Krigarenve

(A Warriors Ways)
A Northern European Fighting Arts System

Introduction to the Research for the Creation of the Krigarenve

Introduction to the established research used to recreate a modern functioning, realistic martial art system developed from the traditional practices and techniques of our northern European ancestors.

Preface

The Krigarenve is not a Historical Martial art. The Krigarenve is a modern functional martial art based on the traditional Northern European Martial tactics, techniques and fighting styles that make up the entire pre-Christian European Tribes.

Keep in mind that all of the information presented here is only the beginning of this documents completed form. The research for the Krigarenve covers historical information ranging the time frame of 1000 BC to 1500 AD and covers Northern European cultures from the Rus to the Icelanders and includes Gaul, Goths, Celts, Germans, Swedes, Irish, Norwegians, Fins and many others that make up the pre-Christian Northern European Cultures, but the information presented in the document so far only presents a sample of the research spanning 800 AD to 1500 AD and is mostly a representation of the cultures of Iceland, Germany, Norway and Sweden.

Body

The Norse during the Viking Age were a very mobile society. Now I don't mean that they moved a lot from place to place (even though they did), what I mean is that a person had the ability to move socially. It was possible for a person to be born into slavery, be freed as an adult, and eventually become a very powerful person in the district. The reason that this would be possible is due to something called idrottir.

Idrottir could be defined as skills. These skills can be academic, athletic, and/or craft. Examples of each would include languages spoken, rune reading and writing, and genealogy under academic; weapons usage (each weapon known would be counted separately), swimming, rock lifting and throwing (counts as two), and climbing cliffs for athletic; carpentry, carving (count individually if you know how to carve on more than one medium, i.e. stone, bone, wood, etc.), blacksmithing, and fishing would be areas under crafts. The more one knows, the more one is worth. This worth is both figurative and literal.

People in Scandinavian society had a price fixed to them at birth. This was called a rett, or blood-price. This was the amount of silver that a person was worth based on what social level they belonged to when they were born. This amount was fixed only in that a persons worth could never go below this amount. Thus, if a person was born, say, into the level of a landless freeman, he or she would be worth two marks of silver (this is a arbitrary amount. I have no documentation that lists actual rett for the various social standings). This means two things: one, if the person is killed the family is entitled to two marks of silver from the killer (or the killers family) as long as the death did not occur as part of a battle during war or from a holmgang. Two, and this is the more important to this article, a person could not put themselves into more debt then their rett unless they were in a thriving business. If this freeman borrowed two marks silver and was unable to repay the loan at the specified time, he or she could be made a slave to the lender until such time as the amount of the loan was repaid. This then brings me back to the topic of idrottir.

Like I said earlier, the more one knows the more one is worth. For example, a boy is born to a family that owns a small farm. The family holds their own but is unable to hire anyone to help work the farm. So as the boy grows he is taught a number of skills that he needs to work the farm. First he is taught to herd geese, next how to cut hay. When he is a bit older he is taught to plow and cast seed. Still later he will be taught the skills to repair farm equipment. Once this is learned he can learn how to make furniture. He will also learn some

blacksmithing as part of the need to be able to repair equipment. If he shows skill he will be able to work at creating other items; tools, utensils, etc. When the boy reaches the age of seventeen he will start going to market with his father to learn how to buy and sell the goods needed and grown. Since the market places usually have a number of foreigners in them the boy, if he is quick witted, will start to learn the languages of at least some of the foreign merchants (at least enough to do business). Thus this young man by the time he has reached twenty winters in age can list the following as his idrottir:

Herding geese
Herding cattle
Herding goats (or sheep, or both)
Sowing grain
Plowing, harvesting
Carpentry (possibly carving as well)
Blacksmithing (at least of iron, but possibly
Gold and silver smithing as well)
Trading
Languages (list each known separately)

And because he lives on a farm and needs to clear land, he can usually add the lifting and throwing of rocks. So our young man can list at least twelve idrottir.

Although my example has been of that of a young man, the same holds true of women. A woman can list all the same farming skills as the young man above. However she most likely would not list carpentry, smithing, or rock lifting and throwing. She would, though, list such skills as weaving (both regular and tablet), sewing, cooking, baking, brewing (this one was highly prized and could bring a higher bride price), and tanning of hides.

Now we can get into the "worth" part in more detail. First, all this knowledge gave the person more personal worth. They would be a more confident and likable person (unless they became braggarts). Second, all these skills would make the person more sought after. If a chieftain knew of a young man that could work a farm, be a smith, speak to foreigners, and use a number of weapons, that chieftain would want that person probably as a foreman to look over one, or possibly more, of the chieftains farms. If you throw in that the young man is also a competent poet, he could become sought after by a king. In the case of a young woman, she could be sought after by all the most powerful men in the district, if not the country. Her father can demand high bride-prices, especially if she knows how to brew good beer.

In the case of men, the offers from chieftains, jarls, and kings can lead to very comfortable lives. These leaders pay their employees well for the knowledge that their foremen hold. Also, if their skills are of a high enough caliber, the leading men of the district would ask to send their children to those with knowledge to be fostered so that the child can become wise and much learned. This applies to female children also. Then there is the possibility for those who know a great deal to attract their own followers. This is how the person born the slave can become a power in the district or country.

To close this up and give an example that is easier to see, I will list my idrottir.

History
Teaching
Poetry
Story telling
Rune reading
Public speaking
Trading
Herding cattle
Herding pigs

Carving (wood and antler)
Leather working
Carpentry
Plumbing
Fermenting
Martial arts
Stav use
Archery
Knife use
Fire arms
Sword use
Spear use
Shield use
Fishing
Hunting
Riding a horse
Driving a car / motor cycle
Metal working
Painting
Sketching
Framing
Rowing
Swimming
Weight lifting
Riding a bike
Play chess
Sewing
Cooking.

This makes a list of 40 idrottir. I have a feeling that I have forgotten some, but it doesn't matter. Also, I have included some that are not period to the Viking Age. But that is because I live in the modern world. So go make a list of your idrottir, it will make you feel better about yourself to realize just how much stuff you really know. Make sure you list everything, even if you only have a passing understanding of the subject. If you know something about it, it's enough to allow you to be of some aid to someone who knows less.

Bodily as well as mental exercises were known under the name of Idrottir. In no ancient records have we so many detailed accounts of games as we have in the Sagas. The education of the Northman was thoroughly Spartan in its character. To this day the love of athletic games is one of the characteristics of their most direct descendants, the English people; and other countries have awakened to the importance of physical training.

Their exercises or games may be classified under three heads.

1st. Athletic games or gymnastic exercises, such as wrestling (Glima), free fighting, swimming, running, jumping, leaping, balancing, climbing, playing ball, racing on snowshoes, skin-pulling and so on.

2nd. Warlike exercises with weapons, which embraced fencing, spear-throwing, arrow-shooting, horse riding, slinging and so on.

3rd Mental exercises, consisting of poetry, Saga-telling, riddles, games of chess and draughts, and harp playing.

In those days of incessant warfare, physical training was considered of the highest importance. Old and young constantly practiced games of strength and dexterity; they knew that it was only by constant exercise that they could become or remain good warriors. This made the young men supple, quick of foot, dexterous in

motion, and gave them great power of endurance, insuring a good physique, which told on their children and future generations. They were thus always prepared for war, and this is the key to the character of the old Viking. We see what a healthy and powerful man he must have been, skillful alike to strike the fatal blow, and avoid the treacherous sword, spear or arrow. The result of such education was seen in the powerful and strong bodily frame that was attained by the youth of the country, the young men being of age and ready for war at the age of fifteen.

There were constant competitions for the honor of the championship in each of the particular games or exercises, and young and old competed together on special grounds which were selected for that purpose, where the assembled and admiring multitude came to witness these contests. There seem to have been no prizes given to the successful competitor—at least no mention is ever made of them. All that was desired was the fame, which fell to the victor, and every great warrior always excelled in the use of weapons or in athletic exercises.

Their love of physical exercise explains how these dauntless and manly tribes, who had a virile civilization of their own, contributed to regenerate the blood of the people among whom they settled or whom they conquered.

Jumping was a favorite exercise of the Northmen. Some men could jump higher than their own height, both backwards and forwards, and this with their weapons and complete armor on.

Agility was absolutely necessary in order to obtain victory or escape from danger; many a man owed his life either to a timely jump to one side, or to a leap from a height, or over a circle of surrounding foes.

Climbing was another of their exercises.

Wrestling was a very popular pastime, and had a beneficial effect on the body, to which it gave suppleness, strength and firmness; it was a great favorite at the Things and festivals. The simplest form of this sport was for the wrestlers to take hold of each other's arms or waists as best they could, and by the strength of their arms to throw each other off their feet. The wrestlers often threw off not only the outer clothing, but also their under-garments, in order to be more free and agile. The competitors were divided by lots into two parties, each of which was drawn up in a row with its leader. These paired off their men to wrestle in the arena or space between the rows, one after the other. If one side was weaker in numbers, or one man had had all his men defeated, he could challenge his antagonist, and the result of their wrestling decided the game.

A more difficult form of wrestling was that of grappling, and attacking each other (sometimes fastened together by a belt at the waist) according to certain rules, and by systematic turnings and grip movements, with arms and legs, seeking to bring each other to the ground. These combats for the championship sometimes ended fatally.

Comparatively little is known about Viking age arms and armor, and even less is known about how the weapons were used.

Our knowledge of the equipment is limited, compared to what is known about arms and armor from the later medieval era because, in comparison, little Viking era armament survives. Unlike the later medieval and Renaissance periods when arms and armor were stored under cover and protected from the elements, virtually all of the Viking age items survive only as grave goods.

Prominent men or warriors were buried (or cremated) with their arms and armor during the Viking period, and it is this material that we have available for study today. However, underground (or underwater), these materials degrade. The wood and leather rot, and the iron rusts. So, it's only under unusual conditions that any Viking age arms and armor have survived at all. While perhaps one thousand Viking age swords survive in various states of preservation, only a small number of Viking age helmets have survived. With so few items to study, it's difficult to determine if a particular specimen is normal or atypical for its historical period.

Because the surviving historical weapons tend not to be well preserved, it can be hard imagining what the weapon might have looked like when new. This photographic comparison of a historical weapon and a modern reproduction gives an idea of the appearance of the weapon when new compared to today.

Our knowledge of the use of the arms and armor is even more limited. Later in the medieval era and in the Renaissance, master fighters wrote down training manuals to teach combat techniques. Some of these manuals survive, and by studying them, one can gain an understanding of the fighting techniques used in those periods.

Nothing like that survives from the Viking era. So, little can be said that's definitive about the use of Viking age weapons.

One way we might learn about Viking era fighting techniques is to study the surviving weapons, to make reproductions, and then to try different techniques, attempting to reconstruct the historical techniques. But it seems unlikely that we could reconstruct the kind of effective fighting techniques that were refined over centuries and practiced by fighting men from childhood.

Alternatively, we might study the techniques taught in the later medieval fight manuals and adopt them to Viking age weapons. While Viking age weapons differ considerably from the weapons in later manuals, the later techniques did not spring up out of a vacuum. It's highly likely that the later techniques derived from the earlier, and the historic manuals represent time-tested, martially effective fighting systems. So, the historic manuals seem like a better place to start.

Another source of information about fighting techniques is the stories from the Viking age, such as the Sagas of Icelanders. One might think these stories would be especially useful as a source for fighting techniques. They were written by people who had almost certainly witnessed combat, and who probably had participated in combat. In addition, they were written for an audience who, similarly, had probably either witnessed or participated in combat and who were familiar with fighting techniques. So the combat situations described are probably realistic.

But the sagas have limited usefulness to the student of historical martial arts. The stories were not written down until centuries after the events they describe took place. So when the sagas talk about fighting techniques, are they describing 10th and 11th century techniques (from when the stories took place) or 13th century techniques (when the stories were written down)? Further, the stories were written for entertainment, and a detailed description of technique is rarely necessary for advancing the plot. As a result, the sagas tend to talk a lot about the participants in a fight, and the ramification of a fight, but very little about the techniques used in the fight. (A complete list of references to arms, armor, and combat in the Icelandic sagas is available for downloading from the Hurstwic library.)

The techniques described here are nothing more than the author's opinion about what techniques may have been used in the Viking era. They are simply guesses based on presented information and personal experience.

Defensive arms:

In the Viking age, shields typically were round, and were always made of wood. A reproduction shield is shown to the left. A typical shield was 80-90cm (32-36 inches) in diameter. While virtually all the surviving examples are made from solid butted planks (right), literary evidence suggests that shields were made of plywood, created by building up layers of very thin planks, each layer oriented 90 degrees from the previous layer. However, no archaeological evidence supports this style of construction.

At the center of the shield was a domed iron boss, which protected the hand. A 10th century shield boss is shown in the photo to the left. The shield was gripped from the inside of the boss, as shown to the right. The arm did not slip through any straps, which permits the shield to be rotated freely from side to side. Although

archaeological evidence is slight, iron reinforcing bars on the rear of the shield may have added strength to the shield and also served to hold the plywood or planking together.

The shield was sometimes rimmed with leather to keep the shield from splitting when hit on edge. Some shields have evidence of iron or bronze clamps around the edge, perhaps to hold the leather edging in place. There is negligible evidence for iron-rimmed shields, although in chapter 40 of Grettis saga, it is said that a berserk carried an iron-rimmed shield to a duel against Grettir. The shield fragment found at Baldursheimur in Iceland has been interpreted as either a fragment of a shield rim, or as a fragment of reinforcement on the rear of the shield. With so little to go on, either interpretation seems speculative

A leather sling, used to carry the shield over a shoulder, was probably common. There are many instances in the stories in which a fighter threw his shield over his back in order to wield his weapon with two hands, such as in chapter 70 of Egils saga.

The front of some shields where often covered with leather. Although most shields were probably painted and decorated.

Shields with a thickness of 10mm (3/8in) are more common, but shields thicker than 30mm (1-1/8in) have been found. A shield that thick could weigh upwards of 15kg (33lbs), quite a substantial weight to be swinging around at the end of one's arm.

At the end of the Viking era, kite shields were used. Their shape helped protect a fighter while riding on the back of a horse. However, during the Viking age, fighting was done on foot, so it seems unlikely they would have seen wide use.

Several episodes in this saga can be quoted to dispute this conclusion. One of these occurs in chapter 129 of Njáls saga. The saga says that Helgi struck out with his sword and cut off the tip of his opponent's shield (as well as his opponent's leg). Round shields can scarcely be said to have "tips", suggesting that the shield in question was a kite shield. However, the significant word in the original Icelandic is sporðr, a word with multiple meanings. Some modern translations render this as "lower part of the shield", but "tail of the shield" also fits.

In another example, Ólafr prepared to defend his beached ship in chapter 21 of Laxdæla saga. He had his men form a line along both sides of the ship, so close together that there shields formed an unbroken row. The points of their spears extended out near the tails of the shields (skjaldarsporðr). Kite shields on board ship seem unlikely. Perhaps kite shields were used in Iceland in the 10th century. Or perhaps the 13th century author didn't know.

In many other sagas, shields are said to have been sliced through below the handle (mundriði). In chapter 43 of Grettis saga, Atli sliced through Gunnar's shield below the handle, cutting off Gunnar's leg below the knee.

Other kinds of shields are mentioned in the sagas, including targa (target) and buklari (buckler), although it's not clear from the stories how these differed from normal shields (skjöldr). In translation, the words are usually rendered as "small shield".

In single combat, the shield was probably held at an angle to the body, either to the outside (to the left side for a right-handed man) or inside (to the right side). The angle prevented the shield from being driven straight in to the combatant's body, which might pin his arms and limit his options. The angle also allowed incoming blows to be deflected, rather than being caught straight on. Egill used this technique against Berg-Önundur in chapter 58 of Egils saga. Egill placed his shield at an angle so that the spear (kesja) thrown by Önundur was deflected by the shield and glanced off.

Neck to knee protection

In use, the shield protects from neck to knees. The head and the lower legs are exposed and

unprotected. Thus, the head and lower leg were likely targets. While the shield can be moved rapidly to ward off blows coming in from a variety of directions, studies of skeletal remains show that many battle injuries occurred on the head and legs. The photo to the right shows the skull of an 11th century fighting man. The top of the skull was removed by a blow from a sword. The terminus of the blow is indicated in the photo by the clear blade. Leg injuries visible in the skeletal remains from Fishergate (York) suggest deliberate attempts to sever the leg muscles, causing the combatant to fall without killing them.

Offensive weapons sometimes stuck fast in a shield after a blow. When that happened, a clever fighter could twist his shield to either break the weapon, or break it loose from the grip of its owner. In chapter 150 of Njáls saga, Kari caught a spear thrust with his shield, and then snapped the spear by wrenching the shield.

The sagas suggest that the shield might be used two handed to defend against a powerful attack. In chapter 55 of Laxdæla saga, Bolli saw Helgi prepare for a thrust with his spear. Bolli dropped his sword to hold the shield with two hands. This trick did not stop Helgi's spear from penetrating the shield and wounding Bolli. Gunnar held his shield with two hands against an attack by Grettir in chapter 24 of Grettis saga. Grettir hacked with his sax between Gunnar's body and the shield, cutting off both of Gunnar's hands.

Recent research suggests that the shield is not simply a wall to hide behind. The shield can be used very aggressively, not only defensively, but offensively as well.

A more aggressive defensive use of the shield is to bind the opponent's sword and shield, opening a line of attack. By sweeping his shield from outside to inside across his front, a combatant can capture and trap his opponent's weapons, leaving the opponent open to an attack. This kind of "shield bind" can be used to apply pressure to the opponent's body, allowing control of his movements.

Besides its obvious defensive uses, the shield can be used offensively. The edge of the shield can be used for punching, turning it into a very effective set of "brass knuckles". If a combatant does not take care control his opponent's shield, he may quickly find his teeth have been knocked out. In chapter 32 of Bjarnar saga Hítdælakappa, Björn drove his shield into his opponent's head to kill him.

This aggressive use of the shield is discussed in more detail below, in the section on sword and shield technique.

The stories also describe instances where the shield was used completely passively. Shields were thrown on fallen combatants during a battle to protect them from further injury (Brennu-Njáls saga chapter 150). A swimmer under attack from missiles thrown from the shore would throw his shield on his back to protect himself while swimming. In chapter 26 of Bjarnar saga Hítdælakappa, Björn did just that while swimming across the Hítará to escape an ambush by Þórður and his men. The ambush probably took place somewhere near where the photo to the left was taken.

During a recent practice, I discovered what should be obvious: a shield makes an excellent sail. A gusty wind makes controlling the shield very much more difficult. One wonders if a skilled fighter would take advantage of that in the same way he might contrive to put the sun in his opponent's eyes.

The stories say that a fighter might hold a second weapon at the ready in his shield hand, while fighting with his primary weapon in the other hand. In chapter 12 of Fóstbræðra saga, Þorgeir held a shield and an axe in his left hand while he fought with a spear in his right hand. Later in the fight, he threw down his spear and took up the axe in his right hand, using it to cut through Snorri's spear shaft, and then through Snorri's head.

The use of shields was probably universal. Someone without a shield would be, quite literally, defenseless, and would most likely be cut down very quickly. So, most everyone probably had a shield. Since the shield could and did break in combat, people expecting to be in a protracted fight probably had several shields on hand. The sagas are filled with examples in which shields split or punctured under the force of incoming spears, axes, or swords.

There are some students of Viking age fighting styles who say that a shield was the only defense needed, and that proper use of a shield makes other defenses (such as helmet and mail) unnecessary. Others would disagree, saying that even with a shield, the other defenses are necessary. We don't know enough about fighting techniques to resolve this question. However, since a helmet and mail were expensive, there were probably a lot of people fighting with only a shield for defense.

During the Viking age, helmets were typically fairly simple: a bowl with a prominent nose guard. One thing to note: there are no horns. There is no evidence that Viking era helmets ever had horns.

Both before and after the Viking era, helmet bowls were made from one piece of iron, pounded into shape. However, during the Viking era, helmets typically were made from several pieces of iron riveted together, called a spangenhelm style of helm. It's easier to make a helmet this way, requiring less labor, which may be why it was used.

The spangenhelm used a single iron band that circled the head around the brow, and two more iron bands that crossed at the top of the head. The four openings were filled with riveted iron plates to create the bowl. In some cases, hard leather may have been used to fill the four openings, rather than iron, to reduce cost. The nose guard was riveted to the brow. At first glance, the nose guard looks awkward and nearly useless, but I can attest to its usefulness: it's prevented my nose from being broken at least once.

It's not clear what was used inside the helmet. Something is needed to keep the helmet off the head and to spread out and absorb the force of a blow. A few surviving helmets (and pieces of helmets) have rivet holes which suggest that some sort of leather suspension system was used. In addition, it's likely that a cap made from an absorbent material such as sheepskin was used, not only to absorb the blow, but also to absorb sweat, in order to help prevent the helmet from rusting from the inside.

Some form of chin fastening is required. Without it, the helmet simply falls off in a fight. Unfortunately, there's little evidence for chin straps. There's no convincing archaeological evidence and little pictorial evidence. On the other hand, we know that helmets both before and after the Viking age routinely used chin straps. From Grágás, the medieval Icelandic law book, we know that some hats had chin straps. But the most convincing evidence for me is that without one, a reproduction helmet is quite useless in a fight; it simply falls off. Some reproductions use a simple leather thong that ties under and the chin. But, speaking as someone with a full beard, I don't find that approach viable. The leather thong is constantly pulling on my beard. The reproduction helmet shown in the photos has a simple chin strap. When properly adjusted, it holds the helmet securely without tugging on my beard all the time.

Other styles of helmets have been found. The well known helmet found at Gjermundbu in Norway has a spectacle-like covering for the face. The spectacle style is somewhat frightening both for someone on the outside looking in, and for someone on the inside looking out.

From the outside, it presents a frightening visage to the opponent, since the face is nearly completely covered and made anonymous. But it's even scarier from the inside, since the spectacles catch incoming spear tips and sword points and guide them right into the wearer's eyes. They're very dangerous in simulated combat, and in real combat, too, I imagine.

However, the original helmet has what appears to be battle damage (a sword blow and an arrow puncture) to one of the plates, so perhaps my modern preconceptions about the danger are in error.

Some helmets from the period had mail curtains to protect the neck. Other forms of solid cheek and neck protection may have been used as well.

The modern helmet reproductions I've used have been pretty comfortable for all-day wear. They weigh about 4lbs (a bit less than 2kg), although some of the larger helmets (with mail and additional protection) may

have weighed more than 4kg (10lb). In the Viking era, fighting men probably wore their helmets all day.

The classic example from the sagas of a fighter killed before he could put on his helmet occurs in Njáls saga (chapter 92). Þráinn and his men, while traveling across the frozen Markarfljót River, saw an imminent ambush from Njál's sons (who were lying in wait on Rauðuskríður, the hill on the far side of the river). Inexplicably, Þráinn took off his helmet and cloak. Before he could put his helmet back on, Skarphéðinn Njálsson seized the initiative and slid across the ice to drive an axe though Þráin's skull.

Because iron was difficult to make during the Viking era, it was expensive. So helmets were expensive and thus not common. Anyone who could afford one would certainly want one. But probably not too many people could afford one. Helmets were probably prized and carefully preserved, repaired as needed, and passed from generation to generation. Some may well have been used for centuries before the iron became too thin and weak to provide any real protection. At the end of a battle, helmets were probably stripped from the bodies before they were buried in a mass grave, and then the helmets were redistributed to those who needed one.

During the Viking age, mail shirts took the form of the reproduction shown to the right. Typically, the garment was T-shaped, with short sleeves (half to three-quarters length) and thigh length (anything longer would make it difficult to ride a horse).

Mail is made up of thousands of interlocking iron rings. In the Viking era, it was always made with a 4-in-1 pattern, in which each ring passes through its four nearest neighbors.

In order to make mail, a smith started with an iron bar, which he drew into iron wire. The wire was wound around a wooden form to create a spiral of iron wire. The spiral was split down its length to create a few dozen open iron rings. One by one, each ring was passed through neighboring rings to form the fabric of the shirt, then closed and sealed shut with a rivet. This process was repeated again and again, thousands and thousands of times to make up the fabric of the shirt. The reproduction mail shown in the photo above has about 30,000 rings in it.

Some samples of mail from the Viking age are made up entirely from riveted rings. Most samples, however, have alternating riveted and solid rings, such as the 10th century mail from Gjermundbu, shown to the right.

The solid rings appear to have been punched out of sheet metal. The shape of the slag inclusions in the iron strongly suggest the riveted rings were made from drawn wire, while the solid rings were from sheet stock. The square cross section of the solid rings provides further evidence that the rings were punched.

Most samples of Viking age mail use round rivets, such as the Gjermundbu mail shown above, rather than the wedge-shaped flat rivets. The smooth, unfaceted shape of the Gjermundbu rivet heads suggests that a setting tool was used to set the rivets.

Some researchers have suggested that the solid rings were made by welding shut open rings. The archaeological evidence tends not support this hypothesis.

Regardless of how it was done, the rings of mail were made solid. Links which were simply bent into shape and butted together without a means to hold them shut were not strong enough to stand up to the rigors of combat.

As the rings were linked to form the fabric of the garment, alterations to the 4-in-1 pattern were made to shape the fabric to the contours of the body and to provide freedom of motion in places such as under the arm. Rings were dropped or added to rows as needed to shape the finished fabric.

Unfortunately, little mail survives from the Viking era. Underground or underwater, the thin rings corrode

very quickly. Most mail from the period survives as a rusty pile of junk. The one more or less complete Viking age mail shirt (from Gjermundbu) was in many pieces when found. Many sections were corroded into a solid mass. Some of the rings survived only as a hollow corroded shell.

In the stories, the word brynja is usually translated as "mail shirt". In a few instances, the word spangabrynja is used, usually translated as "plate-mail", such as in chapter 5 of Grænlendinga þáttur. Whatever it might have been, the story says that Símon did not care for it, and he threw it to the ground as useless junk.

It's important to note that mail does not provide a complete defense; mail is only a secondary defense. If one were to draw the edge of a sword across the arm of an combatant wearing a mail shirt, the sword wouldn't bite; the mail would protect against a cut. However, if one were to take that same sword and strike a powerful blow against the arm or shoulder of the combatant, the mail would not prevent the skin from being bruised, or the bones from being broken. The mail does little to absorb or dissipate the force of a blow, and the force passes right through.

Both before and after the Viking era, fighting men wore padded garments under their mail to help absorb the force of a blow. Typically, these garments consisted of two layers of wool or leather stuffed with fleece or animal hair, and then sewn together. Unfortunately, there is no archaeological evidence that such garments were worn during the Viking era, nor any mention of them in the stories. One hopes that the Norsemen were aware of and used such garments. They make a enormous difference in comfort and safety in simulated combat. One assumes that in real combat, they could make the difference between a disabling injury and a minor one.

Although the mail protects from a cut, the stories say that mail could be punctured by weapons. In chapter 53 of Egils saga, Þórólfur, using two hands, thrust his spear through Earl Hring's mail shirt (and through the earl as well).

Regardless, the stories say that sometimes raiders left their mail shirts on board ship when they went raiding, so they wouldn't be weighed down. In chapter 82 of Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar, Snorri relates that on the day of the battle at Stamford Bridge, it was a day with hot sunshine, and the Norwegians left their mail shirts behind, on board ship.

However, 12kg of iron was quite literally a treasure in the Viking age. Few people could have afforded that much iron. Mail shirts must have been very rare. Anyone who could have afforded one would certainly have wanted one. But probably few people could afford one.

Mail, like helmets, was prized and was probably passed from generation to generation, repaired as needed. After a battle, mail was probably removed from the bodies before any mass burials, to be redistributed and reused by those who needed it.

The sagas mention other personal defenses. In chapter 45 of Eyrbyggja saga, Freysteinn was protected from a sword cut to his neck by a piece of horn sewn into his felt hat. In chapter 41 of Vatnsdæla saga, Ingólfur put flat stones on his chest and back, which protected him when he attacked a band of thieves. In chapter 2 of Vopnfirðinga saga, Brodd-Helgi similarly protected himself with flat stones under his clothing. When Svartr thrust at him with his halberd (höggspjót), it glanced off the stone so violently that Svartr pitched forward, allowing Brodd-Helgi to cut off his leg.

The stories tell of ways that fights were stopped by third parties. The most common method was to throw clothing or blankets onto the combatants' weapons, rendering them ineffectual. This was done by men to capture an opponent without harming him (Egils saga chapter 46) or by women to stop a fight (Vopnfirðinga saga chapter 18).

More than anything else, the sword was the mark of a warrior in the Viking age. They were difficult to

make, and therefore probably rare and expensive. A sword might be the most expensive item that a man owned. The one sword whose value is given in the sagas (given by King Hákon to Höskuldur in chapter 13 of Laxdæla saga) was said to be worth a half mark of gold. In saga age Iceland, that represented the value of sixteen milk-cows.

Swords in the Viking age were typically double edged and were used single handed, since the other hand was busy holding the shield. Blades ranged from 60 to 90cm (24-36 in) long, although 70-80cm was typical. Late in the Viking era, blades got as long as 100cm (40in). The blade was typically 4-6cm wide (1.5-2.3in). The hilt and pommel provided the needed weight to balance the blade, with the total weight of the sword ranging from 2-4 lbs (1-2 kg). Blades had a slight taper, which helped bring the center of balance closer to the grip.

Stories say that sometimes fighters used their swords two-handed. But the grips of most surviving Viking age swords are quite short, with barely room for one hand, much less two.

During the early part of the Viking age, swords blades were made with a process called pattern welding. This technique was used because there was no one material good enough for making sword blades, with the proper combination of strength, flexibility, and ability to hold an edge.

Part of the problem was that the iron making process was not understood during the Viking age. Sometimes, the smith would go through the entire smelting process and end up with highly desirable low carbon wrought iron. But sometimes, he would start with the same raw materials, go through all the same steps and end up with useless high carbon cast iron. The process of controlling the smelting operation was not understood.

In order to make a usable sword blade with the available materials, the smith created a composite material. He started by bundling together selected bars of different types of iron. He heated this bundle, and when it was hot enough, he started twisting it. He continued the heating and twisting process until the billet was ready to be worked, and then he shaped it into the blade.

The heating and twisting process created a composite, made up of different kinds of iron that together, had the necessary strength and flexibility for a sword blade. However, despite using this pattern welding process, sword blades from the Viking age were far from ideal. In some cases, hard iron strips were welded onto the edge of the sword to provide a material better able to hold an edge. Even so, some stories describe how, during an extended battle, swords became so dull and dented they no longer cut (e.g., Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar chapter 109). And, the stories describe instances in which a sword blade bent during a fight. In chapter 49 of Laxdæla saga, Kjartan was ambushed. He was not carrying his usual sword, a gift from the king, but rather a lesser sword. Several times during the battle, Kjartan had to straighten his bent blade by standing on it. In chapter 13 of Gull-Þóris saga, Þorbjörn's sword blade broke when he hit Þórir's helmet with it. Hrafn hit Gunnlaug's shield with his sword so hard that the sword broke off below the hilt in chapter 11 of Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu.

The pattern welding process creates a beautiful, delicate pattern in the surface of the blade as the different types of iron come to the surface.

Later in the Viking era, as the iron making process became better controlled, better iron became available, and pattern welding was no longer used.

As described earlier in this article, we don't really know how weapons were used in the Viking age. We don't have any material that teaches us how Vikings used their weapons. The best we can do is to make some educated guesses based on later combat manuals. Here are a few guesses by the author of this article (and an acknowledgement of those who helped form those guesses). Most of the guesses are based on material from Talhoffer's manual from the year 1467.

The usual disclaimer: These materials are for reference and study purposes only. Historical combat is

potentially dangerous. Students wishing to explore these techniques should do so only under the supervision of a qualified, experienced teacher of historical martial arts.

Most martial arts systems have a series of wards: positions one adopts in which the combatant has good offensive and defensive options, but which give him a chance to size up an opponent and decide what to do next. Combatants probably began in a relaxed stance with the shields nearly parallel with the line of engagement (rather than flat on to the opponent). This position gives a combatant a clear view of the opponent, with the shield in an aggressive, forward position, close to the opponent and ready to strike.

Cuts probably included: a high cut, attempting to split the skull in two; a diagonal cut, attempting to separate neck from shoulders; a middle horizontal cut, which can target anywhere from shoulder to thigh; and a low rising cut, which attacks anywhere from the leg up to the armpit.

Cuts can be made from either side. It might at first seem that the shield is in the way of a cut from the left. The sketch to the right is taken from Talhoffer's fight manual of 1467. It illustrates the use of longsword and dueling shield, which are both much larger than Viking age weapons. Both of the combatants have swept their shields from the outside to the inside and are making a thrust over their shield arms.

A similar approach seems to work quite well with Viking age sword and shield. Attacks can be made both above and below the shield arm when the shield is on the inside.

In a fight, it does no good to attack the opponent's shield. Behind his shield, a fighter is well protected. Instead, one must attack the opponent's body. As a result, a primary objective is to draw the opponent's shield out of the way, opening up a target for an attack. One can imagine tricks in which a blow is targeted at one quarter, causing the opponent to move his shield to defend. That response gives the attacker the opening he needs. He can pull his blow or otherwise deceive his opponent and retarget the blow at the available opening.

For example, the later medieval fight manuals teach that the ox ward is a particularly useful and versatile ward for a variety of weapons (illustrated in Talhoffer's 1467 manual to the right). From this position, one could start a cut or thrust to the face and then, when the opponent repositioned his shield, pull the attack and strike to the lower quarter. Did fighting men in Viking times use this ward or use these tricks? We don't know.

Another way to open a line of attack is by sweeping the shield from one side to the other and binding the opponent's weapons.

This shield bind seems to effectively end the fight. Although not apparent in the photos, Blue has excellent control over Red's body. Red's weapons are useless, and Blue has good targets at the head, shoulders, back, or legs. Additionally, it appears the shield bind can be used when the combatants are already engaged; it seems to have wide applicability whenever an opponent raises his sword during an engagement.

If a combatant can't trick the opponent into creating an opening, he may have to create his own opening. One example is shown in the illustration to the right from Talhoffer's manual. The combatant on the left has just kicked his opponent's shield from outside to inside ward, creating an opening.

The later medieval fight manuals teach the advantages of closing the distance to grapple during a fight. There are instances where a combatant might step right in to his opponent, converting the sword fight into a wrestling match, and pinning his opponent's arms and weapons or executing a disarm or a throw. From the stories, we know that Norsemen enjoyed wrestling and practiced it as a sport (e.g., Grettis saga chapter 72). Did they also practice it in combat? The Viking age swords were short enough that, when in distance, it was only a short step to be within grappling range, so it seems quite possible. But we don't know.

Earlier, I had thought that grappling would be difficult with Viking era shields. However, Talhoffer describes a technique with dueling shield and mace which works nicely with Viking sword and shield.

There are several examples in the Icelandic sagas where grappling is described as a normal part of combat. In some cases, an unarmed man grappled with an armed man who attacked him (e.g., chapter 19 of Bjarnar saga Hítdælakappa). And in some cases, an armed man might choose to discard weapons that had become useless, and close the distance to grapple. In chapter 65 of Egils saga, Egill and Atli's shields were so badly shattered by the exchange of blows that they became useless, and they threw them away. Egill also threw away his sword and grappled with Atli, eventually killing him by biting through his throat. In a similar situation, Atli threw away his sword and went underneath Þorgrím's defense to grapple with him in chapter 21 of Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings.

Later manuals, such as Meyer, describe three phases for each exchange in a fight: Zufechten (Onset); Handarbeit (Handwork); and Abzug (Withdrawal). Talhoffer's techniques focus on the onset. Little is said about handwork and nothing about withdrawal. So how do two combatants fighting with sword and shield withdraw? We are just beginning to find satisfactory answers. The shield seems to make Meyer's usual withdrawal techniques useless. However, we know from the sagas (for instance, the fight at Eyvindarstaðir described in chapter 18 of Vopnfirðinga saga) that earnest fights could go on for a very long time without any wounds being inflicted. That strongly suggests an effective withdrawal technique existed.

One technique that shows promise is to initiate a withdrawal with a shove. When two fighters are bound up with little additional work that either can do, a combatant can shove forward while stepping backwards. Doing so opens the space between them, allowing the combatant to see available options, and either to withdraw safely or to start a new attack. To the opponent, the shove is confusing, since it 's not clear whether the shove signals an advance or a withdrawal.

Viking shields are large enough to temporarily blind an opponent to an incoming attack, a trick that may be used to advantage. The shield can block the opponent's view of the developing attack. However, a combatant can also temporarily blind himself with his own shield if he's not careful, blocking his own view of his opponent's attack.

The stories say that fighters sometimes swapped weapons from one hand to another. In chapter 10 of Droplaugarsona saga, it is said that Helgi showed his skill in arms in a fight against Hjarrandi. Helgi threw up his sword and shield and caught them in the opposite hands, which allowed him to strike a blow against Hjarrandi's thigh. We have found a technique for doing this swap that is extremely confusing to the opponent, since the swap appears at first to be merely a change in ward. The historical sources are silent on how best to take advantage of this swap, but our research continues.
Meyer squnting blow

Later medieval manuals teach the value of cuts made with the false edge of the sword.

Double edged swords have what is known as a true edge and false edge. The true edge is the "front" of the blade, the edge in line with the knuckles. The false edge is the "back" of the blade. Cuts with the true edge are more powerful. But there are some benefits to false edge cuts.

Did Vikings use the false edge in their fights? Did they use any of the tricks outlined above? We simply don't have enough information to know.

It's not clear how boys trained to learn the use of weapons. A few wooden swords and fragments have been found, some of which represent faithful copies of real weapons. But we don't know if they were toys or serious practice weapons. The stories suggest that Norse people were familiar with the concept of "mock" combat, called skylming. It's not clear whether this "fencing" was sport or practice, or perhaps both. In chapter 12 of Gunnlaugs saga ormstunga, Gunnlaugr came upon two men fencing who were surrounded by many spectators. Gunnlaugr walked away in silence when he realized they mocked him as they fought.

Regardless of the method, it seems likely that boys started training at an early age. There are several examples in the stories of young boys using weapons to kill, most notably in chapter 40 of Egils saga

Skallagrímssonar. Young Egill used an axe to kill a player on an opposing team in a ball game. Egill was six years old.

However, not everyone in the sagas is depicted as being skilled with arms. In chapter 24 of Finnboga saga ramma, Uxi struck at Finnbogi three times with a two-handed axe, and three times failed to connect. In chapter 24 of Bjarnar saga Hítdælakappa, Þórður sent the brothers Beinir and Högni armed with axes to kill Björn at his home Hólmur, on the shore of Hítarvatn (right). When they made their attack, Björn used no weapons on the brothers, but was able to grapple with them and bind their hands behind their backs. Björn then stuck their axes under their bonds in back and sent the brothers back to Þórður, thoroughly humiliated.

When Grettir struck a blow at Þorbjörn in chapter 37 of Grettis saga, Þorbjörn parried with his hand. Grettir cut off Þorbjörn's hand and his head.
Grettir and Asdis

Swords were highly prized during the Viking era and were used for generations. The sculpture shown to the left illustrates an episode from chapter 17 of Grettis saga. When a young man, Grettir prepared to leave Iceland. His father had a low opinion of Grettir and refused to give him a sword, saying, "I don't know what useful thing you would do with weapons." His mother, who was more supportive, gave Grettir the sword given to her great-grandfather by King Haraldur of Norway.

Archaeological evidence also supports the long and continued use of sword blades. At least one example of an 11th century sword blade with 15th century fittings exists, indicating that sword blades several centuries old continued to be maintained and used.

A prominent or powerful man was buried with his sword. However, the stories say that families were not averse to entering the grave mound and digging the sword back up if one was needed later on. Stories tell of adventurers who entered a grave mound to recover valuable weapons, along with any other treasures buried there. For example, in chapter 18 of Grettis saga, Grettir entered Kár's burial mound, fought the mound dweller, and returned with Kár's short-sword.

A sword's scabbard provided protection for the blade when not in use. Scabbards were usually made as a sandwich. The innermost lining was fleece, since the natural oils in the wool helped keep the blade from rusting. Wood surrounding the fleece provided the physical strength to protect the blade, and leather covered the entire structure. Many scabbards had metal chapes at the tip, to protect the point of the scabbard (and sword), and some had metal mounts at the throat of the scabbard.

A sword without a scabbard was considered "troublesome". In chapter 6 of Hallfreðar saga, King Ólafr gave Hallfreðr a sword without a scabbard, a troublesome gift for a troublesome poet. The king said that Hallfreðr must keep it for three days and three nights without harm coming to anyone.

Early in the period, scabbards were usually slung from a baldric, a belt over the shoulder. Later, they hung directly from the waist belt. Some swords had a strap on the hilt which could be pulled over the hand, allowing the drawn sword to hang while another weapon was being used. In chapter 58 of Egils saga, Egill drew his sword and pulled the loop over his hand in preparation for a fight with Berg-Önundur. During the fight, when Egil's spear stuck fast in Berg-Önund's shield, Egil grabbed his sword and was able to run Berg-Önundur through before his opponent could even draw his sword.

The stories talk about the use of a friðbönd (peace strap), straps to prevent the sword from being drawn in places where the use of weapons was prohibited. An example occurs in chapter 28 of Gisla saga, at a þing (assembly) meeting.

The two young sons of Vésteinn arrived at the þing unrecognized. Approaching Þorkell, they complemented him and asked to see his fine sword. Þorkell agreed and handed over the sword in its scabbard. The boy undid the peace straps and drew the sword. Þorkell said, "I didn't give you permission to

draw the sword." The boy responded, "I didn't ask," and lopped off Þorkel's head, avenging the death of his father by Þorkell.

In chapter 3 of Króka-Refs saga, Þorbjörn could not draw his sword fast enough, due to the peace strap, and he was killed in his bed-closet by Refr.

A sax is a type of short sword used primarily during the early part of the Viking era. It's a one handed single edged weapon with a blade length ranging from 30 to 60cm (12 to 24 in). Saxes usually had simple fittings and no crossguard. Hilts were made of wood, bone, or horn.

Saxes had a characteristic blade-shape with parallel edges, coming to a point at the tip.

Compared to swords, saxes were more crudely fabricated. Rather than being crafted by skilled, specialized smiths, saxes were probably made by local smiths. Blades tended to be heavier and thicker than sword blades. Some sax blades were pattern welded, like sword blades of the period, indicating a higher level of craftsmanship. The historical blade shown above and the reproduction based on it are pattern welded.

Saxes were usually carried in a scabbard suspended horizontally from the belt. A 10th century burial cross in a churchyard in Middleton, Yorkshire shows a warrior surrounded by weapons.

Different length saxes are sometimes referred to by different names, such as langsax or scramasax. However, the usual term that appears in the period literature such as the Icelandic family sagas is sax and, rarely, but equivalently, höggsax and handsax.

Some people preferred a sax over a sword for fighting. In Grettis saga for instance, Grettir preferred his sax, called Kársnautr, which he took from Kár's grave mound. When wielded by a powerful fighter like Grettir, it's clear from the saga that the sax could inflict horrific damage.

We know little about how saxes were used. Some of the later medieval combat manuals teach the use of the falchion, a distant relative of the sax. Perhaps some of those techniques can be applied to the use of the Viking age sax.

When people think about Viking age weapons, typically they think of the battle axe. However, the second choice, for someone who could not afford a sword, was not an axe, but rather, a spear.

During the Viking age, spear heads took many forms. The photo to the left shows a modern reproduction, typical of the late Viking age. The top photo to the right shows an 11th century spearhead, while the bottom photo to the right shows a 10th century spearhead. Earlier spearheads were about 20cm (8in) long, while later ones were as long as 60cm (24in). The spearheads were made of iron, and, like sword blades, were made using pattern welding techniques during the early part of the Viking era. They were frequently decorated with inlays of precious metals. Some spear heads, had "wings" on the head, useful for a variety of tricks. These are called krókspjót (barbed spear) in the stories.

The heads were fixed to wooden spear shafts using a rivet. The shaft and head had a combined length of 2-3m (7- 10ft) long, although longer shafts may have been used. A passage in chapter 6 of Gisla saga suggests the spear shaft was long enough that a man's outstretched arm could touch the rivet (right). The diameter of the shaft was typically 3cm (about an inch). A strong, straight-grained wood such as ash was used.

Many people think of the spear as a throwing weapon. One of the Norse myths tells the story of the first battle in the world, in which Oðin, the highest of the gods, threw a spear over the heads of the opposing fighters as a prelude to the fight. While spears were certainly used that way during the Viking age, there's little advantage to throwing one's weapon away in a fight. Not only do you lose your weapon, but you risk having your opponent pick it up and use it against you. Worse, your weapon may be caught in flight and flung back at you, a trick used on several occasions by Gunnar (e.g., Njáls saga chapter 54). Despite these risks, the sagas

are filled with examples where spears were thrown, such as chapter 145 of Njáls saga. Spears were also used with "throwing strings" (snærisspjót) for longer reach, such as in chapter 24 of Reykdæla saga og Víga-Skútu where Skúta shot a spear across a river ford, killing Þrándur.

A passage from chapter 48 of Grettis saga suggests that the rivet could easily be removed. Grettir arrived at Þorbjörn's farm, Þoroddstaðir, to take revenge on Þorbjörn for his killing of Grettir's brother, Atli. After Grettir arrived at the farm, he sat down and removed the rivet to prevent Þorbjörn from throwing the spear back at him. The head flew off when Grettir threw the spear. After killing Þorbjörn, Grettir searched for the head, but couldn't find it. According to the saga, the spearhead was found in the marshland behind the farm centuries later.

More commonly, the spear was used as a thrusting weapon. It provided a means to inflict injuries from a distance.

This capability was used to advantage in mass battles. Norsemen, as a rule, tended to avoid mass battles, primarily because they weren't as good at them as other Europeans of the time. But, if a mass battle were necessary, men lined up, shoulder to shoulder, with shields overlapping. After all the preliminaries (which included rock throwing, name calling, and the general trading of insults), the two lines advanced towards each other. When the lines met, the battle was begun. Behind the wall of shields, each line was well protected. But once a line was broken, and one side could pass through the line of the other side, the battle was essentially over. Terrible damage could be done from behind, and the battle usually broke down into armed melees between small groups of men.

But before a line broke, while the two lines were going at each other hammer and tongs, the spear offered some real advantages. A fighter in the second rank could use his spear to reach over the heads of his comrades in the first rank and attack the opposing line. A man armed with a winged spear could use the wings to bind his opponent's sword or spear, or even to pull his opponent's shield away, perhaps providing an opening or advantage that someone in his first row could exploit.

When the line broke, stories say that people would sling their shields over their shoulders and use the spear two-handed. In this mode, the spear has even more reach, since the fighter can bring his hands way back towards the butt end of the spear. In a thrust, the spear shaft can slide so that both hands are at the butt end of the shaft, allowing the spear to reach the full extent of the shaft in a lunge (left). Also, two handed, the spear provides the combatant with enough leverage to lift his opponent up off his feet, impaled on the tip of spear.

In chapter 45 of Grettis saga, Þorbjörn knocked loudly on the door at Atli's farm, then hid. When Atli went to the door, Þorbjörn rushed up holding his spear in two hands and ran Atli through. When he took the blow, Atli said, "Broad spears are in fashion these days," and fell dead.

I used to think that the spear, despite its advantage of reach, was slow, compared to a weapon like the sword. I have been shown otherwise. A spearman can keep a swordsman very busy, flicking the point from face to belly and back again, while staying out of range of the sword. However, a spearman would need to be wary that anyone armed with a sword didn't find his way past the point of the spear. Once past the point, the swordsman would have every advantage. The stories say that fighters armed with swords had the ability to cut a spear shaft in two with their sword, rendering the spear useless. For instance, in chapter 82 of Grettis saga, as Þorbjörn and his men thrust their spears through the doorway to Grettir's house, Illugi chopped the heads from the shafts of all their spears.

One approach that seems to work well when a swordsman faces a spearman is for the swordsman to adopt the inside ward with his shield, inviting an attack.

When the spearman thrusts, the swordsman can move to outside ward, deflecting the thrust.

The swordsman steps in behind the shield, and places himself in a perfect position to lop off the head of the spear. From here, the swordsman is well situated to control the shaft of the spear with his shield as he closes the distance to attack the spearman.

This approach fails, however, if the spearman does the kind of lunge thrust illustrated above on this page. The spear is fast enough that the spearman can recover and set the point on the other side of the swordsman's shield, ready to impale him if he moves forward to cut at the shaft.

A spearman might also respond the swordsman's attack by shortening his grip, bringing his spear under the shield, and attacking the other side.

We know little of the details of how spears were used in the Viking age. Some of the later medieval fight manuals teach techniques for staff weapons that can be adopted to Viking age spears, but we don't know if those techniques were used in the Viking age.

The axe was often the choice of the poorest man. Even the lowliest farm had to have an axe for cutting and splitting wood. In desperation, a poor man could pick up the farm axe and use it in a fight.

Axes meant for battle were designed a bit differently than farm axes. The photo to the left shows two reproduction axes based on 10th century finds, while the photo on the right shows a historic 10th century axe head. Axe heads were made of iron and were single edged; there's no evidence that double edged axes were used in the Viking era.

A wide variety of axe head shapes have been found. The sketch to the right shows three different 11th century axe heads. In the early part of the Viking era, the cutting edge was typically 7 to 15cm (3-6in) long. Typically, the head had a wedge-shaped cross-section. The cross section of the head near the edge was sometimes diamond shape, which provided for greater strength for a given weight of iron.

Fóstbræðra saga chapter 23 tells of a special axe made by Bjarni for Þormóðr, which was hammered all the way out to the edge with no obstructions, resulting in a very sharp blade.

However, some axes had very thin, elegant cross-sections. One wonders how much abuse the original could have survived, having a head that thin.

Later in the Viking era, axe heads became much larger, with crescent shaped edges 22 to 45cm (9-18in) long. These axes were called breið-øx (broad axe).

The shaft was made of wood, and was typically about 1m (40in) long, although presumably the shaft was sized for the intended use of the axe and to balance the axe head. Axes with smaller heads might well have shorter shafts. Both of the reproduction axes shown to the right are nicely balanced, despite the obvious difference in the length of their shafts.

At one time, my opinion was that the axe, being poorly balanced, was harder to control than a well balanced weapon like a sword. However, recent experiences have forced me to change my opinion.

One advantage of an axe over other edged weapons is that all the force of the blow is concentrated into a small section of the blade, so the axe has enough power to punch through a helmet or mail.

The curved shape of the head allows the axe to be used for several tricks. It can be hooked over an opponent's shield to pull it out of position, providing an opening for a thrust or other attack. It can also be used to hook an opponent's ankle or neck, throwing him off balance and onto the ground.

The pointed "beaks" at each end of the blade (öxarhyrna) can be used offensively as was done by Kolbeinn in chapter 5 of Grænlendinga þáttur. He drove the beak of his axe into Þórð's throat, killing him.

Another trick with an axe is described in the sagas. In chapter 62 of Eyrbyggja saga, Þrándr leapt up and hooked the head of his axe over the wall of a fortification. He pulled himself up on his axe handle into the fortification and attacked Hrafn with his axe. The story doesn't describe the fortification, but perhaps it was similar to the saga-era fortification Borgarvirki in Iceland shown to the right as it appears today, built in a natural stone bowl.

Fortifications may have been entered by raising a man on his shield using spear-points, as described in chapter 5 of Gull-Þóris saga. In that case, the fortification was probably wood, since after being raised, Þórir dug his axe into the wall to pull himself up over the top.

Axes (as well as other weapons) were sometimes used to strike a blow that was not intended to be lethal. The backside of the axe head (the hammer) was frequently used for that purpose. Sometimes, the blow was made to humiliate an opponent, or in other cases, made against an opponent so inferior that he didn't seem worthy of a proper blow. In chapter 9 of Þórðar saga hreðu, Össur and his men surrounded the cowardly Þórhallur and forced him to betray the location of his friend, Þórður. Össur struck at Þórhallur with the back of his axe, knocking him out, and said, "It's bad to have a slave as your best friend."

Bayeux Axeman

We have little knowledge of how axes were used in the Viking age. Many of the later medieval combat manuals teach the use of the halberd, the poleaxe, and other staff weapons. So far, this material has not been very helpful for understanding the techniques of Viking age axes, due to the significant differences between the earlier and later weapons.

Bows were used for hunting and also for battle. In mass battles, bowmen stood behind the normal lines and fired their arrows into the enemy indirectly, at a high angle, to fall into the enemy from above.

Perhaps the most notable use of a bow in the sagas is Gunnar's single-handed defense of his home, Hlíðarendi, from an attack by Mörðr and his men. In chapter 77 of Njáls saga, it is said that he was able to kill or wound ten men before his bow string was cut by the attackers.

Bows were made from the wood of a yew, ash, or elm. Typically, they were 1.6 to 2m (60 to 80 in) long. Arrows heads were made in an enormous variety of shapes and sizes. Arrow shafts typically were 70 to 80cm (28-32in) long.

The estimated draw weight of one 10th century bow is 90lb, and the effective range of this weapon was about 200m (650ft).

However, medieval Icelandic law gives a different estimate. The distance of the flight of an arrow, ördrag (bowshot) was a unit of measure commonly used in Icelandic law. For example, Grágás, the medieval Icelandic law book, requires that the court empowered to confiscate an outlaw's property be held within a bowshot of the outlaw's home (K 62). A later addition to Grágás defines the bowshot to be two hundred faðmar (about 480m).

Other weapons are mentioned in the stories. In general, we don't know what they were, and the old Icelandic words are translated differently by different sources. Examples from the period are not known to exist (although one wonders if there is an unrecognized lump of rusty iron on some museum's shelf that was once one of these weapons).

The atgeirr was Gunnar Hámundarson's preferred weapon in Njáls saga and is usually translated as "halberd" (although sometimes as "bill" or "javelin"). In addition to using it as a weapon, Gunnar routinely vaulted onto the back of his horse using his atgeirr. The saga text suggests that the weapon could be used both for thrusting and cutting.

Gunnar's atgeirr is thought to lie at the bottom of Breiðafjörður off the point of land called Skor (left), lost in a shipwreck in the 18th century.

Egill used a kesja on several occasions (such as in chapter 58 of Egils saga), translated as "halberd". In chapter 2 of Gisla saga, Gisli used a höggspjót, also translated as "halberd". One source suggests that atgeirr, kesja, and höggspjót all refer to the same weapon, but we don't know what it might have been.

In chapter 66 of Grettis saga, a giant used a fleinn against Grettir, usually translated as "pike". The weapon is also called a heftisax, a word not otherwise known in the saga literature. The saga says that the weapon had a wooden shaft and was equally suited for striking or stabbing.

In chapter 30 of Harðar saga og Hólmverja, Hörður threw a gaflak (javelin) at a man, killing him. In chapter 53 of Egils saga is a detailed description of a brynþvari (mail scraper), usually translated as "halberd". It had a rectangular blade two ells (1m) long, but the wooden shaft measured only a hand's length. The word bryntröll (mail troll) is also used, translated as "halberd". In chapter 37 of Laxdæla saga, Hrútr struck Eldgrímr between the shoulders with a bryntröll, splitting his mail and cutting through Eldgrím's body.

So little is known of the brynklungr (mail bramble) that it is usually translated merely as "weapon". Similarly, sviða is sometimes translated as "sword" and sometimes as "halberd". In chapter 58 of Eyrbyggja saga, Þórir threw his sviða at Óspakr, hitting him in the leg. Óspakr pulled the weapon out of the wound and threw it back, killing another man.

Everyday items were sometimes placed into service as weapons, according to the sagas. Such items as a boathook (Hávarðar saga Ísfirðing chapter 4), a whale bone (Hávarðar saga Ísfirðing chapter 10), a scythe (Finnboga saga ramma chapter 40), a pitchfork (Finnboga saga ramma chapter 32), a clothes beater (Reykdæla saga og Víga-Skútu chapter 22), mane shears (used for trimming a horse's mane, Bjarnar saga Hítdælakappa chapter 32), and a sled runner (Eyrbyggja saga chapter 37) were used in fights, sometimes with lethal results.

This Norse concept of "honor" and of a "good name" and the extraordinary lengths that a Norseman went to in order to protect his good name require a far lengthier explanation than I can give here. In part, that's because similar concepts don't exist in modern western culture. Thus, English language translations of the Norse words are clumsy and imprecise. For the best explanation, I suggest reading the chapter in Sigurður Nordal's Íslenzk menning.

However, the Íslendingasögur (Sagas of the Icelanders) provide a marvelous (if somewhat distorted) window on the ethics and morality of Icelandic society in the Norse era. Because the sagas were not written down until hundreds of years after the events they describe, they represent a confluence of ideas about ethics and morals from both the saga age (when the stories are set) and the Sturlunga age (when the stories were written).

The range of behaviors in Norse society ran the gamut from drengskapr to níðr. The first is usually translated as "honor" and the second as "shame".

At one extreme, the state of drengskapr was admired, and the actions of a drengr would be emulated and praised.

At the other extreme, the state of níðr was despised, and the actions of a níðingr would be avoided and reviled.

Snorri Sturluson wrote, "Valiant men who exert a good influence are called drengr." A drengr possessed bravery, nobility, magnanimity, a sense of fair play, respect for others, the strength to do what is right, and a sense of personal honor. Physical bravery was taken for granted. More important was self-control. A drengr

showed equanimity in the face of danger, not because of insensitivity or stupidity, but because the danger and the possible risk to life and limb was unimportant compared to the need to maintain self-respect and the respect of the community. There was a practical side to such imperturbability, because not only was it unmanly to show concern or fear in the face of danger, but also useless.

A níðingr was the object of hate and scorn. He was an outcast. Typical causes for such disgrace included: cowardice; treachery; shameful acts (such as killing kinsmen or defenseless people); breaking one's oath. When one man placed his trust in another man, only to be let down by that other man, then that other man would be called a níðingr.

Physical symbols of a man's shame might be erected as a reminder. In chapter 2 of Gísla saga Súrssonar, it appeared that neither Gísli nor Þorbjörn arrived to fight a duel with Skeggi, a shameful failure. Skeggi told a carpenter to make wooden effigies in the likeness of Gísli and Þorbjörn, one behind the other, to forever mock and shame them. Although not explicit, it's clear that a sexual insult is intended. To a Norseman, cowardice and effeminacy were two sides of the same coin. To suggest that a Norseman was no man (such as suggesting that he was the submissive partner in an encounter) was a mortal insult.

Chapter 58 of Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar describes the scorn-pole (níðstöng) raised by Egill against King Eiríkur and Queen Gunnhildur after receiving shameful treatment from them while trying to recover his wife's inheritance. Egill placed a horse's head on a hazel pole driven into the rocks near shore. He invoked a curse against the king and queen, demanding no rest for landvættir (land spirits) until they had driven the king and queen from the land. Turning the horse's head towards the mainland where the king and queen were located, Egill carved the curse in runes on the pole. A 20th century sculpture by Vigeland that depicts this episode is shown to the right.

Chapter 34 of Vatnsdæla saga describes the scorn-pole erected by Jökull towards Bergur and Finnbogi after they failed to show up at the appointed time and place for a duel. Jökull raised the scorn-pole, carved a man's head at the end of the pole and a curse in runes along the pole. He killed one of Finnbogi's mares, cutting it open at the breast and setting it on the pole, facing towards Finnbogi's farm.

A man's fame and honor in life, and his good name after death, were so important that a man was hypersensitive to the opinion of the community. He might not otherwise fear anything nor flinch at death, but the respect of the community was of paramount importance. Any offence in word or deed, or anything that might blot one's honor had to be dealt with firmly in order to maintain that respect. So a Norseman was constantly on the alert for wrongs against his person or his name. Those wrongs were proclaimed openly, and then avenged.

Vengeance was not a punishment for the person on whom it was inflicted. Rather, it was a reparation to the honor of the person who was being avenged. Vengeance repaired the honor of the injured person. Vengeance need not even be worked upon the individual who caused the offense. Killing a close family member was nearly as good as killing the responsible party. For instance, in Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða, Hrafnkel saw Sám's brother walk by and killed the innocent fellow to avenge himself on Sámur.

Since the power of the state was weak, vengeance was sanctioned and even encouraged by the laws. The medieval Icelandic lawbook Grágás (K 86) permitted a man who was seriously injured to avenge himself without penalty at any time up until the time the case was brought to court. And even when the law forbade vengeance, there were cases when public opinion demanded it.

Holmganga island site

Duels were an accepted way of making good on verbal injuries. The less formal form of dueling was known as einvígi (single combat), while the more formal duel was called a hólmganga (going to the island) because duels were frequently fought on small, deserted islands. The islands prevented cowards from running away, and limited possible interference from third parties. The island on which duels were fought at Þingvellir

(the site of Iceland's national parliament) no longer exists, due to the geological changes in the landscape. The area is now flooded by Þingvallavatn, the lake adjacent to the site.

Duels were conducted according to formal rules. According to the 13th century Swedish text Hednalagen, the injured party said, "You are not a man's equal and not a man at heart." The second party responded, "I am as much a man as you."

The time and place for the duel was set. If either party failed to show for any reason, he was branded a níðingr. Chapter 33 of Vatnsdæla saga describes an example. Bergur and Finnbogi challenged Jökull and Þorsteinn to a duel to take place at the haystack wall on the island in the river below Borg, Finnbogi's farm.

Jökull responded, "You must now turn up to the duel if you have a man's heart, rather than a mare's. And if anyone fails to turn up, then a scorn-pole will be raised against him with this curse - that he will be a coward in the eyes of all men, and will never again share the fellowship of good folk, and will endure the wrath of the gods, and bear the name of truce-breaker." Bergur and Finnbogi failed to show up for the duel, and Jökull erected a scorn-pole.

Many of the descriptions of duels in the sagas begin with a recitation of the dueling law (hólmgöngulög). The law seems to vary from one saga to the next, but there are similarities.

For the duel, a cloak was laid on the ground, about three meters square. If either man stepped off the cloak, he lost the duel and was deemed to be níðingr.

Weapons used were swords, spears, and axes. Each man was allowed three shields, in the likely possibility of breakage. If either man's blood fell on the cloak, he was permitted to withdraw from the duel. The man with the worse wound could buy himself off. However, if a man died, all his property went to the winner, so most fights were to the death.

Chapter 9 of Svarfdæla saga provides slightly different details:

Then they proceeded to where they were to fight, and Moldi said he would state the duelling rules, "for I have challenged you. Each of us will place his cloak under his feet, and each of us must stand on his cloak, not moving the thickness of a finger, and the one that moves will bear a coward's name, while the man that wins will be called a valiant man wherever he goes. Whoever is wounded or defeated can release himself from the duel by paying three marks."

Chapter 11 of Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu says that the party who was challenged was to strike the first blow. It also states that when a man became weaponless, he was defeated.

There is the curious practice of bearing the shields for the participants in a duel. An example occurs in chapter 9 of Svarfdæla saga. The earl offered to bear Þorstein's sheild for him, but Þorsteinn declined, saying that no one need be put at risk for his sake: "I will bear my shield myself."

The stories say that before a duel, a sacrificial bull was brought to the dueling site and slaughtered by the winner of the duel. In chapter 66 of Egils saga, it is said that Egill killed Atli in a duel by grappling with him and biting out his throat. While still in a battle frenzy, Egill picked up the sacrificial bull and threw it down onto the ground, breaking its back.

Chapter 10 of Kormáks saga has perhaps the most detailed, if slightly fantastic, description of the dueling laws and customs. On one hand, the saga text confirms some of the details from other sources that have been outlined above. Yet on the other hand, the saga text states, for example, that the man who prepares the duel site must approach the cloak in such a way that he can see the sky between his legs, all the while grasping his earlobes and speaking the invocation of the tjösnublót.

Other forms of dueling are mentioned in the stories. Chapter 17 of Flóamanna saga describes a tub duel (kerganga), in which two men were sealed into a tub or cask. They then fought with staffs that were one ell long (50cm, about 20in).

People trying to make sense of the duel descriptions have come up with alternative interpretations than what I've presented here. One has to assume that when the sagas were written, duels had long since ceased to be a common occurrence. Chapter 11 of Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu describes the last duel to take place in Iceland, between Gunnlaugur and Hrafn, which took place at the Alþing early in the 11th century. The next day, the law council abolished duels. (The duel was a draw, and the saga says that Gunnlaugur and Hrafn agreed to continue the duel in Norway.)

Glima:

Glima (a form of viking wrestling) translates literally as "The Game of Joy", and is an art roughly 1100 years old. It was brought to Iceland by Viking settlers, and has been practiced as a folk art ever since. It is mentioned in writing in the "Jonsbok" law-book in 1325, "Whosoever participates in a contest of friendly wrestling or hide-tugging does so on his own responsibility". In other words, "It's your own damn fault if you get hurt!" The term used in the book to refer to wrestling is "Leikfang". This is an older name for wrestling. The root word "Fang" meaning "Catching" in the sense of gaining control of a person or object. The term can also be used to refer to holding someone in their arms, the space between the arms, or wrestling in general, though in the old sagas when they talked of Leikfang it sounds more like back-hold wrestling than what we see in Glima today with the low grip. Some of the Leikfang contests described end with spines being broken from a man being bent backwards.

Glima is traditionally practiced outdoors in appropriate clothing for the weather. In Iceland, one of the reasons you might have decided to play a few rounds was just to stay warm on a cold night! These often cold and slippery conditions are part of what goes into giving Glima its distinct movement. It would be practiced on the hillsides or in any natural place that gave shelter, and these were referred to as Glimuholl or literally "Glima Hall".

The basic idea is to grip your opponent in the proper way, and then force them to touch their torso or any area above the elbows or knees, to the ground for the best 2 out of 3 falls. Also, if both of their arms touch the ground, it is a fall. If both players fall togetherthen it is called a "brother-fall" and neither player gets the point.

Perhaps the most immediately discernible characteristic of modern Glima is that the participants today wear special leather belts. These have a main belt around the waist, and separate belts on the lower thighs of each leg, which are connected to the main belt with vertical straps. These belts allow a specific grip to be taken which is wrestled out of – similar to many other traditions around the world. Last year I saw an exact duplicate picture of a Glima belt in the "Weekly World News", a paper that also regularly features the half-human "bat-boy" and photos of Clinton shaking hands with UFO aliens. They were saying that this belt was developed by the scientists at NASA as a "Zero-G Sex Device" for experiments on human reproduction while in orbit! Believe it…or not.

The reason that the belts are still worn today is that they are symbolic of wearing the heavy pants and jackets as they did in the past. The belt gives something to grab, and it is fair to all competitors. It is also important to note just where the Glima player is grabbing. The left hip and right thigh are both places where an opponent's sword or dagger would have been kept in the old days – and so it should be no surprise that this is where you grip for play. Your left hand grabs his right thigh and your right hand grips his left hip. From here you start to circle to the right, both circling around each other, trying to find a weakness.

There were three main ways Glima was played in the old days. There was formal Glima and Loose Grips wrestling; and then there was also wrestling for settling a duel – to the death! In the deadly matches, which would have only been done over the most serious of offenses, the two men would go into a field with a large, waist-high, tapered slab of rock – a stone to smash your opponent down on to slay him. One of these still stands today on a farm in the western part of Iceland. Let this be a lesson to modern grapplers – look for the

“slaying stones” in urban areas and other places you might have to fight, and let the terrain magnify the power of your throw!

In Loose Grips, the formal rules of play are not followed to the letter and a player is allowed to “cheat” in that sense, since Loose Grips is not considered “correct wrestling” (by the rules of Glima). The initial grip is different than the one used in the formal game, and follows after the familiar “collar-and-elbow” style seen the world over. The match doesn’t stop when one player touches the ground, and sacrifice throws and other tactics that might be used that are specifically referred to as being “illegal” in Formal Glima are used. One such throw seen in Loose Grips is the Somersault throw (similar to Tomo-Nage). This is fine for loose-grips play, but in technical Glima you would be touching your own body to the ground, so you would lose the fall! In the case where both players fall to the ground in Loose Grips, whomever stands up first is declared the winner. There are at least 27 traditional techniques used in Loose Grips only.

In the modern game, players wear special shoes in addition to the belts previously described. The belts were introduced to play in 1905, and from this time on they were gripped instead of the opponents trousers. The next year would see the introduction of the highest honor in Glima to be awarded - the Grettir Belt, which has been given each year to the greatest Glima player in Iceland, who wins the Icelandic Glima Championship. It is named after a character from one of the Norse sagas who was fantastically strong and a master of wrestling – it is like having the Hercules Belt!

The game was further formalized when the Icelandic Sports Federation published official rules for competition in 1916. In the modern day, Formal Glima is characterized by 4 key points and 8 basic tricks (bragd) using the legs, hips, and feet to throw with.

4 Key Points, without which you don't have true, formal Glima:

1. The fixed grip on the opponent’s waistband and outside of their leg
2. The upright position of the contestants
3. The circular movement of the wrestlers, called Stigandi (Treading)
4. Distinctive throws done with the legs, hips, and feet

8 Basic Tricks, each of course has variations:

1. The Outside Stroke
2. The inside-click, the cross-click & back-heel
3. The twist over the knee, the outside hipe
4. The hook
5. The cross buttock
6. The inside-hipe
7. The cross-buttock aloft
8. The full or half buttock

In glima it is illegal to kick and hit, therefore it is called wrestling. The special thing about glima is that the wrestlers uses some special belts (like in sumo) to get a grip in each other. In the viking age the grip was in each others trousers.

In a glima match the two wrestlers is constantly walking around each other and try to bring down the opponent with tricks like to trip the opponent up, or lifting the opponent up. The match end when one of the wrestlers falls down. There are eight basic tricks, but they can be combined infinitely.

Glima is the nationalsport of Iceland. The reason that it nowadays is almost unknown in other scandinavian countries have to do with the fact that the priests in the end of the viking age considered glima to be a pagan thing. That point of view was never accepted in iceland were it instead turn out to be consider good for the moral and disipline to do glima.

The sport can be practiced by both gender, in all ages. In the icelandic sagas there is written about a match between a man and a woman which run over several days and ended unsettled (in the sagas they often overstated theirs ability a bit).

It is possible to do glima in Copenhagen (Denmark) two times a week. It is also possible to do glima i Malmø (Sweden), and in Whangarei (New Zeeland) and of couse in Iceland.

In the sommer we make shows around in nothern europe in connection with viking festivals and alike.

Basic rules of Glima

The two wrestlers (glimumenn) stand nearly erect, each a little to the left of the other with a slightly wide stance and the right foot slightly advanced. They look over each other's right shoulder, but never down at the feet, the reason for this rule being that the wrestlers are to wrestle by touch and feel and not by sight.

Once the wrestlers have taken their holds and adopted the required stance they begin to step to their right. Then, at a signal, they begin to apply the tricks. Each contestant seeks to throw the other by causing him to lose his balance. Each tries to hook a foot around the other's in order to trip him. A contestant may also try to heave his opponent into the air and by skillful use of the feet, legs, or hips, prevent him from landing on feet, causing him instead to fall to the ground in such a manner that he touches it with some part of his torso.

HÓLMGANG AND EINVIGI:
Scandinavian Forms of the Duel

Introduction - Honor and Feud.
Honor redressed by violence.

Among the Scandinavians of the Viking Age, honor was of paramount importance, both to the individual and to the family: "honor was a kind of equilibrium which a man could not allow to he disturbed. It was intolerable if you were not on even terms with society at large; if you and your family could be spoken of with scorn. Balance and good name were restored only with successful retaliation for insult or injury" (Foote and Wilson, The Viking Achievement, 428).

In this context, "retaliation" is a somewhat deceptive term, bringing to mind ideas of the lex talionis, the exact retribution of "an eye for an eye," however, in Germanic societies the retribution might very well be of much greater magnitude than the original insult or injury, with a slander being met by the sword before honor was satisfied. This pattern of redress often became a cycle between families, with revenge taken by one kindred, and a counter-revenge by the other, with no way of ending hostilities until time and generations wore away memories or until one lineage was dead. A deadly quarrel of this type was called feud, and was immortalized and glorified in epic poetry:

then the exile desired to depart
the stranger from the stead;
were his thoughts rather
if he might bring about
on the sons of the Jutes
Thus he did not refuse
when Hunlafing laid
the best sword --
that was to the Jutes
Likewise after befell
cruel sword-evil
When Gudlaf and Oslaf

revenge for wrongs
than the sea-voyage,
an attack,
planned with iron swords
the ruler of the host
the light-of-battle --
in his lap;
a sword well-known.
Finn, the bold in spirit,
at his own home.
gave back the grim attack

after sea-journey sorrow suffered
a great grief; nor might the restive spirits
within their breasts be withheld. Then was the hall reddened
with the foemen's bodies, so that Finn was slain,
the king with his troops. (Beowulf, ll. 1137b-1153a)

Since feud by its nature tends to continually escalate, involving more and more members of a society in its bonds of hatred and bloodshed, it is to the benefit of a society to develop limiting mechanisms to protect not only its individual members and families, but also the society as a whole from death and dissolution. "According to Járnsíða, feud should be eradicated because it robs society of its best men and the king of his best subjects .... This may be (the law points up the tendency in feud societies in general for retribution to fall not on the killer himself but on a member of his family), but it can hardly be the main reason for the suppression of the practice. In Iceland no less than in other feud societies, feud was a form of clan law and it was in the interest of the state and [later] the Church to reduce the power of the clan" (Clover, "Hildigunnr's Lament," 144). The dominant concern of Viking society as reflected in the sagas was "to channel violence into accepted patterns of feud and to regulate conflict', (Byock, Feud, 1). The first step in limiting feud is to narrow the circle of those directly involved in each battle. One way to do this is to develop the duel of honor between two men as a socially accepted means of redress for injury.

The Vikings called the duel einvigi; literally "single combat," but the concept was developed well before the Viking Age by their Germanic ancestors, for cognates appear in Old Swedish (einvighe), Old High German (einwic), and Old English (artwig), as well as in Old Norse (Bø, "Hólmganga and einvigi," 145). Einvigi was an unregulated duel, fought with any weapons, in any location and by any methods: in short, a brawl (Jones, "Characteristics", 217).

The combatants in an einvigi duel had no judge, and there was no invocation of judicium dei; rather, they relied on their strength and personal "luck" to decide the matter. Ullr, we are told by Snorri Sturluson in Gylfaginning, was known as the god of einvigi; and might have been called upon by one or both contestants to grant divine favor for the fight, but there is not a single instance in the sagas or other Viking literature where any divine help or interference is described (Ciklamini, "Icelandic Duel," 181-182). For whatever reason, einvigi never developed the judicial and religious character of the duels in continental Germanic cultures, the wager of battle, for in general, the Vikings preferred to rely on their own luck and strength, not on a god's whim (Bø, "Hólmganga and einvigi," 135-137).

While einvigi did restrict bloodshed to some degree, it was still not a certain shield against feuds. If one of the combatants were slain in the einvigi; his relatives were entitled still to eptirmál, the right of legal prosecution after killing (Jones, "Characteristics", 205), where the survivors might opt for vengeance or wergild for his death. While an offer to pay wergild legally obligated the avenger to stay his hand and give the slayer a chance at legal defense at an assembly, at the same time Viking culture was geared towards vengeance rather than atonement by paying a blood-price. The Gulaþing Law illustrates this attitude exactly: "Now no one, neither man nor woman, has any personal right to atonement more than thrice if he does not avenge himself meantime" (Foote and Wilson, Viking Achievement, 428). And, of course, vengeance was followed by vengeance, again escalating quickly into generalized feud. Thus, while insult was followed not by feud but by the duel of honor, the duel could easily only delay the onset of a feud, not prevent it.

As Scandinavian society continued to evolve throughout the Viking Age, further mechanisms to control violence within the society were developed. Since the world-view of the pagan Norseman glorified the warrior, and promised a luxurious afterlife for those who died in battle, it followed naturally that for many the surest resolution of dispute would he by the sword. The duel of honor would remain a part of Scandinavian society, however in the West Norse areas (Norway and Iceland) a new form of duel evolved, known as hólmgang. While the einvigi persisted to some extent side-by-side with hólmgang, in Iceland especially einvigi became more and more rare. (At times in the later literature the two terms have become confused, using einvigi when the text's description makes it clear that hólmgang is what was meant). The hólmgang was still a duel of honor, fought between two men, but the hólmgang was different from einvigi in that it was associated with specific

rules or customs known as hólmgangulog (literally, "hólmgang-law" or "hólmgang-rules"). The hólmgangulog was not a single, formally codified law, as the word -log would suggest, but apparently varied from place to place.

In Hednalagen, the so-called Pagan Law of Sweden dating from the 1200's, the hólmgangulog was given thus:

A man uses an unutterable word to another:. "You are not a man's equal and not a man at heart." [He answers:] "I am as much a man as you." They are to meet at a place where three roads join. If the one who comes gave the insult and the other who received it does not come, then he will be what he is called: he cannot swear a legal oath or hear witness on the behalf of either man or woman. If be comes who received the insult and not the one who gave it, then let him shout three niðing-shouts and mark the other man in the ground. Let him who spoke what he did not dare maintain be so much worse a man in consequence. If they meet both fully armed, and the one falls who received the insult, atone for him with half-price for manslaughter. If he falls who gave the insult (the crime of words is worst, the tongue a prime slayer) let him lie in the valueless field [i.e. no atonement is paid for his death] (Foote and Wilson, Viking Achievement, 379-80).

Perhaps the most elaborate dueling rules or hólmgangulog of all the surviving materials is to be found in chapter 10 of Kormáks saga:

These were the roles for the hólmgang: a cloak five ells square was to be laid down, with loops in the corners. Pegs with heads were to be rammed in there which were called tiösnur. He who attended to this was to approach the tiösnur in such fashion that he looked up between his legs while holding onto his earlaps and speaking the spell which later was used in the sacrifice which is called tiösnublót. Three borders (or furrows), each a foot in breadth, were to be around the cloak, and at the edge of these borders must be four posts which are called höslur (hazels). And when all this had been done the spot was called "hazelled" (völlr haslaðr). Each contestant was to have three shields, and when they were destroyed then he must step on the cloak again if he had left it before, and defend himself with his weapons thereafter. He who had been challenged was to have the first blow. If one of the two was wounded so that blood flowed on the cloak, then no further fighting was to be done. If either one stepped outside the höslur with one foot, then that is called "he yields ground"; but "he flees," if with both. Each contestant was to have someone to hold his shield for him. He who was wounded hardest was to pay hólm-ransom (hólmlausn) -- three marks of silver (Hollander, Kormáks saga, 33-4).

The account given in chapter 9 of Svarfdælasaga, while much less elaborate than that in Kormáks saga, has much in common with the latter:

Moldi declared he would recite the law of wager-of-battle, "because I have challenged thee. Each of us shall spread his cloak under his feet. Each shall stand on his cloak, and not draw back a finger outside it, but he who does draw back shall hear a dastard's name. But he who goes forward shall be called a brave man wheresoever he goes. He that is wounded or rendered unfit for the fight shall ransom himself from the hólm with three marks of silver" (Jones, "Characteristics," 208).

Finally, there is this account from Egils saga Skallagrimssonar:

It was dueling law at that time that if a man challenged another in any matter and the one who issued the challenge won the victory, then his due as victor was whatever the challenge bad been made for. If he were defeated, he was obliged to ransom himself by an agreed sum. But if he fell in the duel, the fight lost him all his possessions, and the one who had killed him in the duel inherited from him (Egils saga Skallagrimssonar, 120).

There are some other short accounts describing the rules of the hólmgang in sources such as Gisla saga Sursonar and Vatnsdælasaga, and these explicitly name a hólm or island as the location for the duel.

While the accounts above seem very different, there are many common features of the hólmgangulog. All duels were conducted within a hólmgangustadr, a bounded area which was often on an island or hólm. It is

likely that each district had its own dueling-place, where traditionally such battles were fought. The hólmganga in Kormáks saga were all fought on Leiðhólm (leið is a court), while hólmganga arising at the Alþing were always fought on the hólm in Axewater (Jones, "Characteristics", 213-214). Within this area was secured a cloak approximately nine feet square. A series of three lines was cut into the ground around the outside of the cloak, each a foot apart. It is interesting to note that the Old Norse term for challenging a man to hólmgang, skora a hólm: skora, "to challenge," means literally "to cut or to score," thus skora a hólm was "to mark out or appoint a place for the combat (Jones, "Characteristics", 213).

Around these marks was a boundary of ropes and hazel posts (höslur) [Kormáks saga] or of stones (markasteina) [Egils saga Skallagrimssonar], and this boundary was called the hólmhring (Jones, "Characteristics", 216). Thus, the total fighting area was no more than about twelve feet square. The entire marked out area in which the duel would take place was called the hólmgöngustaðir, and served both legally and ritually as a court of law (Jones, "Characteristics," 214).

Generally, each fighter would have an unarmed shield-bearer, who provided the duelist replacement shields as they were destroyed in the combat. The shield-bearer, or second, was probably not meant to take part in the conflict, but the saga descriptions show that they could certainly affect the outcome of a fight, or even carry it forward by challenging the opponent or the opponent's seconds after the first hólmgang was concluded. Each fighter struck a single blow in turn, with the challenged party delivering the first blow. Once a man's three shields were gone, he had to stay upon the cloak and defend by parrying with his sword: apparently running and dodging were not allowed as a part of a fighter's final defense. This give-and-take continued until one of the duelists was wounded, whereupon the shield-bearers and/or witnesses were supposed to prevent further combat [Kormáks saga]: many of the saga descriptions mention that the disabling wound was to the thigh or leg, after which the combat was stopped, even if the combatant wished to continue.

The usual weapon for use in hólmgang was the sword. Experienced hólmgangumenn carried two swords with them, one in hand and another on a thong looped about the wrist, which not only gave the duelist a "back-up" weapon if his blade became dulled or broken, but an extra length of iron with which to ward off blows when his shields were gone (Bø, "Hólmganga and Einvigi," 144). The hólmgangulog apparently prescribed the use of a sword shorter than that usually used in war, for Þorkell complains in Kormáks saga that the sword that Hólmgangu-Bersi wished to use was too long (Bø, "Hólmganga and Einvigi," 14), and Halfs saga ch. 10 states that the proper length of the dueling sword is one ell (Bø, "Hólmganga and Einvigi," 144). The sagas rarely mention other weapons being used in the hólmgang: occasionally axes are named [Kormáks saga and Olafs saga Tryggvasson] and Egil Skallagrimsson once used a "halberd" in a duel ("halberd" is the translator's effort to describe a hooking-spear or slashing-spear, called krokaspjót in the sagas) (Egils saga Skallagrimssonar, 122).

Apparently fighting the hólmgang required skills different from those needed in war or other martial activities. Several men in the sagas seem to have been were frequent duelists, or even professionals who lived solely by dueling, as is indicated by the names Hólmgangu-Hrafn, Hólmgangu-Ljotr, Hólmgangu-Mani, Hólmgangu-Skeggi, Hólmgangu-Starri and Hólmgangu-Bersi (Ciklamini, "Literary Mold", 124). As one hólmgangumaðr recounts in Kormáks saga, "you have challenged me to a hólmgang, but I offer einvigi to you instead. You are a young man, and little tried, and there are points to be known in the hólmgang, but none at all in the einvigi" (Kormáks saga, Ch. 10).

Dueling injuries resulting from the hólmgang were often not fatal, as the hólmgangulog stipulates that the fight shall end when first blood drawn showed upon the cloak beneath the fighters' feet. Some of the types of dueling injuries even remind a modern observer of those suffered in much later period duels: there are several accounts where the winning blow was to the opponent's leg, one to a thumb, splitting the skin over the knuckle, one had broken ribs, another a broken shoulder, and one fight was ended when a shard of the victor's broken sword flew up and grazed his opponent's cheek (Jones, "Characteristics", 220). The skill and finesse apparent even from the limited accounts of hólmgang surviving strongly tempt the translator to call this type of fighting "fence."

The hólmgöngustaðir, or area in which the hólmgang was fought, was very limited (twelve feet square), and the duelist could not readily utilize all of that: as Kormáks saga recounts, one was said to "yield ground" or "flinch" if one set a single foot outside the höslur, and to "flee" if both feet went beyond the boundaries --- and flinching or fleeing carried with it strong overtones of cowardice, the mark of the niðingr, which no honor-conscious Viking could ignore. The area was even more limited once a fighter's three shields were gone, for then he had to stand his ground on the central cloak (a nine foot square) and could only defend by parrying with his weapons.

At the beginning of the hólmgang, both fighters were aided by a second, who stood close enough to the combat to protect their principal with a shield. These shields cannot have been of very sturdy construction (we have accounts that shields were made of linden or basswood, a very soft wood), as the experienced hólmgangumaðr knew his best strategy was to quickly destroy all three of his opponents' shields: this tactic not only deprived the opponent of his best defense, it also removed the shield-bearer from the fight as well. A good shield-bearer was a considerable asset in the hólmgang, for while he could not damage the other fighter himself (and we suppose the second himself was not a valid target either, although the sagas do not explicitly say this) an experienced second could catch the opponent's sword in his rickety shield, and by twisting the board trap or even bend the opponent's sword (Jones, "Characteristics", 214). Some sagas recount that the fighters had to repeatedly straighten their swords during the combat. Given this type of defensive tactic, it does not require a belief in the evil eye of the bersark explain why a fighter's sword would fail to "bite" the opponent! When the hólmgang began, the challenged party struck the first blow. His opponent then struck one, and so on back and forth, until the combat was decided.

The development of hólmgang was a vital step in restricting bloodshed caused by dueling. First, the fighters were physically separated from onlookers and potential avengers, with the duel being located on an island, at a crossroads, or within a roped-off area. Secondly, the hólmgang was structured to halt fighting after first blood had been drawn, which was proven by the evidence of blood staining the cloaks beneath the duelists' feet. While outright killing of one's opponent was limited in hólmgang, a duelist got not only the satisfaction of facing his opponent at sword's point, but also received a monetary atonement in the form of the hólmlausn. Further, the loser in the duel, although wounded and defeated, had a chance to prove his manliness and bravery by standing to the challenge: alive and honor relatively intact, his relatives had no further cause for hostilities. The sword was often specifically named as the weapon to be used in the hólmgang, which limited severe wounds such as would he caused by the axes or "halberds" (hooking spears or pole axes) that occasionally appear as weapons in the duel, thus reducing the number of deaths. Lastly, even if death was the outcome of the hólmgang, the rules of combat specifically prohibited the relatives of the slain man from seeking compensation (Jones, "Characteristics," 217).

While the rules of the hólmgang prohibited continuation of hostilities between families of duelers, the Scandinavian peoples of the Viking Age had no police force or military empowered to enforce laws or rules. Therefore, one of the ways of ensuring that the hólmgangulog was followed was by sacralizing the duel. By rituals such as the tiösnublót, and by the marking of the dueling site as a liminal area, the hólmgang was shown to participants and observers alike to be a sacred activity, and this in turn added weight to the hólmgangulog, making it more likely that the rules would be followed by all concerned, and that the families of the participants would not continue hostilities into a feuding situation.

While the location of the hólmgang tended to physically separate the combatants from any onlookers who might be caught up in hostilities, the placement of the duel on an island (hólm), at a cross-roads, or within a specially marked area hounded by hazel poles indicates that the area considered appropriate to the hólmgang was one which was already considered to be a special, restricted, or even holy area.

Similar areas marked out with hazel poles (höslur) and "holy ropes" (vébond, "sacred bonds") were considered frið-garðar or "peace-enclosures," in which no weapons could be drawn. In Egils saga Skallagrimssonar the lawcourt area or dómhringr of the Gulaþing Assembly is such an area:

The place where the court sat was a level plain and hazel poles were set in a circle on the plain linked by

ropes. These were called the sanctuary ropes. Inside the circle sat the judges, twelve from the Fjordane District, twelve from the Sogn District, twelve from Hjordaland. These three twelves should judge the lawsuit. (Egils saga Skallagrimssonar, 90).

Both the lawcourt at the Þing and the hólmgöngustaðir were courts in which issues of law are decided. The lawcourt and hólmgöngustaðir alike are enclosed by the holy hazel boundary, but while the lawcourt's enclosure is supposed to keep violence out and peace in, the hólmgöngustaðir boundary encloses violence and preserves the peace of the community without. This relationship can be inverted, exchanging settlement in a court of law for deciding a matter by hólmgang, as is seen in Egils saga Skallagrimssonar when Queen Gunnhild ordered her men to attack Egil in order to stop his lawsuit from going forward:

Alf the Shipman and his men ran to the court, cut apart the sanctuary ropes, and broke down the poles, driving away the judges. Then there was a real uproar in the assembly, but all the men there were without their weapons. Then Egil said, "Can Berg-Onund hear my words?" "I hear," he said. "Then I will challenge you to a duel, and we will fight it out here at the Assembly. Let him who wins have the property, both land and money. If you dare not be called coward by everyone." Then King Erik answered, "If you are eager to fight Egil, then we can let you have that." Egil answered, "I will not fight against you, nor against overwhelming odds, but I'll not run away from equal strength of men if this be allowed me, and in that case, I will make no distinction between opponents. " Then Arinbjorn said, "Let us go away. We can't do anything for the moment that will serve us." He turned away and all his men with him. Then Egil turned back and said, "I call you to witness, Arinbjorn, and you, Þord, and all those men who can now hear my words, nobleman, lawman, and everyone, that I lay a curse on all the estates which Bjorn has owned for living or for working. I lay a curse on you, Berg-Onund, and on all other men, native or foreign, noble or commoner, on every man who is involved in this. I name you breakers of the law of landrights, breakers of the peace, incurrers of the gods' anger." Then Egil went away with Arinbjorn (Egils saga Skallagrimssonar, 92).

Cult places also are enclosed by the höslur and vébond (Ciklamini, "Old Icelandic Duel," 185-186). The belief that sacred groves enclosed in holy ropes are sacred places in which no weapon may be drawn is ancient, for similar beliefs are attested to by Tacitus, who says of the Semnones:

In an island of the ocean there is a sacred grove, and within it a consecrated chariot, covered over with a garment. Only one priest is permitted to touch it. He can perceive the presence of the goddess in this sacred recess, and walks by her side with the utmost reverence as she is drawn along by heifers. It is a season of rejoicing, and festivity reigns wherever she deigns to go and be received. They do not go to battle or wear arms; every weapon is under lock; peace and quiet are known and welcomed only at these times, till the goddess, weary of human intercourse, is at length restored by the same priest to her temple (Tacitus, ch 40, 134-135)

Again, the holy grove is the opposite of the hólmgöngustaðir, where the holy ropes separate a frið-garð on one side, and the normal world of violence and weapons on the other. Since the law courts and cult places used the same method of delineating the frið-garð as did the hólmgang, the association with the rule of law and the judgment of the gods served to help limit violence arising from the duel by conceptually confining the conflict within the vébond. The weight of cultural expectations and religious belief helped prevent bystanders from becoming embroiled in the conflict.

Other elements of the hólmgang add to the sacral aspect are the rituals accompanying the duel. The first of these is the tiösnublót, which was connected with the drawing of the hólmgöngustaðir, when the cloak upon which the combatants would stand was pegged to the earth:

Pegs with heads were to be rammed in there [at the corners of the cloak] and these pegs were called tiösnur. He who attended to this was to approach the tiösnur in such fashion that he looked up between his legs while holding onto his earlobes and speaking the spell which later was used in the so-called tiösnu sacrifice (Kormáks saga, 33).

This peculiar action is difficult to understand, especially as the incantation which accompanied the act has not been transmitted to us. However, the unique posture of bending over and looking between one's legs while grasping the ears is familiar from elsewhere in the sagas, when this action is used to either cast the evil eye upon a victim or to break such a curse (see Vatnsdæla saga, ch. 26, Gull-Þóris saga, ch. 17, and Landnamábók III, 4; Ciklamini, "Old Icelandic Duel," 184). In the context of the hólmgang, it is suggested that this ritual serves an apotropaic function: the person performing the rite was a disinterested party, and the gazing through the legs in this manner put the person in a position to gain insight into the supernatural world, discovering and banishing evil magic which might unjustly affect the outcome of the duel. More specifically, the rite was probably designed to prevent the common magical spell attributed to the berserker which blunted an opponent's sword blade (Ciklamini, "Old Icelandic Duel," 184).

While this seems clear enough, the name of this preparatory ritual is tiösnublót: the first part of this word is the same as the name for the pegs which hold the corners of the cloak, but blót implies animal sacrifice, in which the blood of the sacrificed beast is sprinkled over persons or objects with a hlautteinn (an evergreen twig used to sprinkle the blood) in order to sanctify them. It is my opinion that an animal sacrifice did accompany the delineation of the dueling ground, and in connection with the use of the sacred hazel wood of the corner posts, served to sacralize the hólmgöngustaðir, separating it conceptually from the human world of Midgarðr and recreating the hólmgöngustaðir as a part of the útgarðr or Other-World, the world of the gods and giants, separate from the world of men. This contention is strengthened by the description in Kormáks saga of Þórvard's duel, where he is explicitly said to offer a sacrifice before the hólmgang had begun:

Whether or not animal sacrifice preceded the hólmgang, it certainly concluded the battle. One or both of the combatants was expected to bring to the hólmgang court a calf or bull which was called the blótnaut (sacrifice-bull) (Gould, "Blótnaut," 143-144). The victor of the battle sacrificed the blótnaut as a thank-offering to the gods for his victory, and also perhaps as part of the ritual which allowed the warrior to re-enter the Midgarð world of peace and human law (Jones, "Religious Aspects," 310).

The hólmgang served the community of the Scandinavians of the Viking Age in a vital way by helping to prevent widespread feud and bloodshed which could disrupt the functioning of an entire community. The various differences between hólmgang and einvigi can be seen as developments which foster maintenance of the social order.

Einvigi was a no-holds barred form of combat where dishonorable tactics were allowable so long as they won the victory. Hólmgang brought with it the hólmgangulog, which regulated the fighting and by rule and force of custom limited the way the combat proceeded: in hólmgang "it was considered a disgrace to bite, kick or scratch: 'horses bite, mares kick and cats scratch -- but punching, walloping and hair-pulling is man's work' said a man from Bykle" (Bø, "Hólmganga and Einvigi," 145). More honorable combat that disdained "dirty tricks" was less likely to cause hard feelings for the defeated combatant and his kin, while the regulated nature of the hólmgang allowed for combat to first blood rather than to the death: when the defeated warrior was left alive, there was no need for his family to declare bloodfeud or seek vengeance against the winner of the battle.

In einvigi, there were no rules regarding what roles bystanders or observers could take in regards to the battle, and the family of the defeated duelist was intimately involved with the victor afterwards either by the need to collect wergild or, in the more societally approved response, to exact vengeance, which involvement often escalated the conflict beyond the original two combatants. Hólmgang, on the other hand, defined set roles for those observing the combat, including shield-bearers, a person designated to offer the sacrifice of the blótnaut, and possibly others with official roles such as line judges to determine when a combatant overstepped the boundaries of the hólmgöngustaðir. Since the hólmgangulog regulated the conduct of the victor and the vanquished, prescribing that the vanquished warrior must pay hólmlausn (hólm-ransom) if still living and that the victor need pay limited atonement or no atonement/wergild if the defeated party was slain, the family of the defeated combatant was no longer expected or required by society to exact vengeance or payment for the slaying.

Einvigi by its nature was unregulated: the combatants were not separated from any onlookers in any way,

and the potential numbers of onlookers who could become embroiled in the passions of the conflict was unlimited. In the hólmgang, by physically removing the combatants to an island (hólm) or other limited area, there was physically less room and less opportunity for bystanders to become involved in the conflict. Furthermore, hólmgang combat took place in an area roped off and carefully demarcated, into which area no onlookers were allowed to enter, making it less likely for an angry observer to draw a weapon and enter the fray. The hólmgöngustaðir was conceptually separated from the onlookers as well by the force of ritual, law, custom, and holiness, creating deep psychological separation that further distanced the duelists from those watching the fight.

While hólmgang was considered an act with sacred and legal force, it served well as an alternate recourse in law. The man who could not afford to pay sworn witnesses or compurgators to attest his case at the lawcourts of the Þing, or who was involved in legal wrangles with men who had much more social standing and power, were able to equalize the operation of law by resorting to the law of the duel, pitting himself and his skill at arms against an opponent who he could not defeat any other way.

Landnamábók records a number of hólmgang duels fought in instances in which latecomers to Iceland arrive, only to find that all the habitable land has been claimed by those who came before, or they are unable to obtain property due to high land prices and/or personal poverty. By challenging a landowner to a duel, these adventurers have the opportunity to obtain a farmstead for the price of a battle:

A man was called Ísólfr. He came to Iceland at the end of the Settlement period. He challenged Vilbaldr to hand over his land or fight a duel. Vilbaldr, however, did not wish to fight and left Búland (Landnamábók, ch 372; Ciklamini, "Literary Mold," 122).

The sagas are full of variations upon this theme. Most commonly the challenger is described as a bersark: fearsome warriors known for their rage and invincibility in battle (see my article on Berserkergang for more information on the bersark). While it is indisputable that this theme is in part a literary stereotype (the lust-crazed bersark who challenges a man in order to win sexual rights to the man's wife, daughters, or other female relatives and incidentally the defeated man's farm and worldly goods, is opposed by either the saga hero or the challenged man himself, who must overcome the bersark's supernatural ability to blunt sword blades with his glance and who can often only be wounded by trickery or a special weapon) (Blaney, "The Berserk Suitor," 279-294) the accounts from Landnamábók show that this theme had its roots in actual practice.

The "victory clause" of the hólmgangulog is what allowed abuses of the practice. The "victory clause" provided that

If a man challenged another in any matter and the one who had issued the challenge won the victory, then his due as victor was whatever the challenge had been made for. If he were defeated, he was obliged to ransom himself by an agreed sum. But if he fell in the duel, the fight lost him all his possessions, and the one who had killed him in the duel inherited from him (Egils saga Skallagrimssonar, 120).

This provision was originally supportive of the social order, allowing the common man to prevail in law over powerful men of wealth and social stature, however in the hands of a practiced duelist, the hólmgangulog became a type of legal robbery (Ciklamini, "Literary Mold," 117-188). The existence in the sagas of several historic personages with the nickname "the Duelist" (Hólmgangu-Hrafn, Hólmgangu-Ljótr, Hólmgangu-Mani, Hólmgangu-Skeggi, Hólmgangu-Starri and Hólmgangu-Bersi) (Ciklamini, "Literary Mold", 124) suggests that at least some of these men were professional duelists who made their living at hólmgang, and provides additional evidence that the hólmgang was being used as a way of life rather than as a sacred rite and the utmost recourse of the law. Certainly one of these duelists, Hólmgangu-Ljótr, is presented by the saga author in Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings as a dishonorable man who one would expect to abuse the custom of hólmgang:

Ljótr is not an honorable man; he is inn mesti ójafnaðarmaðr, "a most violent and unscrupulous man." His quarrel over a trenched pasture which he shared with his neighbor typifies Ljótr's dealings with others and

establishes him as a man who disregards the rights of others . . . the duels he fought were part of the violent pattern of his life (Ciklamini, "Literary Mold," 127-128).

Although some sources would suggest that hólmgang was abolished due to the advent of Christianity, there is much evidence to suggest otherwise. Njals saga recounts how the Christian missionary Þangbrandr dueled with heathens:

Þorkell . . . challenged Þangbrandr to a duel; Þangbrandr defended himself with a crucifix instead of a shield; but even so he managed to defeat Þorkell and kill him (Njals saga, 218).

The Church in Western Europe at this time relied upon the duel as a participant in litigation: abbeys paid champions to represent them in judicial duels, and priests were found as combatants in duels as well (Ciklamini, "Icelandic Duel, 190). In fact, the Scandinavian countries all abolished the duel well before any other country in Western Europe, where the duel ultimately persisted until 12th and 13th century town charters abolished the use of the judicial duel, and in fact was not completely extirpated until the British Ashford scandal in 1818.

This is not to say that once hólmgang was abolished, that good Christians would not find Christian reasons to abjure the practice, as we see in Ljósvetninga saga where Hrolf challenged Eyjolf to a duel, only to be told by a friend, "I strongly disapprove that hólmgang should be resorted to, and it is a custom of heathen men" (ca. 1058) (Jones, "Characteristics," 223-224).

By the Settlement period the roots of hólmgang in law and pagan belief began to erode, making hólmgang more and more often into a secular rather than a sacred activity, and a rule of might rather than a rule of law. The most important reason for the abandonment of hólmgang as the final recourse of law was the fact that the duel no longer safeguarded the interests of the aristocracy (Ciklamini, "Icelandic Duel," 190). The last hólmgang said to be fought in Iceland was between two men of substance and power, Gunnlaug Ormstungu and Hrafn Onundarson. Hrafn hewed a mighty blow at Gunnlaug's shield, causing a splinter to break off his sword and fly up to cut Gunnlaug's cheek. With blood flowing, the fighters were separated:

But the following day in the legislature it was made law that hólmgang should be done away with from that day forth forever. This was done on the advice of all the wisest men at the Þing, where indeed there were present the wisest men of all the land. So this which Hrafn and Gunnlaug fought was the last hólmgang to take place in Iceland (Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu, 207-208).

The time was ripe in Iceland for the abolition of the hólmgang as a legal recourse. Two years before Hrafn and Gunnlaug's abortive battle, in 1004, the Icelandic Lögretta had established the Fifth Court as a court of appeals. Now instead of appealing a bad court decision to the duelling-ground, one could appeal the verdict to a higher court. While some duels were still fought sem forn lög liggja til, "according to the old laws," they no longer enjoyed social sanction. The tale of the formal legal abolishment of hólmgang is found in Ljósvetninga saga: although hólmgang had gradually fallen into disuse since the time of Hrafn and Gunnlaug, Þórir Helgason suddenly and unexpectedly challenged Guðmund the Mighty to a duel rather than continue his legal appeal. As with the British Ashford scandal in 1818, Þórir was using a forgotten but still legal maneuver to achieve his ends: the hólmgang was disapproved of, but not yet illegal. Belatedly, the Lögretta passed the law finally abolishing the hólmgang in Iceland (Jones, "Characteristics," 222).

Norway abolished hólmgang in 1014, when Jarl Eiríkr created a law to stop the legalized robbery by hólmgang so popular with the notorious bersarks:

Before leaving Eirik summoned all his Landmen and the larger bondis to meet him. Eirik the jarl was an able ruler, and they had much discussion regarding the laws and their administration. It was considered a scandal in the land that pirates and berserks should be able to come into the country and challenge respectable people to the hólmgang for their money or their women, no wergild being paid whichever fell. Many had lost their money and been put to shame in this way; some indeed had lost their lives. For this reason jarl Eirik abolished all

hólmgang in Norway and declared all robbers and berserks who disturbed the peace outlaws (Grettis saga, ch. 19).

Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu suggests that the Norwegian ban on hólmgang was instead due to the same conflict between Gunnlaug and Hrafn which had supposedly ended in the abolition of hólmgang in Iceland: once the enemies were forbidden to duel in Iceland, they traveled to Norway, where the hólmgang was still legal. There Jarl Eiríkr forbade Gunnlaug permission to carry on with the duel (Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu, 211).

Saxo Grammaticus reports the abolishment of hólmgang in Denmark at two different dates. According to Saxo, Svein Forkbeard supposedly banned hólmgang after witnessing a successful ordeal by hot iron performed by Bishop Poppo. The second time hólmgang was banned in Denmark according to Saxo was in 1074 (a much more believable date) when Harald Hein declared that instead of hólmgang the final resort in a lawsuit was to be purgatorial oath: this law was not well received as a wealthy man could purchase compurgators to swear to his case, and deprived a litigant the right to disprove a false oath via trial by combat (Ciklamini, "Icelandic Duel," 192-193).

Tactics:

Techniques used when attacking have proven to be one of the most important factors through history when it comes to winning the battles. This was something that the Vikings picked up and was notorious for during their raids of plundering. Their attacks were both terrifying and sudden which caused their enemies to flee in panic when they suddenly saw the barbaric Vikings coming.

At sea they used this technique by carving out dragonheads on the front rear of the ships. The Vikings didn't stop for anything and when they met an enemy fleet, they positioned their ships along the sides of the enemy ships and tied them together. If the fleets met rear to rear they had a specific order in which the Vikings jumped over to the enemy ship so that the attack didn't evolve in confusion. I fact, the Viking's attacks were often thoroughly planned. They even had a escape plan that they used that gave them an advantage in situations where they had many small ships that they could pull up on land.

Fighting from a hill was a very efficient technique used by the Romans and Vikings as well as the Englishmen. By retreating to a hill, they were able to turn the battle to their advantage and get more strength in the attack. Other than that, the Englishmen didn't have much in common with the Vikings during that age. They were slow in action but the strategy was always planned to perfection compared to the Vikings that could attack at the first sight of their enemy, although they also planned many of their raides. Some also believe that the leader of the english troop sometimes burned down the boats that they arrived with to insure that the men couldn't flee. This made them fight for their lives as well, not only for the cause. This kind of encouragement was never needed among the Vikings. It was well known among the countries that the Vikings always attacked with great force and without hesitation.

The Vikings had no professional standing army, and tactics and discipline seem to have been fairly rudimentary. They did not fight in regular formations, although the bonds of loyalty between men and their lords would have given their armies some cohesion. Weapons training began in youth in hunting, sports and raiding. Aspiring warriors sought armed service in the retinues of the famous, for which they hoped to be rewarded with weapons and fame of their own. A leader therefore needed to wage war frequently in order to keep his following and maintain power against rivals.

'The famous "berserks" ...would work themselves into a battle frenzy so intense it is said ...they could even ignore the pain of wounds.'

In preparation for battle the younger warriors would draw up in line, with their shields overlapping in a 'shield-wall' for better protection; their chiefs were well defended by a close bodyguard. The older veterans formed up in support behind them. Battle then began by throwing a spear over the enemy line to dedicate them

to Odin, it is said, and this was followed by a shower of spears, arrows and other missiles.

If this was not enough to decide the outcome, each side then attempted to break through and rout the opposition, capturing or killing their leaders if possible. The experienced commander knew that the best way to achieve this was by forming a wedge of 20 to 30 warriors, with its point towards the enemy line in what was known as the svinfylking, or 'boar formation', and then charge, hoping to break through by sheer weight of numbers.

The famous 'berserks', whose name suggests they wore bearskins, may have fought in groups, and believed that Odin, the god of war, gave them both protection and superhuman powers so they had no need of armour. They would work themselves into a battle frenzy so intense it is said they bit on the edges of their shields, and could even ignore the pain of wounds.

Before the end of the 11th century the Vikings fought mainly on foot. Their horses were small and they had no real cavalry. Documentary sources do report horses occasionally being used by Viking leaders in battle, but more usually they served as a rapid means of transport to the battlefield, where their riders dismounted to fight.

Types of military engagement might range from small-scale family feuds or gang-raids to full-scale pitched battles. At the battle of Stiklestad in Norway, St Olaf and his army of some 3,600 warriors were defeated by a much larger force in 1030, and at Ashingdon, in Essex, the Danish king Cnut routed King Edmund in 1016. The largest armies may have consisted of 4,000 to 7,000 men. But they would generally have dispersed after a campaign and either returned to their lives as farmers, merchants or craftsmen, or joined up with other war-bands.

According to sources such as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the Vikings on campaign abroad sometimes constructed temporary winter camps. Only one English example has yet been identified, at Repton in Derbyshire. There the Danish Great Army, which had landed in East Anglia in 865, took shelter over the winter of 873-4.

But in Scandinavia itself we find the remains of ringforts constructed in the late tenth century, such as at Fyrkat, Trelleborg and, the largest, at Aggersborg, in Denmark. They were precisely planned to a similar design and their diameters range from around 120 to 240m. It is estimated that the buildings they once enclosed could have housed between 6,000 to 9,000 inhabitants. It was formerly thought that they were barracks prepared for an attack on England. But their date suggests rather that they were royal defensive and administrative centres, possibly built by Harald Bluetooth to unify the country at a time of conflict with the German Empire. They appear to have lasted for only 30 years or so.

Laws of the late Viking period show that all free men were expected to own weapons, and magnates were expected to provide them for their men. The main offensive weapons were the spear, sword and battle-axe, although bows and arrows and other missiles were also used. Weapons were carried not just for battle, but also as symbols of their owners' status and wealth. They were therefore often finely decorated with inlays, twisted wire and other adornments in silver, copper and bronze.

'Weapons were not just for battle, but also symbols of their owners' status and wealth.'

The spear was the commonest weapon with an iron blade on a wooden shaft, often of ash and 2 to 3m in length. It was used for both thrusting and throwing. The blades varied in shape from broad leaf shapes to long spikes. Skilled spearsmen are said to have been able to throw two spears at once using both hands, or even to catch a spear in flight and hurl it back with deadly effect.

Swords were very costly to make, and a sign of high status. The blades were usually double-edged and up to 90cm, or a little over, in length, but early single-edged sabres are also known. They were worn in leather-bound wooden scabbards. Early blades were pattern-welded, a technique in which strips of wrought iron and

mild steel were twisted and forged together, with the addition of a hardened edge. Later blades of homogeneous steel, imported probably from the Rhineland, bore inlaid makers' marks and inscriptions, such as INGELRII or ULFBERHT. Viking craftsmen often added their own elaborately decorated hilts, and many swords were given names, such as Leg-biter and Gold-hilt.

Long-handled battle-axes might be used instead of swords, particularly in open combat. The famed, double-handed broad axe is a late development, typical of the late 10th and 11th centuries. But as the owner could not hold a shield at the same time, he would take cover behind the front line of warriors, rushing out at the right moment to hew down the enemy.

For defence, circular shields up to one metre across were carried. They were made of wooden boards and had a central hole for an iron hand-grip, which was riveted to the back of the boards. A domed iron boss was fitted over the hole to protect the hand. Viking shields were probably leather covered, with a rim binding also of leather, or metal in some cases. The Viking sagas - mostly composed in Iceland in the 13th century - show that they could have been painted with simple patterns, as in the case of those found in the Gokstad ship, or even possibly with mythological scenes and heroes. Around 1000, the continental, kite-shaped shield was introduced, which gave more protection for the legs.

'Reindeer hide is said to have been used as armour ...'

The sagas also mention 'byrnies' - long tunics of mail armour reaching below the waist - but surviving examples are rare. The mail consisted of interlocking rings with overlapping ends, formed by coiling an iron wire around a rod and then snipping it along the length of the rod. It took many hours to produce a mail shirt, making it very expensive, so they were probably worn mainly by the leaders. It was essential to wear thick padding underneath to absorb the force of sword blows or arrow strikes. Reindeer hide is said to have been used as armour, too, and was reputedly more effective even than mail. Plate armour was not employed, but scale or lamellar armour may occasionally have been obtained from the East, as pieces have been found at the site of Birka, in Sweden.

Helmets were likewise probably worn only by the leading men, although the horned helmet is a modern myth! Helmets required considerable skill to produce: an example of the tenth century from a man's grave at Gjermundbu, Norway, has a spectacles-like visor, an iron dome consisting of four sections with a spike on the crown, and possibly a mail neck-guard. Caps of hide may have been commonly worn, but have not survived.

Throughout the Dark Ages, war was a fact of life in many areas. From the opportunistic raids of Vikings to the massed battles of the C10th, most areas experienced the fear of imminent violence, and saw their men march off to fight and die.

So, how exactly did they fight? On the whole, details of the battles and combat of the period are sketchy at best, although some detailed descriptions of individual fights are recorded in the Icelandic sagas. It is mainly from grave finds of the early period, and carved stones and legal texts from the later periods that we draw our knowledge of the combat of the Viking Age. The laws of Norway, Denmark and Sweden state that every able-bodied man should own weapons according to his status. In Norway, a sword or axe, spear and shield must be owned. In Sweden and Denmark, this was a sword, spear, shield and iron helmet for each man. In addition, it is common for the law to state that each "bench" (in a ship) or each local chieftain (sturaesman) should have a mail shirt or protective jerkin and a bow and arrows.

Swords - the sword was the weapon of choice of the wealthy warriors and the aristocracy of the Viking Age. Found throughout Europe, it is common for the sword blade to be imported from a Frankish workshop, and fitted with hilt fittings made locally. Many swords are engraved or inlaid with a makers mark or name, with INGELRII and ULFBERHT the most common. The blade was sharp on both edges, around 90cm long including the tang (10cm), with a blade 10cm wide at the top, tapering to a slightly blunt tip. The sword was a slashing weapon, not generally used for thrusting. Constructed in the early period by "pattern welding", the central section of the blade is made up of twisted rods of iron, beaten together to form a strong and pliable

core, and also leaving the pattern of the twisted rods in the blade. A harder (but more brittle) edge was then welded to the core. Later, as the quality of iron smelting improved and thus a purer and more regular source of iron became readily available, pattern welding fell out of fashion.

Axes - the characteristic weapon of the Vikings, the axe is found in many burials and is shown on several carved stones. With at least three recognised types, it ranges from a short, single- handed version to the "Danish Axe" of 1-1.5 metres in length, wielded in two hands with a swing which could behead horses with one stroke. Few axes are found in purely Saxon contexts, and it is generally true that in the rest of Europe the axe had been superceded by the sword by the time of the Vikings. The Danish Axe is perhaps best known from the scenes on the Bayeaux Tapestry which depict Harold's huscarls wielding the axes with two hands against the Norman cavalry.

Spears - spears are the most common weapon found in graves in Scandinavia during the earlier Viking Age, and in England from the earliest Saxon period. Grave evidence disappears completely with the general conversion to Christianity, but it is highly likely that spears remained the most common weapon in use - cheap and easy to produce, they are nevertheless a very effective weapon which requires little skill or training to use. Most Viking spearheads are long and thin (from 30cm to as long as 50cm), and would have been equally useful as thrusting or slashing weapons. From the length of the heads and the reconstructed length of the shafts (2-2.5 metres), it is likely that such spears were used in two hands. Although it has been suggested that these could be used in conjunction with a shield, it is perhaps more likely that they were used without a shield once the combat closed beyond the area in which missiles could be useful. Shorter spears capable of being used as javelins are also found in great numbers, suggesting that the opening rounds of a battle in Viking times would involve a salvo of missiles as the lines closed. Some of these are of a size which makes it difficult to decide whether they are small javelins or large arrow heads. These could also be used as a single-handed weapon with a shield, providing the reach of a spear while retaining the defence of a shield.

Archery - bows of varying sizes were used extensively in hunting, and would undoubtedly have been used in battles, particularly at sea. Ranging from short bows of around 1 metre to sizes of almost 1.8 metres, these were capable of shooting over an effective range of up to 200 metres, being even more effective when used in volleys. An arrow shot from a Viking bow would almost certainly pierce a mail shirt at short range, but at longer ranges could only threaten unarmoured warriors unless a lucky shot hit an exposed area. The bows were made of yew or ash, with some late examples found of composite bows, strengthened with horn or iron. The nocks were of wood or horn, and the arrows probably of around 70cm.

Shields - round and traditionally made of linden (lime) wood (although the available evidence suggests that in fact most were made of more common woods, such as larch, beech, oak, or even pine), most shields would be relatively thin, lasting no more than one battle. Although it is thought that metal rims were used to add to the protection a shield gave, no evidence has been found for this. However, the use of leather or rawhide as either a reinforcing rim or as a full cover for a shield would have been common. Ranging from 60cm to 120cm, the shield was the single item of equipment which changed most during the Viking Age. The larger sizes are based on those found in the Gokstad ship burial, but as these were never intended for battlefield use they may not be an accurate representation of the general style. Shields were made from planks of wood, held together by a wooden or iron bar running from top to bottom of the shield. In the centre, a cutout hole allowed the shield to be gripped with the hand covered by an iron boss of hemispherical or conical shape. Given the thin wood used, it is likely that shields were used to deflect a blow, rather than parrying it directly, as it is likely that sword and particularly axe blows would cut through the shield. Towards the end of the Viking Age, kite-shaped shields became widespread, giving better protection to the legs. This was typified by the Norman Conquest (the Normans being second-generation Vikings), although the Saxon army also seems to have had some kite shields, probably only among the huscarls and the aristocracy.

Armour - the most common armour of the period was the mail shirt, referred to as a byrnie for most of the period. Made from iron rings which were individually punched from plates or wound from drawn wire, each ring was linked to four others. In later examples, every second ring was solid, with the split rings being linked into the shirt and then riveted closed. With over 30,000 links in the average shirt, the effort required to make a

mail shirt was considerable. Most shirts had half-length sleeves, and reached to mid- thigh or knee length, protecting the most vulnerable parts of the body. A good shirt would easily stop a slashing blow from a sword or axe, although the crushing effect of an axe blow would cause extensive bruising and possibly internal injuries. Against a thrust from a spear, a mail shirt would probably offer little protection against anything other than a glancing blow if the spear was used with two hands. Against a spear used single-handedly, the protection would have been good, preventing deep penetration and absorbing most of the force from the blow. However, most spearmen would have been trained to aim for the face or throat, negating the benefit of the mail shirt.

Some of the effect of crushing blows against a mailed warrior could be mitigated by wearing additional padding under the mail, but it is not clear that this was common for the majority of the Viking period. Later, it is likely that some form of padding was common for Norman knights, but since this would most likely be of linen stuffed with wool, no examples have survived.

Combat Style:

In the shieldwall, most attacks are made over the head, crashing down onto the head, neck and shoulders. With spears used with two hands a chest or waist-level thrust across the lines, targetting a warrior involved in another fight, would have been very effective although it exposes the spearman to a similar attack from the opposition side.

Once the shieldwall breaks down, individual fights are likely to have been settled by wounding blows, leaving the opponent disabled but not dead. Many corpses are found with major leg injuries, suggesting that there were incapacitated and then left to bleed to death while the battle continued.

With running melees across a battlefield, those targets which are easy to hit are the most tempting - legs and arms are the most obvious. Against a warrior in a mail shirt, the lower arms, face and neck are the obvious target areas. Although the lower leg is uncovered, any attempt to reach this low would dangerously expose the warrior to a counter attack, and so is unlikely to be successful.

Battlefield Tactics:

The Shieldwall -Once battle was joined, each side would form a line of warriors, perhaps several deep, formed into the "shield wall". Each warrior overlaps his shield on both sides, presenting a wall which is strong enough to stop a rushing opponent from penetrating. From behind this wall the warriors would absorb the initial charge, and then loosen slightly to fight individual battles and small melees. With many spears in the lines, the opponent opposite and those up to four down the line were within reach, making combat frantic and deadly. To step out of the line was to die. Retreat of even a few feet could lead to loss of initiative, and would eventually result in a wholesale withdrawal or even rout. With men standing so close and in several ranks, movement was limited, and even highly trained warriors would find it difficult to manoeuver quickly on the battlefield. As a result, outflanking moves were common, and unless stopped quickly could prove overwhelming. At Stamford Bridge, such a move defeated Harald Hadrada when he could not hold his right flank. Once encircled, defeat followed quickly.

The Boar Snout - The "Boar's Snout", or "Swine Array" (svinfylka) was held to be a trick given to the Vikings by the wily God of War, Odin. The sheer weight and momentum of the charge could drive the wedge through an opposing shield wall, turning the battle and spreading panic through the enemy. Although this is probably based on a Roman formation, it is noticable that it is not documented as a Saxon tactic, appearing unique to the Vikings at the time. Since formations of this type require considerable practice and training to achieve effectively, it is more likely to have been employed by the permanent troops of the hearthtroop rather than by the levies called up on an irregular basis.

Huscarls - The "household troops" of an earl or king, these were the most experienced and best equipped warriors. It is normal for them to be placed in the front rank in battles, as shock troops and to bolster the morale of the other warriors. They are also seen as separate units, operating as a rapid reaction force on the flanks or to reinforce areas which appear weak. The task of defending the standard and the leader of the

army fell to the Huscarls.

Leadership - contrary to later tactics, it was expected that a Viking Age leader would lead from the front. Having achieved his position partly by his skill at warfare, it was expected that the leader would stand in the middle of the front rank, leading the charge and the boar snout. All would depend on his personal fortunes - if he fell, it is likely that his army would withdraw or rout, although his huscarls were expected to stand over him and die with their leader. It seems to have been normal for the leaders of Viking Age armies to attempt to seek each other out on the battlefield, attempting to ensure a quick victory by cutting of the head of the army. Although not normally successful, in several cases the huscarls of one army have breached the shieldwall and slain the opposing leader, presumably as part of an advance led by their earl or king.

In the early Viking period the basis of the army was the hirð (pronounced - heerth), the men of the lord's hearth who had sworn loyalty to him. Many would be fellow countrymen drawn by a lord's reputation for valour and generosity, but some would be professional fighters seeking the best rewards. In peacetime they acted as the lord's or king's officials, forming embassies, exacting tribute, recovering dues, and acting as messengers; in war they formed the core of his army. In addition the lord could call upon his estates to provide ships and crews (the coastal nature of Scandinavian warfare meant that armies were often calculated in terms of ships' crews).

The country was divided into units (hafna) each assessed at one full mark of gold, all of which were committed to manning and arming a ship. The crew would have varied from 40 - 60, and in addition to a spear, iron cap (helmet) and shield for each member, one mail shirt per ship, and one bow and arrows per 6 benches were required. These figures varied slightly in different countries and times but provide a good average guide, although if each crew had say three times the number of bows and arrows to mail shirts, then carnage was almost always guaranteed. So either there was an expectation that more mail was owned by the lithsmen on board or this figure of one shirt is erroneous. A similar system probably continued to be used in the Danelaw where there was a large number of small land-holding bondi - a thing of the past in the manorialy based Saxon England. Like the Saxon fyrd the Anglo-Danish here may have had a system of rotation for service to reduce the burden on estates, although like the fyrd it may have contained many semi-professional warriors.

The eleventh century saw a gradual shift to a more permanent professional force commencing with the assaults of Swein and Cnut upon England. In 1012 forty-five ships detached themselves from Swein's fleet and made a bargain with Æthelred to 'keep the country against its enemies' provided the crew were fed and clothed. Later, under Cnut, a standing force of 40 ships was maintained after the disbanding of the here or army.

Its crews were professionals, lithsmen, and were clearly distinguished from the ships manned by the levies. The men received eight full marks a year per oar. Only under Edward, free of Danish dominance, did this system decline and the still loyal Danish ships left England with their gains.

Similarly, Cnut instituted the thingemannalith or tinglith, better known by the English term huscarl. In many ways it formalised the earlier system of the hirð. Unlike the earlier band this one was not supported by the king alone, but by taxes and fees, usually from the towns and burhs where there was much wealth but little land, hence less obligation for fyrd service. In at least two cases there are references to butsecarles being paid by a burh whose citizens are not taking part in the king's host. These men appear to be mercenaries given garrison duties to protect towns in potential danger who had already provided men for the fyrd.

There was very little formal structure by way of military rank in Viking armies. As a rule the term dreng is applied to a young warrior, and ðegn to a more mature member of a boat's crew. The only two specifically military posts referred to at the time were the merkismathr, the standard bearer (an honoured position since many Viking standards were said to have magical properties), and the stallari or marshal - the king's deputy in the field.

In the eleventh century the Norse kings probably had an immediate retinue of about ninety men,

excluding menial servants and hangers on. These were divided into the hirðmenn (household men or hearthmen, i.e.; men who were privileged to be sharing his hearth) and a lower class called gestir literally guests, whose pay was half that of the hirðmenn. The gestir had their own leader, assembly and quarters. They acted as a kind of police force, doing errands for the king, executing his justice and collecting his taxes. They were not a popular group, and a later explanation of their name is that they were 'unwelcome guests' in many a house!

The hirðmenn were hand-picked and well rewarded. To be chosen was a great honour and meant acceptance not only by the other members, but by the king. A hirðman paid homage to the king and swore loyalty to him and the other hirðmenn. In Norway the hirðmenn maintained a hospice for their old and infirm members (a sort of early 'benevolent fund'!). These men were knit together by the personal bond they each had with their king or chieftain.

'The king and other leading men who had a hirð should show their men favour and goodwill and give them their proper pay. In return men should give their lord loyalty and service and be prepared to do all his commands.'

The aspect of Norse society that most captures the popular imagination is the Viking raids. The historical records of Europe (written for the most part by the educated clergy who frequently were the victims of these raids) called the raiders "a most vile people". But the raiders themselves certainly didn't hold that opinion. To them, the raids were a normal and desirable consequence of the pressures on a growing society and of the religious beliefs of the time.

It's worth noting that raids similar to those conducted by the Vikings occurred in other parts of Europe during the Viking era. What made the Viking raids so notable was their success (due in large part to the superiority of Viking ships) and their extent (well outside the borders of the Norse lands).

The raids were only one aspect of the Norse expansion. It's not clear what triggered this outward movement at the end of the 8th century. Perhaps it was due to population pressure, since portions of Scandinavia was overpopulated by the standards of the time.

Changes in trading patterns in northwest Europe in the century before the Viking age may have been the trigger that started the outward movement from the Norse lands. The new trade routes and trade centers exposed the Norse people to the magnitude of the wealth changing hands, and to the conflicts and politics of European kingdoms, revealing both the benefits of and the opportunities for raiding outside the Norse lands. a most vile peopleRegardless of the trigger, the Norse people started moving outwards from Scandinavia at the end of the 8th century, interacting with and making their mark upon the other Europeans. The start of this movement defines the beginning of the Viking age.

As they expanded, the Norse were looking for three things: new victims to raid; new partners with which to trade; and new land on which to settle. In many cases, Norse voyages included all three activities.

The raids were usually opportunistic, against targets that could be attacked, plundered, and departed from quickly. Vikings stayed along the coast or on navigable rivers; overland marches were avoided. The goal was to grab as much valuable booty as possible before an effective defense could be raised. Typical booty included weapons, tools, clothing, jewelry, precious metals, and people who could be sold as slaves.

The size of the raiding parties varied. A small raiding party is described in chapter 46 of Egils saga. Egill and Þórólfur led separate groups of twelve men each from their shared longship. A larger party is described in chapter 29 of Njáls saga. Gunnar and Hallvarður began their raiding party with two ships, one with forty oars, and one with sixty. At the end of the summer, they returned from their raids with ten ships. One of the largest raiding parties was the Great Army which harried in England and the Continent and which probably numbered in the few thousands.

The Viking raiders depended on the superiority of their ships in order to make their raids a success. The shallow draft of Viking age ships meant that they could navigate shallow bays and rivers where other contemporary ships couldn't sail. The broad bottom of the Viking ships made it possible to land on any sandy beach, rather than requiring a harbor or pier or other prepared landing spot. These two factors made it possible for Vikings to land and raid in places that their victims thought it impossible to land, contributing to the surprise of the raids. Additionally, the efficiency of Viking ships under sail meant they could outrun contemporary ships under favorable conditions. And the combination of sail and oar meant that Viking ships could outrun contemporary ships under unfavorable conditions as well. These two factors made it possible for Viking raiders to depart from a raid with little danger from any defenders who might try to give chase.

The cruel and bloody portrayal of these raids has probably been overstated. The exaggerations have occurred in the writings of authors from several eras: by the contemporary authors who originally described the raids (learned Christians who were inimical to the pagan Norse and who may have been the victims of the raids); by the later authors who had pride in the exploits of their forebears (such as the authors of the Icelandic family sagas); by later historians who had developing feelings of nationalism (such as the authors of some of the first Scandinavian histories); and by modern authors who may have misinterpreted earlier texts. For example, the sadistic ritual killing known as a "blood-eagle" in some of the descriptions of Viking raids is almost certainly a literary invention from later times.

The Norse pagan religion helped to propel the Norse expansion through two key beliefs. The first is the belief that for most people, there is no existence after death. Death is the end for all but a few. These few include the chosen warriors who enjoyed the pleasures of Valhöll after death. And they include oath breakers, thieves, and the like who, after death, were taken to Niflheim for torment. Since there was no afterlife, the only thing that survived after death was one's reputation, one's "good name". Norsemen risked everything to gain and protect their good name.

The second key belief of Norsemen is that the time of one's death is determined by fate, which is chosen by the Norns, and that nothing one did could change the moment of one's death. However, what one did up until that moment was strictly one's own doing. Therefore, one ought to make the very best of every moment of life, because the worst that could happen would be death, and the best that could happen would be fame and an enhancement to one's reputation. Since one couldn't effect the time of one's own death, which was predestined anyway, there was nothing to lose and everything to gain by being bold and adventurous.

This attitude towards life is expressed in an address made by King Sverrir of Norway to his troops before the Battle of Ilevolden (described in Sverris saga). The king related a parable to his men:

Thus spoke a farmer when he accompanied his son to the warships and gave him advice, asking him to be valiant and hardy in perils: "How would you act if you were engaged in battle and knew before hand that you were destined to be killed?" The son answered, "Why should I then shrink from striking right and left?" The farmer said, "Now suppose someone could tell you for certain that you would not be killed?" The son answered, "Why should I then refrain from pressing forward to the utmost?" The farmer said, "In every battle where you are present, one of two things will happen: you will either fall or come away alive. Be bold, therefore, for everything is preordained. Nothing can bring a man to his death if his time has not come, and nothing can save one doomed to die. To die in flight is the worst death of all."

A good man (drengr) was expected to face challenges with courage and equanimity. Worrying or complaining did nothing to improve the situation and only diminished a man. The greatest test of a man was to fight to the bitter end, even in the face of certain defeat and death. Norsemen expected a share of trouble, and the best of them attempted to use it, and to rise above it creating fame for themselves through bravery, loyalty, and generosity.

As a result of these two key tenets of the Norse pagan religion, it is only natural that raiding became a common way to increase one's stature in the community. There's a subtle but important distinction in the Norse mind between thieving and raiding. Theft was abhorrent. But a raid, involving a battle with an enemy followed

by the victors taking booty, was not only acceptable, but highly desirable, since it enhanced one's fame and wealth. It mattered little that the victims of the raid might be farmers or villagers or monks who were totally unprepared to defend themselves.

A story from chapter 46 of Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar illustrates this distinction. While raiding a coastal farm, Egill and his men were captured by the farmer and his family, who bound all of the raiders. In the night that followed, Egill was able to slip his bonds. He and his men grabbed their captors' treasure and headed back to the ship. But along the way, Egill realized he was acting like a thief, which was shameful. So, he returned to his captors' house, set it ablaze, and killed the occupants as they tried to escape the fire. He then returned to the ship with the treasure, this time as a hero. Because he had fought and won the battle, he could justly claim the booty.

Historians call this era the Viking era. Throughout these pages, I've tried to avoid that term because while all Vikings were Norse, not all Norsemen were Vikings. In the old Norse language, the word víkingr would normally be translated as raider or pirate. While this aspect of Norse life was very important, most Norsemen were not pirates, but rather farmers, traders, smiths, and so on. The Norse literature implies that going "a-viking" was suitable, even desirable for a young man, but that a more mature man was expected to settle down, raise a family, and manage his farm.

The first recorded Viking raid occurred in the year 793, against the great monastery of Lindisfarne off the east coast of England. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (a contemporary history of the Anglo-Saxon people) for that year reads:

In this year dire portents appeared over Northumbria and sorely frightened the people. They consisted of immense whirlwinds and flashes of lightning, and fiery dragons were seen flying in the air. A great famine immediately followed these signs, and a little after that in the same year, on 8 June, the ravages of heathen men miserably destroyed God's church on Lindisfarne, with plunder and slaughter.

The attack sent shock waves throughout Europe: why had God allowed such a holy place to be defiled by pagans? Were the raiders a punishment for some terrible sin?

Monasteries were frequent targets of Norse raiders not because the raiders were particularly anti-Christian, but because that's where the money was. Wealth tended to concentrate in the monasteries during this period. The raiders recognized that fact and took advantage of it.

The Viking raids didn't come to an end with any singular event. Some would say the widespread conversion to Christianity in the Norse lands at the beginning of the 11th century signaled the end of the Viking age. The teachings of the Christian religion did not encompass the kinds of activities that took place on a typical raid.

In the year 1066, King Haraldr harðráði of Norway died trying to conquer England. It would be the last major Norse raid. In the same year, Polish tribesmen overran and destroyed Hedeby, the primary Norse trading center. The climate turned colder that century, making life more difficult in the north. The Norse influence in continental Europe gradually declined

The Íslendingasögur (Sagas of Icelanders, sometimes called the Icelandic family sagas) are a valuable resource for the study of Norse society and culture in the Viking age. In order to facilitate the use of the sagas in the study of Viking age arms and combat, I've created a list of references to arms and combat in the sagas. This page describes how the list was created and how to use it.

1. How would you become a Viking warrior?

Any Viking -- whether chieftains or farmers -- could organize a group of men for the purpose of raiding. Plundering expeditions such as the one in Lindisfarne were carried out by only small groups of men

transported in three to six ships. Some of these foreign raids had royal approval, but for the most part these men acted on their own initiative for personal economic gain.

Viking warriors also served as volunteers in royal armies called lid in wars of conquest abroad or in neighboring lands. However, kings or local royal agents could gather men as part of levies for military campaigns at home.

2. What were the tactics of Viking armies?

Vikings did not have a professional standing army and their tactics and discipline were basic. They did not fight in organized formations and there was no formal weapons training; young Vikings learned how to use weapons through hunting. This is often the reason why Vikings were more successful in surprise attacks than in battling large, skilled armies.

The Vikings, however, still had tactics they used in battle. A frequent defense tactic was the shieldburg, or shield wall. Warriors lined up and overlapped their shields to protect themselves from spears. The warriors then threw their own shower of spears, followed with hand-to-hand combat. Vikings also formed what were known as svinfylking or a "boar formation" -- a wedge formation of 20 to 30 warriors to overcome their enemies.

3. How would a warrior become an army leader?

A warrior could become a leader by virtue of noble birth or military prowess. Viking warriors skilled in the use of all weapons -- swords, axes, and spears -- and those who proved themselves in battle could become commanders of small units. Frequently, however, Viking leadership positions were held by those of noble birth -- kings, earls, or clan chieftains. Viking kings commanded armies through their unit commanders of earls or chieftains.

4. When and how often would Viking warriors go on raids?

Viking raids began in the 790s and continued for decades. These surprise attacks were planned all throughout winter and were executed in the summer. The frequency of the raids ranged from once every few years to every year. Nomadic armies such as the Great Army that invaded England in 865 could travel for years plundering England and France.

5. Could women Vikings become warriors?

Yes, there were women warriors in Viking society! Although for the most part, Viking women stayed home and ran the farm while their husbands were away, some women went along in Viking raids. Freydis, the sister of explorer Leif the Lucky, led an attack against natives in Vinland (now Newfoundland) and overpowered her two other brothers for control of the Viking colony. Apparently not one for competition, she even used her axe to kill all the women in their settlement.

6. Who were berserkers?

Berserkers were Viking warriors who went into a frenzied state during battle. During this state they felt no pain, had superhuman strength and believed they were actually wolves or bears. These rages are thought to have been possibly initiated by hallucinogenic mushrooms, self-induced hysteria or epileptic seizures. Berserkers fought without concern for their own personal safety. Groups of berserkers -- often brothers and their sons -- were chosen to make the first attack against the enemy whom they shocked with their bravery and brazenness.

7. What happened to warriors who died in battle?

Viking warriors believed that Valkyries, warrior daughters of the principal Viking god Odin, presided over battles and chose those who were to die. Valkyries then brought the souls of the dead heroes back to Valhalla, Odin's banquet hall in the heavenly realm of Asgard. These warriors then became members of Odin's army, Einherjar who were then served beer and mead by the Valkyries in a feast. Chief among the Valkyries, and Odin's favorite was Brunhild, usually represented as riding through the air on horse, wearing a helmet and carrying a spear.

This article is a collection of quotations on the use of arms and armor during the Viking period. Its purpose is to provide students of historical armed combat quick access to information from 23 Sagas without having to read through over 1600 pages to find it. These sagas cover the 9th through the 12th century, and these versions were written down during the 12th through 14th century.

The sagas were obtained from The Online Medieval and Classical Library (OMACL). The OMACL library provides the following information about itself an its texts:

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The sagas were searched and read for any entries that would be helpful to today's student of historical Western combat. The entries were transcribed below without any change to the text or addition of editorial comment. Entries used here are actual references to the use of arms and armor and their capabilities. In addition, some other useful information that might be of interest to the reader was occasionally included. Certainly many useful possible entries were missed. Many other entries of marginal use were not included here. The sagas contain plenty of other information on:

- results in the healing of wounds

- motives of combat

- fines and retribution paid for wounds and kills made in combat

- descriptions of arms and armor

- details of combat at sea

- large scale strategy and tactics

- many more descriptions of battles or combat that do not give much detail

At times footnotes or comments from the translator where included if they added to the purpose of this article. There are other cases where the footnote numbering can be found in passages but the footnote was not included. If the reader wants more information they can obtain those works directly from OMACL for free and search for the reference cited.

These 23 sagas below are found in 8 different literary works listed below in the order in which they are found in this article. The work called Heimskringla, The Chronicle of the Kings of Norway contains 16 sagas itself.

The Life and Death of Cormac the Skald("Kormak's Saga")

The Story of the Heath-Slayings ("Heitharviga Saga")

The Story of the Volsungs (Volsunga Saga)

The Story of the Ere-Dwellers ("Erybyggja Saga")

The Laxdaela Saga

The Saga of Grettir the Strong (Grettir's Saga)

The Story of Burnt Njal (Njal's Saga)

Heimskringla, The Chronicle of the Kings of Norway, Snorri Sturlson

1. Ynglinga Saga

2. Halfdan the Black Saga

3. Harald Harfager's Saga

4. Hakon the Good's Saga

5. Saga of King Harald Grafeld and of Earl Hakon Son of Sigurd

6. King Olaf Trygvason's Saga

7. Saga of Olaf Haraldson (St. Olaf)

8. Saga of Magnus the Good

9. Saga of Harald Hardrade

10. Saga of Olaf Kyrre

11. Magnus Barefoot's Saga

12. Saga of Sigurd the Crusader and His Brothers Eystein and Olaf

13. Saga of Magnus the Blind and of Harald Gille

14. Saga of Sigurd, Inge, and Eystein, the Sons of Harald

15. Saga of Hakon Herdebreid ("Hakon the Broad-Shouldered")

16. Magnus Erlingson's Saga

It is not the intent here to analyze the accuracy of these texts. However, the following advice concerning accuracy of the descriptions is offered to the reader:

Question everything you read here. These sagas do contain some obvious embellishments and outright fantasy. In the details of combat, you can find warlocks, dragons, hill giants, spells, trolls, gods, superhuman deeds, and magical weapons. From this, it is easy to question the validity of other details about the use of arms and armor. Even without the fiction, these sagas were originally passed down verbally and discuss elements of weapon use that the warriors of the day would themsleevs easily know to be true or false. Some events mentioned also preceed the date they were written down in these versions by as much as 300 years, which undoubtedly results in some information changing over time.

Also consider the problems with translating sagas originally written in Icelandic into English. Although the translators were certainly scholars, it is unlikely that they had a working knowledge of combat. Terminology is also at issue. Even today experts in arms and armor often disagree on the appropriate name for things. So the reader can not expect that a scholarly translator one hundred years ago to use the same terms and meanings as today. For example at least one reference used the term spear and halberd for the same weapon in the same sentence.

Do not summarily judge the accuracy of the sagas. Certainly some of the sagas are more accurate than others. These sagas come from many different authors and transcribers. Some of the events are much closer in time to the date they were written down than others. There are cases within the sagas were it is carefully pointed out when it is unclear who may have accomplished some act. Also the texts occasionally demonstrate by anecdote the importance of truth and accurate information in Viking culture. In addition certain events within the texts can easily be confirmed with texts from different countries.

Even within a saga there is going to be information that is pure myth along side other details that are worthy of consideration. Consider also that the written version of these sagas was penned during the 12th through the 14th century when armored combat was still very much a normal part of medieval life. So even if a detail about combat was totally fictionalized when written, it would have been influenced by what was considered reasonable at that time.

Use these references as just another source of information for the accurate reconstruction of historical Western fighting arts. Combine the information here with what you can learn from historical artwork, fighting manuals, preserved arms and armor, opinions of leading hoplological experts and lots of personal experimentation and training with replicas. The more sources that confirm an idea the more we can rely on its validity. Believing something to be true based on only one historical drawing or reference is unscholarly and unnecessary.

It is doubtful that it will ever be known exactly how historical arms and armor were precisely used or their full capabilities. But this is what a serious student of the craft today strives to achieve by searching through vast material and weeding out incorrect information to at last find another piece to the puzzle. Yet perhaps the final ultimate truth is not altogether necessary; because it is the journey not the final destination that today's swordsmen crave.

The Life and Death of Cormac the Skald
("Kormak's Saga")

Originally written in Icelandic sometime between 1250 - 1300 A.D., although parts may be based on a now lost

12th century saga. Author unknown.

Translation by W.G. Collingwood & J. Stefansson (Ulverston, 1901). This text is in the PUBLIC DOMAIN.

This electronic text edited, proofed, and prepared by Douglas B. Killings (DeTroyes@AOL.COM), March 1995.

Then they both went to the fighting holm and fought. The viking laid bare his side, but the sword would not bite upon it. Then Ogmund whirled about his sword swiftly and shifted it from hand to hand, and hewed Asmund's leg from under him: and three marks of gold he took to let him go with his life.

Narfi rode up, with his shield and sword, and carried on strangely, rolling his eyes about like a hunted beast. Some men were up on the wall with Cormac when he came, and his horse shied at them. Said Cormac, ...

"Thou hast never a word but ill," said Cormac, and leapt upon him and struck at the shield: and as it slipped aside he was smitten on the breast and fell from his horse; and the horse ran away with the shield (hanging to it).

Cormac's brother Thorgils said this was too much. "It serves him right," cried Cormac. And when Narfi woke out of his swoon they got speech of him.

"Now see to thy safety henceforward,
And stick to thy horse and thy buckler;
Or this mallet of mine, I can tell thee,
Will meet with thine ear of a surety.
Now say no more stories of feasting,
Though seven in a day thou couldst tell of,
Or bumps thou shalt comb on thy brainpan,
Thou that breakest the howes of the dead.
Now, Bersi owned the sword they call Whitting; a sharp sword it was, with a life-stone to it; and that sword he had carried in many a fray.

"Whether wilt thou have weapons to meet Whitting?" she asked. Cormac said he would have an axe both great and keen.

Dalla said he should see Skeggi of Midfiord and ask for the loan of his sword, Skofnung. So Cormac went to Reykir and told Skeggi how matters stood, asking him to lend Skofnung. Skeggi said he had no mind to lend it. Skofnung and Cormac, said he, would never agree: "It is cold and slow, and thou art hot and hasty."

"Hard wilt thou find it to handle," said Skeggi. "There is a pouch to it, and that thou shalt let be. Sun must not shine on the pommel of the hilt. Thou shalt not wear it until fighting is forward, and when ye come to the field, sit all alone and then draw it. Hold the edge toward thee, and blow on it. Then will a little worm creep from under the hilt. Then slope thou the sword over, and make it easy for that worm to creep back beneath the hilt."

"Here's a tale of tricks, thou warlock!" cried Cormac

"Nevertheless," answered Skeggi, "it will stand thee in good stead to know them."

So Cormac rode home and told his mother, saying that her will was of great avail with Skeggi. He showed the sword, and tried to draw it, but it would not leave the sheath.

"Thou are over wilful, my son," said she.

Then he set his feet against the hilts, and pulled until he tore the pouch off, at which Skofnung creaked and groaned, but never came out of the scabbard.

Well, the time wore on, and the day came. He rode away with fifteen men; Bersi also rode to the holm

with as many. Cormac came there first, and told Thorgils that he would sit apart by himself. So he sat down and ungirt the sword.

Now, he never heeded whether the sun shone upon the hilt, for he had girt the sword on him outside his clothes. And when he tried to draw it he could not, until he set his feet upon the hilts. Then the little worm came, and was not rightly done by; and so the sword came groaning and creaking out of the scabbard, and the good luck of it was gone.

CHAPTER TEN

The Fight On Leidarholm.

After that Cormac went to his men. Bersi and his party had come by that time, and many more to see the fight.

Cormac took up Bersi's target and cut at it, and sparks flew out.

Then a hide was taken and spread for them to stand on. Bersi spoke and said, "Thou, Cormac, hast challenged me to the holmgang; instead of that, I offer thee to fight in simple sword-play. Thou art a young man and little tried; the holmgang needs craft and cunning, but sword-play, man to man, is an easy game."

Cormac answered, "I should fight no better even so. I will run the risk, and stand on equal footing with thee, every way."

"As thou wilt," said Bersi.

It was the law of the holmgang that the hide should be five ells long, with loops at its corners. Into these should be driven certain pins with heads to them, called tjosnur. He who made it ready should go to the pins in such a manner that he could see sky between his legs, holding the lobes of his ears and speaking the forewords used in the rite called "The Sacrifice of the tjosnur." Three squares should be marked round the hide, each one foot broad. At the outermost corners of the squares should be four poles, called hazels; when this is done, it is a hazelled field. Each man should have three shields, and when they were cut up he must get upon the hide if he had given way from it before, and guard himself with his weapons alone thereafter. He who had been challenged should strike the first stroke. If one was wounded so that blood fell upon the hide, he should fight no longer. If either set one foot outside the hazel poles "he went on his heel," they said; but he "ran" if both feet were outside. His own man was to hold the shield before each of the fighters. The one who was wounded should pay three marks of silver to be set free.

So the hide was taken and spread under their feet. Thorgils held his brother's shield, and Thord Arndisarson that of Bersi. Bersi struck the first blow, and cleft Cormac's shield; Cormac struck at Bersi to the like peril. Each of them cut up and spoilt three shields of the other's. Then it was Cormac's turn. He struck at Bersi, who parried with Whitting. Skofnung cut the point off Whitting in front of the ridge. The sword-point flew upon Cormac's hand, and he was wounded in the thumb. The joint was cleft, and blood dropped upon the hide. Thereupon folk went between them and stayed the fight.

Then said Cormac, "This is a mean victory that Bersi has gained; it is only from my bad luck; and yet we must part."

He flung down his sword, and it met Bersi's target. A shard was broken out of Skofnung, and fire flew out of Thorveig's gift.

Bersi asked the money for release, Cormac said it would be paid; and so they parted.

Cormac was there some nights; his hand swelled much, for it was not dressed.

After that meeting, Holmgang Bersi went to see his brother. Folk asked how the holmgang had gone, and when he told them they said that two bold men had struck small blows, and he had gained the victory only

through Cormac's mishap.

then Cormac went home to Mel and saw his mother. She healed his hand; it had become ugly and healed badly. The notch in Skofnung they whetted, but the more they whetted the bigger it was.

Now Steinar had a sword that was called after Skrymir the giant: it was never fouled, and no mishap followed it. On the day fixed, Thord and Steinar went out of the tent, and Cormac also came to the meeting to hold the shield of Steinar. Olaf Peacock got men to help Bersi at the fight, for Thord had been used to hold his shield, but this time failed him. So Bersi went to the trysting-place with a shield-bearer who is not named in the story, and with the round target that once had belonged to Thorveig.

Each man was allowed three shields. Bersi cut up two, and then Cormac took the third. Bersi hacked away, but Whitting his sword stuck fast in the iron border of Steinar's shield. Cormac whirled it up just when Steinar was striking out. He struck the shield-edge, and the sword glanced off, slit Bersi's buttock, sliced his thigh down to the knee-joint, and stuck in the bone. And so Bersi fell.

"There!" cried Steinar, "Cormac's fine is paid."

But Bersi leapt up, slashed at him, and clove his shield. The sword-point was at Steinar's breast when Thord rushed forth and dragged him away, out of reach.

"There!" cried Thord to Bersi, "I have paid thee for the mauling of my sons."

So Bersi was carried to the tent, and his wound was dressed.

So they came to the holme and fell to the holmgang. Thord carried the shield before Bersi, and Vali was Thorkel's shield-bearer. When two shields had been hacked to splinters, Bersi bade Thorkel take the third; but he would not. Bersi still had a shield, and a sword that was long and sharp.

Said Thorkel, "The sword ye have, Bersi, is longer than lawful."

"That shall not be," cried Bersi; and took up his other sword, Whitting, two-handed, and smote Thorkel his deathblow.

"To batten the black-feathered wound-bird
With the blade of my axe have I stricken
Full thirty and five of my foemen;
I am famed for the slaughter of warriors.
May the fiends have my soul if I stain not
My sharp-edged falchion once over!
And then let the breaker of broadswords
Be borne -- and with speed -- to the grave!"

But when he was on the way back again, out came Bersi and Halldor to meet him. Bersi had a halberd in one hand and a staff in the other, and Halldor had Whitting. As soon as Vali saw them he turned and hewed at Bersi. Halldor came at his back and fleshed Whitting in his hough-sinews. Thereupon he turned sharply and fell upon Halldor. Then Bersi set the halberd-point betwixt his shoulders. That was his death-wound.

Then they set his shield at his feet and his sword at his head, and spread his cloak over him; and after that got on horseback and rode to five homesteads to make known the deed they had done and then rode home. Men went and buried Vali, and the place where he fell has ever since been called Vali's fall.

Halldor was twelve winters old when these doings came to pass.

So then they set to. Cormac's sword bit not at all, and for a long while they smote strokes one upon the other, but neither sword bit. At last Cormac smote upon Thorvard's side so great a blow that his ribs gave way and were broken; he could fight no more, and thereupon they parted. Cormac looked and saw where a bull was standing, which he slew for a sacrifice; and being heated, he doffed his helmet from his head, saying this

song: --

(70)

"I have fared to the field of the battle,
O fair one that wearest the bracelet!
Even three times for thee have I striven,
And this thou canst never deny me.
But the reed of the fight would not redden,
Though it rang on the shield-bearer's harness;
For the spells of a spae-wife had blunted
My sword that was eager for blood."

After that, Thorvard was soon healed, and when he thought he was strong again, he rode to Mel and challenged Cormac to the holmgang.

"It takes thee long to tire of it," said Cormac: "but I'll not say thee nay."

So they went to the fight, and Thordis met Thorvard now as before, but Cormac sought no help from her. She blunted Cormac's sword, so that it would not bite, but yet he struck so great a stroke on Thorvard's shoulder that the collarbone was broken and his hand was good for nothing. Being so maimed he could fight no longer, and had to pay another ring for his ransom.

Then Thorolf of Spakonufell set upon Cormac and struck at him. He warded off the blow and sang this song: --

(73)

"This reddener of shields, feebly wrathful,
His rusty old sword waved against me,
Who am singer and sacred to Odin!
Go, snuffle, most wretched of men, thou!
A thrust of thy sword is as thewless
As thou, silly stirrer of battle.
What danger to me from thy daring,
Thou doited old witch-woman's carle?"

Then he killed a bull in sacrifice according to use and wont, saying, "Ill we brook your overbearing and the witchcraft of Thordis:" and he made this song: --

(74)

"The witch in the wave of the offering
Has wasted the flame of the buckler,
Lest its bite on his back should be deadly
At the bringing together of weapons.
My sword was not sharp for the onset
When I sought the helm-wearer in battle;
But the cur got enough to cry craven,
With a clout that will mind him of me!"

After that each party went home, and neither was well pleased with these doings.

Once upon a time, after a battle, Cormac was driving the flying foe before him while the rest of his host had gone back aboard ship. Out of the woods there rushed against him one as monstrous big as an idol -- a

Scot; and a fierce struggle began. Cormac felt for his sword, but it had slipped out of the sheath; he was over-matched, for the giant was possessed; but yet he reached out, caught his sword, and struck the giant his death-blow. Then the giant cast his hands about Cormac, and gripped his sides so hard that the ribs cracked, and he fell over, and the dead giant on top of him, so that he could not stir.

The Story of the Heath-Slayings
("Heitharviga Saga")

Originally written in Icelandic (Old Norse) sometime in the 12th Century A.D. Author unknown.

The text of this edition is based on that published as "THE SAGA LIBRARY, VOL. II: THE STORY OF THE ERE-DWELLERS, translated by William Morris & Eirikr Magnusson (Bernard Quaritch, London, 1892).
This edition is in the PUBLIC DOMAIN in the United States.

This electronic edition was edited, proofed, and prepared by Douglas B. Killings (DeTroyes@EnterAct.COM), January 1998.

Bardi and his folk had portioned out the men to them beforehand, that two should fall on each one of them. Bardi and Stein were to take Ketil Brusi, who was mighty of strength; Day and Olaf were to go against Gisli; Steingrim and Thord were to go against Thormod. So now they turn on them.

Now came those brethren to the garth, and Ketil was the swifter, and leapt over it into the mead; but whenas Gisli leapt at the garth, a turf fell therefrom, and he slipped; therewith came up Bardi, who was the swiftest of those men, and hewed at him with the sword Thorgaut's-loom, and hewed off well-nigh all the face of him.

And he shaketh the sword at him therewith.

This they might not abide, so now they run on them. Thorbiorn leaps at Bardi, and smites him on the neck, and wondrous great was the clatter of the stroke, and it fell on that stone of the beads which had been shifted whenas he took the knife and gave it to Nial's son; and the stone brake asunder, and blood was drawn on either side of the band, but the sword did not bite.

Then said Thorbiorn: "Troll! No iron will bite on thee."

Now were they joined in battle together, and after that great stroke he (Thorbiorn) turns him forthwith to meet Thorod, and they fall to fight together; Ketil goeth against Bardi, and Thorgaut against Thorberg. There lacked not great strokes and eggings-on.

The Southlanders had the lesser folk, and the less trusty.

Now first is to be told of the dealings betwixt Bardi and Ketil. Ketil was the strongest of men and of great heart. Long they had to do together, till it came to this, that Bardi slashed into the side of him, and Ketil fell. Then leapt Bardi unto Thorgaut and gave him his death-wound, (B) and there they both lay low before the very weapon which they owned themselves.

Now is it to be told of Thorbiorn and Thorod. They fall to in another place; and there lacked not for great strokes, which neither spared to the other, most of them being huge in sooth. But one stroke Thorod fetched at Thorbiorn, and smote off his foot at the ankle-joint; but none the less he fought on, and thrust forth his sword into Thorod's belly, so that he fell, and his gut burst out.

But Thorbiorn, seeing how it had fared with his kinsmen (namely, Ketil and Thorgaut), he heeded nought of his life amidst these maimings.

Now turn the sons of Gudbrand on Thorbiorn. He said: "Seek ye another occasion; erst it was not for young men to strive with us." Therewith he leaps at Bardi and fights with him. Then said Bardi: "What! A very

troll I deem thee, whereas thou tightest with one foot off. Truer of thee is that which thou spakest to me."

"Nay," quoth Thorbiorn, "nought of trollship is it for a man to bear his wounds, and not to be so soft as to forbear warding him whiles he may. That may be accounted for manliness rather; and so shouldst thou account it, and betroll men not, whereas thou art called a true man. But this shall ye have to say hereof before I bow me in the grass, that I had the heart to make the most of weapons."

There fell he before Bardi and won a good word.

Now lacks there never onset, but it came to this at last, that the Southern men gave way.

But it is told that there was a man hight Thorliot, a great champion, who had his abode at Walls; but some say that he was of Sleybrook: he fought with Eric Wide-sight; and before they fought, Eric sang this stave:

"O warrior that reddenest the war-brand thin-whetted,
'Tis the mind of us twain to make shields meet together
In the wrath of the war-fray. O bider of Wall-stead,
Now bear we no ruth into onset of battle.
O hider of hoards of the fire that abideth
In the fetter of earth, I have heard of thine heart,
High-holden, bepraised amongst men for its stoutness;
And now is the time that we try it together."

They had to do a long while, and that say men that scarce might braver men be seen; for either of them was of the biggest and strongest of men, deft in weapons, and dauntless of heart. Now Eric hews at Thorliot with his sword, and it brake asunder, but he catches a hold of the point and hews at him, and gives him a great wound, and he fell.

But they might not withhold themselves, and they run off to meet him eagerly, and they fall to fight. Eyolf was the greatest of champions, and a man of showy ways, like his father before him; full-fashioned of might, well proven in onslaught; and the battle betwixt them was long and hard; and suchwise it ended, that either was so wilful and eager, and so mighty of heart and hand, that they all lay dead at their parting.

Fast fought the sons of Eid withal, and go forward well and warrior-like; against them fought Stein and Steingrim, and now they all fight and do a good stroke of work; and there fall the sons of Eid, and Bardi was standing hard by, when they lost their lives.

Thorgisl the Hewer spared nought; he deemed great scathe wrought him by the death of his son. He was the mightiest man of his hands, and defter of weapons than other men. He heweth on either hand and deemeth life no better than death.

These are most named amongst the foremost herein, to wit, Thorgisl and Eric and Thorod.

Thorgisl spared him nought, and there was no man of the country who seemed to all a wayfellow of more avail than he. Thorgisl (son of Hermund, brother of Thorod) betook him to meet him; and they dealt long together, nor was either of them lacking in hardihood. Now Thorgisl (Hermundson) smites a stroke on him down his nose from the brow, and said:

"Now hast thou gotten a good mark befitting thee; and even such should more of you have."

Then spake Thorgisl (the Hewer): "Nought good is the mark; yet most like it is, that I shall have the heart to bear it manfully; little have ye yet to brag over." And he smote at him so that he fell and is now unfightworthy.

Now was there a lull for a while, and men bind their wounds.

Now is seen the riding of four men, and there was Tind and Tanni, Eyolf and Thormod; and when they came up they egg on much; and they themselves were of championship exceeding great; and battle was joined the third

time.

Tanni fell on against Bardi, and there befell fight of wondrous daring.

Tanni hewed at him, and it fell out as before, that Bardi is hard to deal with, and the business betwixt them ended herewith, that Tanni fell before Bardi.

Eyolf went against Odd, and they fight, each of them the best of stout men. Now Eyolf smiteth at Odd, and it came on to his cheek and on to his mouth, and a great wound was that.

Then spake Eyolf: "Maybe the widow will think the kissing of thee worsened."

Odd answereth: "Long hath it been not over good, and now must it be much spoilt forsooth; yet it may be that thou wilt not tell thereof to thy sweetheart."

And he smote at him, so that he gat a great wound.

Here it befell as of the rest, that Bardi was standing hard by, and did him scathe.

Withal Thormod Thorgautson was a bold man, and went well forward. Eyolf of Burg fared against him, and got a sore hurt.

Now though these above said be the most named amongst the Northlanders, yet all of them fared forth well and in manly wise, whereas they had a chosen company.

So when these were fallen there was a lull in the battle. And now Thorberg spake that they should seek to get away; but eight men from the South were fallen, and three from the North. Now Bardi asks Thorod if he thought he would have the might to fare with them, and he gave out there was no hope thereof, and bids them ride off.

Now Bardi beheld his hurt, and therewithal they saw the band that now fared up from the South like a wood to look upon. So Bardi asks if they be minded to bide, but they said they would ride off; and so they did, and were now sixteen in company, and the more part of them wounded.

The Story of the Volsungs
(Volsunga Saga),

with Excerpts from the Poetic Edda.

Originally written in Icelandic (Old Norse) in the thirteenth century A.D., by an unknown hand. However, most of the material is based substantially on previous works, some centuries older. A few of these works have been preserved in the collection of Norse poetry known as the "Poetic Edda".

The text of this edition is based on that published as "The Story of the Volsungs", translated by William Morris and Eirikr Magnusson (Walter Scott Press, London, 1888). This edition is in the PUBLIC DOMAIN in the United States.

This electronic edition was edited, proofed, and prepared by Douglas B. Killings (DeTroyes@EnterAct.COM), May 1997.

Bor's sons slew Ymir the giant, but when he fell there ran so much blood out of his wounds that all the kin of the Hrimthursar were drowned, save Hvergelmir and his household, who got away in a boat.

Now Sinfjotli drave the point of the sword up into the big stone, and drew it hard along, and the sword bit on the stone. With that Sigmund caught the sword by the point, and in this wise they sawed the stone between them, and let not or all the sawing was done that need be done, even as the song sings:

"Sinfjotli sawed
And Sigmund sawed,
Atwain with main
The stone was done."

Now are they both together loose in the barrow, and soon they cut both through stone and through iron, and bring themselves out thereof.

Now the vikings rushed from their ships in numbers not to be borne up against, but Sigmund the King, and Eylimi set up their banners, and the horns blew up to battle; but King Sigmund let blow the horn his father erst had had, and cheered on his men to the fight, but his army was far the fewest.

Now was that battle fierce and fell, and though Sigmund were old, yet most hardily he fought, and was ever the foremost of his men; no shield or byrny might hold against him, and he went ever through the ranks of his foemen on that day, and no man might see how things would fare between them; many an arrow and many a spear was aloft in air that day, and so his spae-wrights wrought for him that he got no wound, and none can tell over the tale of those who fell before him, and both his arms were red with blood, even to the shoulders.

But now whenas the battle had dured a while, there came a man into the fight clad in a blue cloak, and with a slouched hat on his head, one-eyed he was, (1) and bare a bill in his hand; and he came against Sigmund the King, and have up his bill against him, and as Sigmund smote fiercely with the sword it fell upon the bill and burst asunder in the midst: thenceforth the slaughter and dismay turned to his side, for the good-hap of King Sigmund had departed from him, and his men fell fast about him; naught did the king spare himself, but the rather cheered on his men; but even as the saw says, "No might 'gainst many", so was it now proven; and in this fight fell Sigmund the King, and King Eylimi, his father-in-law, in the fore-front of their battle, and therewith the more part of their folk.

So Regin makes a sword, and gives it into Sigurd's hands. He took the sword, and said --

"Behold thy smithying, Regin!" and therewith smote it into the anvil, and the sword brake; so he cast down the brand, and bade him forge a better.
Then Regin forged another sword, and brought it to Sigurd, who looked thereon.
Then said Regin, "Belike thou art well content therewith, hard master though thou be in smithying."

So Sigurd proved the sword, and brake it even as the first; then he said to Regin --

"Ah, art thou, mayhappen, a traitor and a liar like to those former kin of thine?"

Therewith he went to his mother, and she welcomed him in seemly wise, and they talked and drank together.

Then spake Sigurd, "Have I heard aright, that King Sigmund gave thee the good sword Gram in two pieces?"

"True enough," she said.

So Sigurd said, "Deliver them into my hands, for I would have them."

She said he looked like to win great fame, and gave him the sword. Therewith went Sigurd to Regin, and bade him make a good sword thereof as he best might; Regin grew wroth thereat, but went into the smithy with the pieces of the sword, thinking well meanwhile that Sigurd pushed his head far enow into the matter of smithying. So he made a sword, and as he bore it forth from the forge, it seemed to the smiths as though fire burned along the edges thereof. Now he bade Sigurd take the sword, and said he knew not how to make a sword if this one failed. Then Sigurd smote it into the anvil, and cleft it down to the stock thereof, and neither burst the sword nor brake it. Then he praised the sword much, and thereafter went to the river with a lock of wool, and threw it up against the stream, and it fell asunder when it met the sword. Then was Sigurd glad, and went home.

So he came against Sigurd with a great army, he and his brothers with him, and an exceeding fierce fight befell; many a spear and many an arrow might men see there raised aloft, axes hard driven, shields cleft and byrnies torn, helmets were shivered, skulls split atwain, and many a man felled to the cold earth.

And now when the fight has long dured in such wise, Sigurd goes forth before the banners, and has the good sword Gram in his hand, and smites down both men and horses, and goes through the thickest of the throng with both arms red with blood to the shoulder; and folk shrank aback before him wheresoever he went, nor would either helm or byrny hold before him, and no man deemed he had ever seen his like. So a long while the battle lasted, and many a man was slain, and furious was the onset; till at last it befell, even as seldom comes to hand, when a land army falls on, that, do whatso they might, naught was brought about; but so many men fell of the sons of Hunding that the tale of them may not be told; and now whenas Sigurd was among the foremost, came the sons of Hunding against him, and Sigurd smote therewith at Lyngi the king, and clave him down, both helm and head, and mail- clad body, and thereafter he smote Hjorward his brother atwain, and then slew all the other sons of Hunding who were yet alive, and the more part of their folk withal.

And therewithal he vanished away; but Sigurd made the pits even as it was shown to him.

Now crept the worm down to his place of watering, and the earth shook all about him, and he snorted forth venom on all the way before him as he went; but Sigurd neither trembled nor was adrad at the roaring of him. So whenas the worm crept over the pits, Sigurd thrust his sword under his left shoulder, so that it sank in up to the hilts; then up leapt Sigurd from the pit and drew the sword back again unto him, and therewith was his arm all bloody, up to the very shoulder.

Now when that mighty worm was ware that he had his death-wound, then he lashed out head and tail, so that all things soever that were before him were broken to pieces.

So whenas Fafnir had his death-wound, he asked "Who art thou? And who is thy father? And what thy kin, that thou wert so hardy as to bear weapons against me?"

Therewith Sigurd cut out the heart of the worm with the sword called Ridil; but Regin drank of Fafnir's blood, and spake, "Grant me a boon, and do a thing little for thee to do. Bear the heart to the fire, and roast it, and give me thereof to eat."

Then Sigurd went his ways and roasted it on a rod; and when the blood bubbled out he laid his finger thereon to essay it, if it were fully done; and then he set his finger in his mouth, and lo, when the heart-blood of the worm touched his tongue, straightway he knew the voice of all fowls, and heard withal how the wood-peckers chattered in the brake beside him --

"There sittest thou, Sigurd, roasting Fafnir's heart for another, that thou shouldest eat thine ownself, and then thou shouldest become the wisest of all men."

And another spake: "There lies Regin, minded to beguile the man who trusts in him."

But yet again said the third, "Let him smite the head from off him then, and be only lord of all that gold."

And once more the fourth spake and said, "Ah, the wiser were he if he followed after that good counsel, and rode thereafter to Fafnir's lair, and took to him that mighty treasure that lieth there, and then rode over Hindfell, whereas sleeps Brynhild; for there would he get great wisdom. Ah, wise he were, if he did after your redes, and bethought him of his own weal; `for where wolf's ears are, wolf's teeth are near.'"

Then cried the fifth: "Yea, yea, not so wise is he as I deem him, if he spareth him whose brother he hath slain already."

At last spake the sixth: "Handy and good rede to slay him, and be lord of the treasure!"

Then said Sigurd, "The time is unborn wherein Regin shall be my bane; nay, rather one road shall both these brothers fare."

And therewith he drew his sword Gram and struck off Regin's head.

into the castle went Sigurd, and saw one lying there asleep, and all-armed. Therewith he takes the helm from off the head of him, and sees that it is no man, but a woman; and she was clad in a byrny as closely set on her as though it had gown to her flesh; so he rent it from the collar downwards; and then the sleeves thereof, and ever the sword bit on it as if it were cloth. Then said Sigurd that over-long had she lain asleep; but she asked --

"What thing of great might is it that has prevailed to rend my byrny, and draw me from my sleep?"

Now the hair of this Sigurd was golden-red of hue, fair of fashion, and falling down in great locks; thick and short was his beard, and of no other colour, high-nosed he was, broad and high-boned of face; so keen were his eyes, that few durst gaze up under the brows of him; his shoulders were as broad to look on as the shoulders of two; most duly was his body fashioned betwixt height and breadth, and in such wise as was seemliest; and this is the sign told of his height, that when he was girt with his sword Gram, which same was seven spans long, as he went through the full-grown rye-fields, the dew-shoe of the said sword smote the ears of the standing corn; and, for all that, ;~greater was his strength than his growth: well could he wield sword, and cast forth spear, shoot shaft, and hold shield, bend bow, back horse, and do all the goodly deeds that he learned in his youth's days.

But the third time he went in, and there lay Sigurd asleep; then Guttorm drew his sword and thrust Sigurd through in such wise that the sword point smote into the bed beneath him; then Sigurd awoke with that wound, and Guttorm gat him unto the door; but therewith Sigurd caught up the sword Gram, and cast it after him, and it smote him on the back, and struck him asunder in the midst, so that the feet of him fell one way, and the head and hands back into the chamber.

Now she bade bring forth much gold, and bade all those come thither who would have wealth: then she caught up a sword, and thrust it under her armpit, and sank aside upon the pillows, and said, "Come, take gold whoso will!"

So she sees that the game goeth sorely against her brethren, and she gathers to her great stoutness of heart, and does on her a mail-coat and takes to her a sword, and fights by her brethren, and goes as far forward as the bravest of man-folk; and all spoke in one wise that never saw any fairer defence than in her.

Now the men fell thick, and far before all others was the fighting of those brethren, and the battle endured a long while unto midday; Gunnar and Hogni went right through the folk of Atli, and so tells the tale that all the mead ran red with blood; the sons of Hogni withal set on stoutly.

Then spake Atli the king, "A fair host and a great have we, and mighty champions withal, and yet have many of us fallen, and but evil am I apaid in that nineteen of my champions are slain, and but left six alive."

So on a night, when the king had drunken, he gat him in bed, and when he was laid asleep, thither to him came Gudrun and the son of Hogni.

Gudrun took a sword and thrust it through the breast of King Atli, and they both of them set their hands to the deed, both she and the son of Hogni.

Then Atli the king awoke with the wound, and cried out; "No need of binding or salving here! -- who art thou who hast done the deed?"

The Story of the Ere-Dwellers
("Eyrbyggja Saga")

Originally written in Icelandic (Old Norse) sometime around the middle of the 13th century. Author unknown, although some scholars have suggested a connection with the author of the "Laxdaela Saga".

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Thorolf deemed the lands of Burgdale but too narrow, and he challenged Ulfar the Champion for his lands, and bade him to the holm-gang because he was an old man and a childless. But Ulfar had liefer die than be cowed by Thorolf. They went to holm in Swanfirth, and Ulfar fell, but Thorolf was wounded in the leg, and went halt ever after, and therefore was he called Halt-foot.

But in the evening when the Kiallekings were full of meat they took their weapons and went out on to the ness; but when Thorstein and his folk saw that they turned off from the road that lay skerry-ward, they sprang to their weapons and ran after them with whooping and egging on. And when the Kiallekings saw that, they ran together and defended themselves.

But those of Thorsness made so hard an onset that Kiallak and his men shrunk off the field and clown to the foreshore, and then they turned against them therewith, and there was a hard battle between them; the Kiallekings were the fewer, but they had a chosen band. But now the men of Woodstrand were ware of this, Thorgest the Old and Aslak of Longdale; they ran thereto and went betwixt them; but both sides were of the fiercest, nor could they sunder them before they gave out that they would aid those who should hearken to their bidding to sunder.

Therewith were they parted, but yet in such wise that the Kiallekings might not go up on to the field; so they took ship, and fared away from the Thing.

Thorarin answered:" No longer will I stand here;" and therewith Thorarin and his folk ran out and would break up the court. They were seven in all, and therewithal both sides rushed into the fight. Thorarin slew a house-carle of Thorbiorn's, and Alfgeir another, and there fell also a housecarle of Thorarin's; but no weapons would bite on Odd Katlason. ,

Now the goodwife Aud calls out on her women to part them, and they cast clothes over the weapons.

Thereafter Thorarin and his men went in, but Thorbiorn rode off with his folk, and they put off the case to the Thorsness Thing. They rode up along the Creeks, and bound up their wounds under a stackyard that is called Combe-Garth.

But in the home-field at Mewlithe men found a hand whereas they had fought, and it was shown to Thorarin; he saw that it was a woman's hand, and asked where Aud was; it was told him that she lay in bed. Then he went to her, and asked whether she were wounded; she bade him pay no heed to that, but he was ware withal that her hand had been hewn off. Then he called to his mother, and bade her bind up the wound.

In that very nick of time came up Thorarin and his folk, and Nail was the foremost; but when he saw them threaten with their weapons, he blenched and ran forth and up into the fell, and there became one witless with fear. (3) But Thorarin rushed at Thorbiorn and smote his sword into his head, and clave it down to the jaw-teeth. Then Thorir Ernson with two others set on Thorarin, and Hallstein and another on Alfgeir. Odd Katlason with another man gat on to a fellow of Alfgeir's, and three of Thorbiorn's fellows on two of Thorarin's folk; and the fight was joined both fierce and fell. But so their dealings ended, that Thorarin cut the leg from Thorir at the thickest of the calf, and slew both his fellows. Hallstein fell before Alfgeir wounded to death; but when Thorarin was free, Odd Katlason fled with two men; he was not wounded, because no weapon might bite on his kirtle; all their other fellows lay on the field; and there too were slain two housecarles of Thorarin.

"Well, thief, what knowest thou of that?" said Biorn, and sprang up and drove at him with the staff so that he fell stunned. But when Mar saw that, he drew his sword and cut at Biorn, and the stroke fell on the arm up by the shoulder, and a great wound that was. Thereat men ran into two bands, but some went betwixt them, and they were parted, so that nought else happed to tell of. But the next morning rode Vigfus down to Holyfell and claimed boot for this shaming, but Snorri spoke, saying that he saw no odds between those haps that had befallen.

That Vigfus liked ill enough, and they parted with the greatest ill-will.

In the spring Vigfus brought a suit for the wounding to the Thorsness Thing, but Snorri set forth, that

Biorn should be made guilty for the blow with the staff; and the end of the case was that Biorn was made guilty, because of the onslaught on Helgi, and got no boot for his wound, and his arm he bare ever after in a sling.

But when Snorri and his folk went from the fires they were minded for the place of easement, and Snorri went first, and got off out into the outer door before Swart could bring his onset about; but Mar Hallwardson came next, and Swart thrust the bill at him, and it smote the shoulder-blade, and glanced off out towards the armpit, and there cut itself through, and no great wound it was. Then Swart sprang out and over the wall, but the causeway stones were slippery under him, and he fell a great fall when he came down, and Snorri got hold of him before he got up.

Thereafter Biorn took his weapons and went away, and was minded for home, but when he came up beyond Bigmull, five men sprang up before him, and there was Thorod and two of his house-carles and the sons of Thorir Wooden-leg. They set on Biorn, but he defended himself well and manly. The sons of Thorir set on the hardest, and gat him wounded, but he was the bane of them both.

Then Thorod with his housecarles fled away, and he was but little wounded, and they not at all.

Now whereas Cunning-Gils was a man of many children and very poor, he took the bait and went out under the towngarth at Ulfar's-fell, and there he saw how Ulfar came up from below with a good shield and a fair-dight sword that Arnkel had given him. So when they met, Cunning-Gils prayed to see the sword, and flattered Ulfar much, and said he was a great man, since he was deemed worthy to have such seemly gifts from chiefs. Ulfar wagged his beard, and handed to him the sword and shield. Cunning-Gils straightway drew the sword and thrust Ulfar through, and then took to his heels and ran out along Ulfar's-fell to Crowness.

He took his weapons and went after them, and came up with them west of Svelgriver twixt it and the Knolls, but as soon as he came up with them, Hawk leapt off his horse and thrust at Arnkel with a spear, and smote his shield, yet he gat no wound. Then Arnkel sprang from his horse and thrust with a spear at Hawk, and smote him in the midst, and he fell there on the place which is now called Hawks-river.

Now Arnkel fell to boring holes in the door-ledge, and laid his adze down the while. Thorleif took it up, and heaved it up swiftly over his head with the mind to bring it down on Arnkel's skull, but Arnkel heard the whistle of it and ran in under the stroke, and heaved up Thorleif by the breast, and soon was proven the measure of either's strength, for Arnkel was wondrous strong. So he cast Thorleif down with so great a fall that he lay stunned, and the adze flew out of his hand, and Arnkel got hold thereof and smote it into Thorleif's head, and gave him his death-wound.

Now when Snorri and his folk came to the garth, it is not told that any words befell there, but straightway they set on Arnkel, and chiefly with spear-thrust, which Arnkel put from him with the sledge-runner, and many of the spear-shafts were broken thereby, nor was Arnkel wounded; but when they had spent their shot-weapons, then Thorleif Kimbi ran at the garth and leapt up on to it with sword drawn, and Arnkel smote at him with the sledge-runner, and Thorleif dropped down away from the stroke out of the garth, and the runner smote against the garth wall, and up therefrom flew a piece of frozen turf; but the sledge-runner was broken at the mortice, and part thereof fell out over the garth. Arnkel had laid his sword and shield against a hayrick, and now he took up his weapons and defended himself therewith; but now he began to gather wounds, and withal they came up into the garth about him. Then Arnkel leapt up on to the hayrick, and defended himself thence for a space, but such was the end of the matter that he fell, and they covered him over there in the garth with hay; and thereafter Snorri and his folk fared home to Holyfell.

Now that day men gave and took wounds, and one man from the Northcountry-men was brought to his death, and he was borne into a copse that was on the ere, and much blood ran from his wounds, and there stood a pool of blood in the copse. There was the youngling Kiartan, the son of Thurid of Frodis-water, with a little axe in his hand; he ran to the copse, and dipped the axe in the blood.

But the next morning men had a turf-play beside the booth of the sons of Thorbrand, and as Thorlak's sons passed by, forth flew a great piece of turf, and smote Thord Wall-eye under the poll, and so great was the stroke, that he fell heels over head; but when he arose, he saw that Thorbrand's sons were laughing at him hugely. Then Thorlak's sons turned back and drew their swords, and they ran to meet one another, and forthwithal they fought together, and some were wounded, but none slain.

... and when they came to the homestead they leapt off their horses and were minded to enter, but might not break open the door. Then they leapt up on to the house, and fell to unroofing it.

Arnbiorn took his weapons, and warded himself from the inside of the house. He thrust out through the thatch, and that became woundsome to them.

But when Thorleif Kimbi heard that, he ran out with the other sons of Thorbrand, and then all went forth who were in the chamber. Thorleif came first to the door, and saw where Thord Walleye stood before the doorway with his shield; but even therewith Steinthor went forth into the homefield. Thorleif took a spear which stood there in the doorway, and thrust it at Thord

Wall-eye, and the thrust smote his shield and glanced off it unto the shoulder, and that was a great wound. After this men ran out and there was battle in the home-mead, and Steinthor was of the eagerest, and smote on either hand of him. But when Snorri the Priest came out he bade men stay the unpeace, and bade Steinthor ride away from the homestead, and said that he would not suffer men to ride after them. So Steinthor and his folks fared adown the mead, and men parted in such wise.

But when Snorri the Priest came back to the door, there stood Thorod his son with a great wound in his shoulder, and he was then twelve winters old. Snorri asked who had brought that about.

"Steinthor of Ere," said he.

And Thorleif Kimbi answered and said: "Now has he rewarded thee in meet wise, for that thou wouldst not have us chase him; but my rede it is that we part not thus."

"Yea, so shall it be now," said Snorri, "that we shall have more dealings with them." And he bade Thorleif withal tell the men to follow after them.

Now Steinthor and his folk were come down from the field when they saw the chase, and therewith they crossed the river and turned up on to the scree Geirvor, and made them ready for a stand; for a good fighting-stead was that because of the stones. But as Snorri's company came up the scree, Steinthor cast a spear over Snorri's folk for his good luck, according to ancient custom; (2) but the spear sought a mark for itself, and in its way was Mar, the kinsman of Snorri, who was straightway put out of the fight. So when that was told Snorri the Priest, he answered: "It is well that men should see," says he, "that he is not always in the best case that goeth the last."

So then befell a great battle, and Steinthor was at the head of his own folk, and smote on either hand of him; but the fair-wrought sword bit not whenas it smote armour, and oft he must straighten it under his foot. He made most for the place whereas was Snorri the Priest.

Stir Thorgrimson set on fiercely with Steinthor his kinsman, and his first hap was that he slew a man of the fo1k of Snorri the Priest, his son-in-law; but when Snorri saw that he cried to Stir:

"Thus, forsooth, thou avengest Thorod, the son of thy daughter, whom Steinthor of Ere has brought unto death; the greatest of dastards art thou."

Stir looked on him and said: "Speedily I may atone for that;" and he shifted his shield withal, and turned to the side of Snorri the Priest, and slew another man, but this time a man of Steinthor's band.

Now even herewith came up from Longdale the father and son, Aslak and Illugi the Red, and sought to go between them. Thirty men they had with them, and to that company joined himself Vermund the Slender.

So then they prayed Snorri the Priest to let stay the slaughter of men, and Snorri bade the Ere-dwellers come up and make a truce. Then Aslak, he and his, bade Steinthor take truce for his men. So Steinthor bade Snorri reach forth his hand, and he did so; but therewith Steinthor raised his sword aloft and cut at Snorri's arm, and great was the clatter of the stroke, for it smote the stall-ring, and well-nigh struck it asunder, but Snorri was nowise wounded.

Then cried out Thorod Thorbrandson: "No truce will they have! Well then, let us set on, and stay not till all the sons of Thorlak are slain."

But Snorri the Priest answered: "Turmoil enow it would bring to the countryside if all sons of Thorlak were slain, and the truce shall be holden to if Steinthor will, after the word aforesaid."

Then all bade Steinthor take the truce; and things went so far, that a truce was declared betwixt man and man until such time as they came back each one to his home.

Now it is to be told of the Broadwick folk that they knew how Snorri the Priest had fared with a flock to Swanfirth. So they take their horses and ride after Steinthor at their swiftest, and they were on Ulfar's-fell-neck whiles the fight was on the scree; and some men say that Snorri the Priest saw Biorn and his folk as they came up on the hill's brow, whenas he happened to turn and face them, and that for that cause he was so easy in the terms of the truce with Steinthor and his men.

So when Biorn and Steinthor met at Orligstead, Biorn said that matters had gone even after his guessing. "And my rede it is," said he, "that ye turn back now, and drive them hard."

But Steinthor said: "Nay, I will hold to the truce I have made with Snorri the Priest, in whatso ways matters may go betwixt us hereafter."

Thereafter they ride each to his own home, but Thord Wall-Eye lay wounded at Ere. In the fight at Swanfirth five men had fallen of Steinthor's company, and two of Snorri the Priest; but many were wounded on either side, for the fight had been of the hardest. So says Thorrood Trefilson in his Raven-lay:

So when these beheld men running down the firth, they deemed they knew who they were, and thought the men of Ere were fain to meet them. So they fell to going at a great pace, and made for the skerry with the mind to make a stand there; and in this wise each came nigh to meeting the other, yet the sons of Thorbrand reached the skerry first. But as Steinthor and his folk came forth past the skerry, Thorleif Kimbi let drive a spear against their flock,

and it smote Bergthor, son of Thorlak, in the midst, and straightway was he put out of the fight. Then he went away out on to the ice, and lay down, and Steinthor and his folk set on toward the skerry, but some went after their weapons. The sons of Thorbrand warded themselves well and in manly wise, and a good fighting-stead they had there, because the floes sloped steeply from the skerry and were wondrous slippery; thus wounding went slowly betwixt men, before those came back who had gone to fetch the weapons.

Steinthor and his men set on, six together, on the skerry, but the Eastmen went out on to the ice within bowshot, for they had bows, and there with they shot against those on the skerry, and gave many a wound.

Now slow work was the winning of the skerry, but when they had been thereat a long while, Thord Wall-eye made a dash at it, and would thrust at Thorleif Kimbi with a spear, for he was ever the foremost of his men. The thrust smote the shield of Thorleif, but even as Thord Wall-eye laboured over the blow his feet failed him on the slippery floe, and he fell on his back and slipped headforemost down from the skerry. Thorleif Kimbi leapt after him to smite him dead before he could get to his feet again, and Freystein Rascal followed Thorleif, and he had shoe-spikes on his feet. Then Steinthor ran thereto, and cast his shield over Thord even as Thorleif fetched a blow at him, and with the other hand he smote at Thorleif Kimbi, and smote the leg from him below the knee; and while that was a-doing Freystein Rascal thrust at Steinthor, aiming at his middle; and when Steinthor saw that, he leapt up aloft, and the thrust went between his legs, and these three things, whereof we have told even now, he did in one and the same nick of time. Then he ran to Freystein, and smote him on the neck with his sword, and loud was the clatter of that stroke. So he cried withal: "Art smitten, Rascal?"

"Smitten forsooth," said Freystein, "but yet no more than thou didst deem, for no wound have I therefrom." For in a hooded hat of felt was Freystein, with horn sewn into the neck thereof, and on that had the stroke fallen.

Then Freystein Rascal turned back skerryward, but Steinthor bade him run not, since he had no wound, and Freystein turned him round on the skerry, and now they made at each other hard and fast. Steinthor was in great risk of falling, for the floe was both steep and slippery, but Freystein stood firm on his spiked shoes, and smote both hard and oft; but such was the end of their dealings, that Steinthor brought his sword down on Freystein above his hips, and smote the man asunder in the midst.

Then they went on to the skerry, and stayed not till all Thorbrand's sons were fallen. Then cried out Thord Wall-eye that they should go betwixt head and trunk of all the sons of Thorbrand, but Steinthor said he had no will to bear weapons on men who lay alow.

So they came down from the skerry, and went to where Bergthor lay, who scarce had might to speak. So they brought him with them in over the ice, and so over the neck to the boat, and rowed in the boat out to Bank in the evening.

Now a shepherd of Snorri's had been at Oxbrents that day, and saw thence the fight at Swordfirth. So he

went home straightway, and told Snorri the Priest how there had been a meeting that day at Swordfirth nowise friendly. So Snorri and his folk took their weapons, and went into the firth nine in company; but when they came there, Steinthor and his men had gone their ways and come aboard off the ice (1) of the firth.

Then Snorri looked to the wounded men, and there was none slain save Freystein Rascal, but they were all nigh wounded to death.

Thorleif Kimbi cried out to Snorri, bidding go after Steinthor and his folk, and let no one of them escape. So Snorri the Priest went there whereas Bergthor had lain, and saw there great gouts of blood. Then he took up in his hand together blood and snow, (2) and crushed it up, and put it in his mouth, and asked who had bled there. And Thorleif said it was Bergthor who had

bled. Then Snorri said it was life-blood. "Like enow," said Thorleif; "from a spear it came."

"Methinks," says Snorri, "that is the blood of a doomed man; so we will not follow after them."

Then were Thorbrand's sons brought home to Holyfell and their wounds bound up. Thorod Thorbrandson had so great a wound in the back of his neck that he might not hold his head straight; he had on hose-breeches withal, and they were all wet with blood. A home-man of Snorri the Priest was about pulling them off; but when he fell to stripping them he could not get them off. Then he said: "No lie is that concerning you sons of Thorbrand, when folk say ye are showy men, whereas ye wear clothes so tight that they may not come off you."

Thorod said: "Belike thou pullest slovenly." And therewith the home-man set his feet against the bed-stock and pulled with all his might, but yet gat them off none the more.

Then Snorri the Priest went thereto, and felt along his leg, and found a spear stuck through his leg between the hough sinew and the leg bone, that had nailed together the leg and the breeches. Then said Snorri that the thrall was a measureless fool not to have thought of such a thing.

Snorri Thorbrandson was the briskest of those brothers, and he sat at table beside his namesake that evening. Curds and cheese they had to meat, but Snorri noted that his namesake made but little play with the cheese, and asked why he eat so slowly.

Snorri Thorbrandson answered that lambs found it the hardest to eat when they were first gagged.

Then Snorri the Priest drew his hand down his throat, and found an arrow sticking athwart his gullet and the roots of the tongue. Then Snorri the Priest took drawing-tongs and pulled out the arrow, and then Snorri Thorbrandson fell to his meat.

Then Snorri the Priest healed all the sons of Thorbrand. But when Thorod's neck grew together his head sat somewhat drawn backwards on his trunk, and he said that Snorri would heal him into a maimed man. Snorri said that he deemed the head would come straight when the sinews were knit together; but Thorod would have nought but that the wound should be torn open again, and the head set straighter. But all went as Snorri had guessed, and as soon as the sinews were knit together the head came right; yet little might Thord lout ever after. Thorleif Kimbi thenceforth went mostly with wooden leg.

Now Biorn saw how Snorri the Priest and his men rode down from the heath on to the mead, and straightway knew the men. Snorri the Priest was in a blue cape and rode first.

Such hasty rede took Biorn that he caught up the knife and turned swiftly to meet them, and when he came up to Snorri he caught hold of the sleeve of his cape with one hand, and held the knife in the other, in such wise as it was handiest to thrust it into Snorri's breast if need should be.

But when the kin of Stir and folk allied to him knew that, they armed themselves, and went betwixt the courts, and the Redmel-folk as they would go to the courts, and a fight befell betwixt them.

Thorstein of Hafsfirthisle would pay no heed to aught but making for the place whereas Snorri the Priest was. Both big and stark was Thorstein, and a deft man-at-arms, but when he fell fiercely on Snorri, Kiartan of Frodis-water, Snorri's sister's son, ran before him, and Thorstein and he fought long together, and their weapon-play was exceeding hard-fought.

But thereafter friends of both sides came thither, and went between them, and brought about truce.

Uspak turned to meet him and fetched a blow at him with his axe-hammer, and smote him on the ear so that he fell swooning; but those who were nighest caught hold of him and dragged him to them, and stood over him while he lay in the swoon, but then was the whale not guarded.

Then came up Alf the Little and bade them not take the whale. Uspak answered: "Come not nigh, Alf; thin is thy skull and heavy my axe, and far worse than Thorir shalt thou fare, if thou makest one step further forward."

This wholesome counsel thus taught him Alf followed.

Uspak said he could not bring himself to that, and therewith they ran each at each, and a fight befell; and Thorir and his men were of the eagerest, but Uspak and his folk defended themselves well and manly, yet some were wounded, and some slain.

Thorir had a bear-bill in his hand, and therewith he ran at Uspak and smote at him, but Uspak put the thrust from him, and whereas Thorir had thrown all his might into the blow, and there was nought before the bill, he fell on his knees and louted forward. Then Uspak smote Thorir on the back with: his axe, and loud rang the stroke; and Uspak said: "That shall stay thy long journeys, Thorir," says he.

"Maybe," says Thorir; "yet methinks a full day's journey may I go for all thee and that stroke of thine."

For Thorir had a chain-knife round his neck, as the fashion then was, and had cast it aback behind him, and the blow had come thereon, and he had but been scratched in the muscles on either side of his spine, and little enough withal.

Then ran up a fellow of Thorir's and smote at Uspak, but he thrust forth his axe, and the blow took the shaft thereof and struck it asunder, and down fell the axe. Then cried out Uspak, and bade his men flee away, and himself fell to running; but as soon as Thorir arose, he cast his bill at Uspak and smote him on the thigh, and cut through it on the outer side of the bone. Uspak drew the bill from the wound and cast it back, and it smote the man in the midst who had erst cut at Uspak, and down he fell dead to the earth.

Thereafter away ran Uspak and his following, and Thorir and his company chased them out along the foreshores well-nigh to Ere. Then came folk from the homestead, both men and women, and Thorir and his folk turned back.

And no more onslaughts were made on either side thenceforth through the winter.

At that meeting fell three of Uspak's men and one of Thorir's, but many were wounded on either side.

But the next day, as soon as it was light, they apportioned out the work amongst them for onset, and Snorri the Priest got that part of the work that Raven the Viking guarded, and Sturla the guard of Uspak; the sons of Bork the Thick, Sam and Thormod, fell on at one side, but Thorod and Thorstein Codbiter, the sons of Snorri the Priest, on the other.

Of weapons that they could bring to bear, Uspak and his folk had for the most part stones for their defence, and they cast them forth against their foes unsparingly; for those in the work were of the briskest.

The men of Snorri and Sturla dealt chiefly with shot, both shafts and spears; and they had got together great plenty thereof, because that they had long been getting ready for the winning of the work.

So the onset was of the fiercest, and many were wounded on either side, but none slain. Snorri and his folk shot so thick and fast, that Raven with his men gave back from the wall. Then Thrand the Strider made a run at the wall, and leaped up so high that he got his axe hooked over the same, and therewith he drew himself up by the axe-shaft till he came up on to the work. But whenas Raven saw that a man had got on to the work, he ran at Thrand, and thrust at him with a spear, but Thrand put the thrust from him, and smote Raven on the arm close by the shoulder, and struck off the arm. After that many men came on him, and he let himself fall down outside the wall, and so came to his own folk.

Uspak egged on his men to stand stoutly, and fought himself in right manly wise; and when he cast stones he

would go right out on the wall.

But at last whenas he was putting himself very forward and casting a stone at Sturla's company, at that very nick of time Sturla shot a twirl-spear (2) at him, which smote him in the midst, and down he fell outside of the work. Sturla straightway ran to him, and took him to himself, and would not that more men should be at the slaying of him, because he was fain that there

should be but one tale to tell of his having been the banesman of Uspak. Another man fell on that same wall where the sons of Bork fell on.

Thereon the Vikings offered to give up the work, life and limb saved, and therewithal that they would lay all their case under the doom of Snorri the Priest and Sturla.

So whereas Snorri and his men had pretty much spent their shot, they said yea to this. So the work was given up, and those within rendered themselves to Snorri the Priest, and he gave them all peace of life and limb, even as they had claimed. Both Uspak and Raven died forthwith, and a third man withal of their company, but many were wounded on either side.

Then it was told Thorod what Glossy was about, and he ran out straightway; and a heap of wood lay by the door, wherefrom he caught up a great birch-rafter, and cast it aloft on to his shoulder, so that he had hold of the fork of it, and ran down the meadow at the bull; but when Glossy saw Thorod, he took his stand and turned to meet him.

Then Thorod rated him, but he gave back no whit the more for that. So Thorod hove up the rafter and smote him betwixt the horns so great a stroke, that the rafter flew asunder at the fork; but at the blow Glossy so changed his mood, that he ran at Thorod; but he gat hold of his horns and turned him aside from him; and so it went on awhile, that Glossy set on Thorod, but Thorod gave ever back and turned the beast away, now to this side, now to that, until at last Thorod began to be mithered; then he leapt up on to the neck of the bull, and clasped him round under the throat, and lay along on his head betwixt the horns, and was minded in such wise to weary him; but the bull ran to and fro over the meadow with him

Then saw Thorod's home-men how matters went hopelessly betwixt them, but they durst not come thereto weaponless, so they went in after their weapons; and when they came out, they ran down into the meadow with spears and other weapons, and whenas the bull beheld that, he thrust his head down betwixt his feet, and shook himself withal, so that he got one horn under Thorod, and then afterwards he tossed up his head so hard, that Thorod flew feet up, so that he well-nigh stood with his head on the bull's neck, and as he swept down, Glossy set his head under him, so that one horn went into his belly and stood deep in. Then Thorod let loose the hold of his hands, and the beast set up a mighty bellow, and ran along the meadow down to the river; and Thorod's homefolk ran after Glossy and chased him athwart the scree called Geirvor, and right away till they came to a certain fen, down before the stead at Hella. There sprang the bull out unto the fen, and the end of it all was, that he never came up again; and that place is since called Glossy's-well.

But when the home-folk were come back to the meadow, lo! Thorod had gone thence afoot. He had gone home to the house, and by then they came therein, he had lain down in his bed, and there he lay dead; and so he was carried to the church withal, and was buried.

The Laxdaela Saga

Originally written in Icelandic (Old Norse) sometime around the year 1245 A.D. Author unknown, although some scholars contend (on good, but by no means firm, textual evidence) that the author was probably a woman.

The text of this edition is based on that published as "Laxdale Saga", translated by Muriel Press (The Temple Classics, London, 1899). This edition is in the PUBLIC DOMAIN in the United States.

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The men of Salmon-river-Dale now jumped off their horses, and got ready to fight. Hrut bade his men not

trouble themselves about the odds, and goes for them at a rush. Hrut had a helmet on his head, a drawn sword in one hand and a shield in the other. He was of all men the most skilled at arms. Hrut was then so wild that few could keep up with him. Both sides fought briskly for a while; but the men of Salmon-river-Dale very soon found that in Hrut they had to deal with one for whom they were no match, for now he slew two men at every onslaught. After that the men of Salmon-river-Dale begged for peace. Hrut replied that they should surely have peace. All the house-carles of Hoskuld who were yet alive were wounded, and four were killed. Hrut then went home, being somewhat wounded himself; but his followers only slightly or not at all, for he had been the foremost in the fight.

Olaf bade the crew fetch out their weapons, and range in line of battle from stem to stern on the ship; and so thick they stood, that shield overlapped shield all round the ship, and a spear point stood out at the lower end of every shield. Olaf walked fore to the prow, and was thus arrayed: he had a coat of mail, and a gold, reddened helmet on his head; girt with a sword

with gold-in-laid hilt, and in his hand a barbed spear chased and well engraved. A red shield he had before him, on which was drawn a lion in gold. When the Irish saw this array fear shot through their hearts, and they thought it would not be so easy a matter as they had thought to master the booty.

Olaf went to the fold-door and struck at him with his spear. Hrapp took the socket of the spear in both hands and wrenched it aside, so that forthwith the spear shaft broke. Olaf was about to run at Hrapp but he disappeared there where he stood, and there they parted, Olaf having the shaft and Hrapp the spearhead. After that Olaf and the house-carle tied up the cattle and went home. Olaf saw the house-carle was not to blame for his grumbling. The next morning Olaf went to where Hrapp was buried and had him dug up. Hrapp was found undecayed, and there Olaf also found his spearhead. After that he had a pyre made and had Hrapp burnt on it, and his ashes were flung out to sea. After that no one had any more trouble with Hrapp's ghost.

Then she drew a sword and thrust it at Thord and gave him great wounds, the sword striking his right arm and wounding him on both nipples. So hard did she follow up the stroke that the sword stuck in the bolster. Then Aud went away and to her horse and leapt on to its back, and thereupon rode home. Thord tried to spring up when he got the blow, but could not, because of his loss of blood. Then Osvif awoke and asked what had happened, and Thord told that he had been wounded somewhat. Osvif asked if he knew who had done the deed on him, and got up and bound up his wounds.

Eidgrim now wanted to part, and gave the whip to his horse, and when Hrut saw that, he raised up his halberd and struck Eidgrim through the back between the shoulders so that the coat of mail was torn and the halberd flew out through the chest, and Eidgrim fell dead off his horse, as was only natural.

Before they met Kjartan flung his spear, and it struck through Thorolf's shield above the handle, so that therewith the shield was pressed against him, the spear piercing the shield and the arm above the elbow, where it sundered the main muscle, Thorolf dropping the shield, and his arm being of no avail to him through the day

At that moment An fell, having fought for some time, with his inwards coming out. In this attack Kjartan cut off one leg of Gudlaug above the knee, and that hurt was enough to cause death.

Then Kjartan flung away his weapons and would defend himself no longer; yet he was but slightly wounded, though very tired with fighting. Bolli gave no answer to Kjartan's words, but all the same he dealt him his death-wound. And straightway Bolli sat down under the shoulders of him, and Kjartan breathed his last in the lap of Bolli. Bolli rued at once his deed, and declared the manslaughter due to his hand.

Then An went into the dairy hard and swift, and held his shield over his head, turning forward the narrower part of it. Bolli dealt him a blow with Footbiter, and cut off the tail-end of the shield, and clove An through the head down to the shoulder, and forthwith he gat his death. Then Lambi went in; he held his shield before him, and a drawn sword in his hand. In the nick of time Bolli pulled Footbiter out of the wound, whereat his shield veered aside so as to lay him open to attack. So Lambi made a thrust at him in the thigh, and a great wound that was. Bolli hewed in return, and struck Lambi's shoulder, and the sword flew down along the side of him, and he was rendered forthwith unfit to fight, and never after that time for the rest of his life was his arm any more use to him. At this brunt Helgi, the son of Hardbein, rushed in with a spear, the head of which was an ell long, and the shaft bound with iron. When Bolli saw that he cast away his sword, and took his shield in both hands, and went towards the dairy door to meet Helgi. Helgi thrust at Bolli with the spear right through the shield and through him. Now Bolli leaned up against the dairy wall, and the men rushed into the dairy, Halldor and his brothers, to wit, and Thorgerd went into the dairy as well.

Then Steinthor Olafson leapt at Bolli, and hewed at his neck with a large axe just above his shoulders,

and forthwith his head flew off. Thorgerd bade him "hale enjoy hands", and said that Gudrun would have now a while a red hair to trim for Bolli.

If a man be wounded by the sword the hurt may not be healed, unless the healing-stone that goes with the sword be rubbed there on."

Grim saw the shadow of a man cast on the water, and springs up at once. By then Thorkell had got very nearly close up to him, and strikes at him. The blow caught him on his arm just above the wolf-joint (the wrist), but that was not a great wound. Grim sprang forthwith upon Thorkell, and they seized each other wrestling-wise, and speedily the odds of strength told, and Thorkell fell and Grim on the top of him. Then Grim asked who this man might be. Thorkell said that did not at all matter to him.

Now the both stand up and walk home to the hut. Thorkell sees that Grim was growing faint from loss of blood, so he took Skofnung's stone and rubbed it on, and ties it to the arm of Grim, and it took forthwith all smarting pain and swelling out of the wound.

And forthwith Helgi thrust his spear out through the window and through Hrapp, so that he fell dead to earth from the spear.

Thorstein the Black and Svein, son of Alf o' Dales, stood before the door. The rest of the company were tearing the roof off the dairy. Hunbogi the Strong and the sons of Armod took one end of the beam, Thorgils, Lambi, and Gudrun's sons the other end. They now pull hard at the beam till it broke asunder in the middle; just at this Hardbein thrust a halberd out through where the door was broken, and the thrust struck the steel cap of Thorstein the Black and stuck in his forehead, and that was a very great wound. Then Thorstein said, as was true, that there were men before them. Next Helgi leapt so boldly out of the door so that those nearest shrunk aback. Thorgils was standing near, and struck after him with a sword, and caught him on the shoulder and made a great wound. Helgi turned to meet him, and had a wood-axe in his hand, and said, "Still the old one will dare to look at and face weapons," and therewith he flung the axe at Thorgils, and the axe struck his foot, and a great wond that was. And when Bolli saw this he leapt forward at Helgi with Footbiter in his hand, and thrust Helgi through with it, and that was his deathblow. Helgi's followers leapt out of the dairy forthwith, and Hardbein with them. Thorleik Bollison turned against Eyjolf, who was a strong man. Thorleik struck him with his sword, and it caught him on the leg above the knee and cut off his leg, and he fell to earth dead. Hunbogi the Strong went to meet Thorgils, and dealt a blow at him with an axe, and it struck the back of him, and cut him asunder in the middle. Thord Cat was standing near where Hardbein leapt out, and was going to set upon him straightway, but Bolli rushed forward when he saw it, and bade no harm be done to Hardbein. "No man shall do a dastard's work here, and Hardbein shall have life and limbs spared."

The Saga of Grettir the Strong
(Grettir's Saga)

Originally written in Icelandic, sometime in the early 14th Century. Author unknown.

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The forces on each side were very large, and the battle was one of the greatest ever fought in Norway. There are many accounts of it, for one always hears much about those people of whom the saga is told. Troops had come in from all the country around and from other countries as well, besides a multitude of vikings. Onund brought his ship alongside of that of Thorir Long-chin in the very middle of the battle. King Harald made for Thorir's ship, knowing him to be a terrible berserk, and very brave. The fighting was desperate on either side. Then the king ordered his berserks, the men called Wolfskins, forward. No iron could hurt them, and when they charged nothing could withstand them. Thorir defended himself bravely and fell on his ship fighting valiantly. The whole ship from stem to stern was cleared and her fastenings were cut, so that she fell

out of the line of battle. Then they attacked Onund's ship, in the forepart of which he was standing and fighting manfully. The king's men said: "He bears himself well in the forecastle. Let us give him something to remind him of having been in the battle." Onund was stepping out with one foot on to the bulwark, and as he was striking they made a thrust at him with a spear; in parrying it he bent backwards, and at that moment a man on the forecastle of the king's ship struck him and took off his leg below the knee, disabling him at a blow. With him fell the greater number of his men. They carried him to a ship belonging to a man named Thrand, a son of Bjorn and brother of Eyvind the Easterner. He was fighting against King Harald, and his ship was lying on the other side of Onund's. Then there was a general flight. Thrand and the rest of the vikings escaped any way they could, and sailed away westwards. They took with them Onund and Balki and Hallvard Sugandi. Onund recovered and went about for the rest of his life with a wooden leg, wherefore he was called Onund Treefoot as long as he lived.

Onund was a man of immense strength and he bade his followers observe how it fared with them. They shoved a log under the stump of his leg, so that he stood pretty firm. The viking dashed forward, reached Onund and hewed at him with his sword, which cut right through his shield and into the log beneath his leg, where it remained fixed. As Vigbjod bent down to pull his sword clear again, Onund dealt him a blow on his shoulder, severing his arm and disabling him. When Vestmar saw his comrade fall, he sprang on to the outermost ship and escaped along with all who could get on to her. Then they examined the dead. Vigbjod had already expired.

"Here I bring you your axe," said Thorgeir. Then he struck at Thorfinn's neck and cut off his head. Flosi was up on the beach and saw it. He urged on his men to give it them back. They fought for a long time and the Kaldbak people were getting the best of it. Most of them had no weapons but the axes with which they were cutting up the whale and short knives. The men of Vik were driven from the whale on to the sandbanks. The men from the East, however, were armed and able to deal wounds. Their captain Steinn cut off the leg of Kolbeinn's son Ivar, and Ivar's brother Leif beat one of Steinn's men to death with a rib of the whale. Then they fought with anything they could get, and men were slain on both sides. At last Olaf came up with a number of ships from Drangar and joined Flosi; the men of Kaldbak were then overpowered by numbers. They had already loaded their ships, and Svan told them to get on board. They therefore retired towards the ships, the men of Vik after them. Svan on reaching the sea struck at Steinn their captain, wounding him badly, and then sprang into his own ship. Thorgrim gave Flosi a severe wound and escaped. Olaf wounded Ofeig Grettir fatally, but Thorgeir carried him off and sprang on to his ship with him. The Kaldbak men rowed into the fjord and the two parties separated.

Grettir took all the treasure and went back towards the rope, but on his way he felt himself seized by a strong hand. He left the treasure to close with his aggressor and the two engaged in a merciless struggle. Everything about them was smashed. The howedweller made a ferocious onslaught. Grettir for some time gave way, but found that no holding back was possible. They did not spare each other. Soon they came to the place where the horse's bones were lying, and here they struggled for long, each in turn being brought to his knees. At last it ended in the howedweller falling backwards with a horrible crash, whereupon Audun above bolted from the rope, thinking that Grettir was killed. Grettir then drew his sword Jokulsnaut, cut off the head of the howedweller and laid it between his thighs.

At that moment Grettir returned, and taking his halberd in both hands he thrust it right through Thorir's body just as he was about to descend the steps. The blade was very long and broad. Ogmund the Bad was just behind pushing him on, so that the spear passed right up to the hook, came out at his back between the shoulderblades and entered the breast of Ogmund. They both fell dead, pierced by the spear. Then all the others dashed down as they reached the steps. Grettir tackled them each in turn, now thrusting with the spear, now hewing with the sword, while they defended themselves with logs lying on the ground or with anything else which they could get. It was a terrible trial of a man's prowess to deal with men of their strength, even unarmed.

Grettir slew two of the Halogaland men there in the enclosure. Four of the serving-men then came up. They had not been able to agree upon which arms each should take, but they came out to the attack directly the berserks were running away; when these turned against them they fell back on the house. Six of the ruffians fell, all slain by Grettir's own hand; the other six then fled towards the landing place and took refuge in the boat-house, where they defended themselves with oars. Grettir received a severe blow from one of them and narrowly escaped a serious hurt.

The serving-men all went home and told great stories of their own exploits. The lady wanted to know

what had become of Grettir, but they could not tell her. Grettir slew two men in the boat-house, but the other four got away, two in one direction, two in another. He pursued those who were nearest to him. The night was very dark. They ran to Vindheim, the place spoken of before, and took refuge in a barn, where they fought for a long time until at last Grettir killed them. By this time he was terribly stiff and exhausted. The night was far spent; it was very cold and there were driving snow-storms. He felt little inclination to go after the two who yet remained, so he went back home.

There was a hill between them and Grettir, who had turned back along the footpath. Now he had no others to reckon with in making the attack. He drew his sword Jokulsnaut and tied a loop round the handle which he passed over his wrist, because he thought that he could carry out his plans better if his hand were free. He went along the path. When the bear saw a man coming, he charged savagely, and struck at him with the paw that was on the side away from the precipice. Grettir aimed a blow at him with his sword and cut off his paw just above the claws. Then the creature tried to strike him with his sound paw, but to do so he had to drop on the stump, which was shorter than he expected, and over he fell into Grettir's embraces. Grettir seized the beast by the ears and held him off so that he could not bite. He always said that he considered this holding back the bear the greatest feat of strength that he ever performed. The beast struggled violently; the space was very narrow, and they both fell over the precipice. The bear being the heavier came down first on the beach; Grettir fell on the top of him, and the bear was badly mauled on the side that was down. Grettir got his sword, ran it into the heart of the bear and killed him.

One day Grettir and Arnbjorn were walking along the road for their diversion when they passed a gate, whence a man rushed out holding an axe aloft with both hands and struck at Grettir, who was not on his guard and was moving slowly. Arnbjorn, however, saw the man coming, seized Grettir and pushed him aside with such force that he fell on his knee. The axe struck him in the shoulder-blade and cut down to below the arm, inflicting a severe wound. Grettir turned quickly and drew his sword; he saw that it was Hjarrandi who had attacked him. The axe had stuck fast in the road, and Hjarrandi was slow in recovering it. Grettir struck at him and cut off his arm at the shoulder. Then there came running up five of Hjarrandi's followers and a battle began with them. They were soon routed; Grettir and Arnbjorn killed the five who were with Hjarrandi; one man escaped and bore the tale to the jarl forthwith.

One day Grettir was sitting in a booth and drinking, because he wanted to keep out of Gunnar's way. Suddenly there was a bang at the door, so hard that it broke in pieces, and in rushed four men armed and attacked Grettir. They were Gunnar with his followers. Grettir seized his arms which were hanging above his head and ran into a corner, where he defended himself, holding his shield before him, and hewing with his sword. They made little way against him. One blow he succeeded in delivering upon one of Gunnar's followers, who needed nothing more. Then Grettir advanced, driving them before him out of the booth, and killing another of them. Gunnar would fain have got away with his men, but on reaching the door he caught his foot on the doorstep, fell over and was not able to recover himself at once. He held his shield before him and retreated as Grettir pressed him hard. Then Grettir sprang on to the crossbenches near the door. Gunnar's hands and the shield were still inside the door, and Grettir struck down between him and the shield, cutting off both his hands at the wrist. He fell backwards out of the door, and Grettir gave him his death-blow. Then the man who was behind him got on his feet and ran off at once to tell the jarl what had happened.

Thorgeir and Thorgils fought each of them desperately together without either prevailing. After a long and furious battle Thorgils fell slain by Thorgeir. In another place Thormod was fighting with the followers of Thorgils, and he overcame them, killing three. Those who remained of Thorgils' party went off after he fell to Midfjord, taking his body with them and feeling that they had suffered a great loss. The foster-brothers took possession of the whole whale.

Suddenly Grettir sprang under his arms, seized him round the waist and squeezed his back with all his might, intending in that way to bring him down, but the thrall wrenched his arms till he staggered from the violence. Then Grettir fell back to another bench. The benches flew about and everything was shattered around them. Glam wanted to get out, but Grettir tried to prevent him by stemming his foot against anything he could find. Nevertheless Glam succeeded in getting him outside the hall. Then a terrific struggle began, the thrall trying to drag him out of the house, and Grettir saw that however hard he was to deal with in the house, he would be worse outside, so he strove with all his might to keep him from getting out. Then Glam made a desperate effort and gripped Grettir tightly towards him, forcing him to the porch. Grettir saw that he could not put up any resistance, and with a sudden movement he dashed into the thrall's arms and set both his feet against a stone which was fastened in the ground at the door. For that Glam was not prepared, since he had

been tugging to drag Grettir towards him; he reeled backwards and tumbled bind-foremost out of the door, tearing away the lintel with his shoulder and shattering the roof, the rafters and the frozen thatch. Head over heels he fell out of the house and Grettir fell on top of him. The moon was shining very brightly outside, with light clouds passing over it and hiding it now and again. At the moment when Glam fell the moon shone forth, and Glam turned his eyes up towards it. Grettir himself has related that that sight was the only one which ever made him tremble. What with fatigue and all else that he had endured, when he saw the horrible rolling of Glam's eyes his heart sank so utterly that he had not strength to draw his sword, but lay there wellnigh betwixt life and death. Glam possessed more malignant power than most fiends, for he now spoke in this wise: ...

... When the thrall had spoken the faintness which had come over Grettir left him. He drew his short sword, cut off Glam's head and laid it between his thighs.

The berserk thought they were trying to get off by talking. He began to howl and to bite the rim of his shield. He held the shield up to his mouth and scowled over its upper edge like a madman. Grettir stepped quickly across the ground, and when he got even with the berserk's horse he kicked the shield with his foot from below with such force that it struck his mouth, breaking the upper jaw, and the lower jaw fell down on to his chest. With the same movement he seized the viking's helmet with his left hand and dragged him from his horse, while with his right hand he raised his axe and cut off the berserk's head.

He made such a vigorous onslaught that Gunnar's men fell back, and he killed two of them. Then he turned upon Gunnar himself and struck a blow that severed his shield right across below the handle, and the sword struck his leg below the knee. Then with another rapid blow he killed him.

In the meantime Grim, the son of Thorhall, was engaging Thorgeir, and a long tussle there was, both of them being men of great valour. When Thorgeir saw his brother Gunnar fall he wanted to get away, but Grim pressed upon him and pursued him until at last his foot tripped and he fell forward. Then Grim struck him with an axe between the shoulders, inflicting a deep wound. To the three followers who were left they gave quarter.

It was raining hard, so he did not go outside, but stood holding both the door-posts with his hands and peering round. At that moment Thorbjorn sidled round to the front of the door and thrust his spear with both hands into Atli's middle, so that it pierced him through. Atli said when he received the thrust: "They use broad spear-blades nowadays."

Then he fell forward on the threshold. The women who were inside came out and saw that he was dead.

Grettir got off his horse. He had a helmet on his head, a short sword by his side, and a great spear in his hand without barbs and inlaid with silver at the socket. He sat down and knocked out the rivet which fastened the head in order to prevent Thorbjorn from returning the spear upon him. ...

... Neither of them had a helmet. Grettir went along the marsh and when he was within range launched his spear at Thorbjorn. The head was not so firm as he had intended it to be, so it got loose in its flight and fell off on to the ground. Thorbjorn took his shield, held it before him, drew his sword and turned against Grettir directly he recognised him. Grettir drew his sword, and, turning round a little, saw the boy behind him; so he kept continually on the move. When he saw that the boy was within reach he raised his sword aloft and struck Arnor's head with the back of it such a blow that the skull broke and he died. Then Thorbjorn rushed upon Grettir and struck at him, but he parried it with the buckler in his left hand and struck with his sword a blow which severed Thorbjorn's shield in two and went into his head, reaching the brain. Thorbjorn fell dead. Grettir gave him no more wounds; he searched for the spear-head but could not find it. He got on to his horse, rode to Reykir and proclaimed the slaying.

One morning Grim came home from fishing and went into the hut stamping with his feet and wanting to know whether Grettir was asleep. Grettir lay still and did not move. There was a short sword hanging above his head. Grim thought he would never have a better opportunity. He made a loud noise to see whether Grettir took any notice, but he did not, so Grim felt sure that he was asleep. He crept stealthily to the bed, reached up to the sword, took it down and raised it to strike. just at the moment when he raised it Grettir sprang up on to the floor, and, seizing the sword with one hand, Grim with the other, hurled him over so that he fell nearly senseless. "This is how you have proved yourself with all your friendly seeming," he said. Then he got the whole truth out of him and killed him.

Then he threw off his clothes and his weapons and swain out to the nets. He gathered them together,

returned to the shore and cast them up on to the bank. just as he was about to land Thorir quickly seized his short sword and drew it. He ran towards Grettir as he stepped on to the bank and aimed a blow at him. Grettir threw himself down backwards into the water and sank like a stone. Thorir stood by the shore intending to guard it until he came up. Grettir swam beneath the water, keeping close to the bank so that Thorir could not see him, and so reached the bay behind him, where he landed without letting himself be seen. The first Thorir knew of it was when Grettir lifted him up over his head and dashed him down with such violence that the sword fell out of his hand. Grettir got possession of it and without speaking a word cut off his head. So his life ended. After that Grettir refused to take in any forest-men, and yet he could not live alone.

Thorir urged his men on to attack him. The gorge was very narrow so that he could easily defend it from one end, and he wondered much that they did not get round to his rear to hurt him. Some of Thorir's men fell and some were wounded, but they effected nothing. Then Thorir said: "I always heard that Grettir was distinguished for his courage and daring, but I never knew that he was so skilled in magic as I now see he is; for there fall half as many again behind his back as before his face, and I see that we have to do with a troll instead of a man."

So he bade his men retire, and they did so. Grettir wondered what the explanation could be, but was terribly exhausted. Thorir and his men withdrew and rode into the northern parts. Their expedition was considered very disgraceful. Thorir had left eighteen men on the ground and had many wounded.

Grettir fell back a little and reached a stone which is still standing by the side of the way and is called Grettishaf, where he stood at bay. Gisli urged on his men, and Grettir saw that he was not quite so valiant as he pretended to be, for he kept well behind them. Grettir got tired of being hemmed in, so he made a lunge with his sword and killed one of Gisli's men, sprang from his stone and assailed them so vigorously that Gisli fell back all along the foot of the hill. Then his other man was killed.

The Myramen prepared to attack in good order and Grettir told his companions to guard his rear. They could not all come on at once. There was a hard struggle between them; Grettir used his short sword with both hands and they found it not easy to get at him. Some of the Myramen fell and some were wounded.

He tried always to engage those who seemedmost courageous; first he went for Steinolf of Hraundal and cleft his skull down to his shoulders; then he struck at Thorgils the son of Ingjald and almost cut him in two. Then Thrand tried to spring forward and avenge his kinsmen, and Grettir hewed at his right thigh, cutting out all the muscles so that he could fight no more. Next he gave Finnbogi a severe wound.

Adventure With a Troll-Woman

We return now to tell of Gest. Towards midnight he heard a loud noise outside, and very soon there walked a huge troll-wife into the room. She carried a trough in one hand and a rather large cutlass in the other. She looked round the room as she entered, and on seeing Gest lying there she rushed at him; he started up and attacked her furiously. They fought long together; she was the stronger but he evaded her skilfully. Everything near them and the panelling of the back wall were broken to pieces. She dragged him through the hall door out to the porch, where he resisted vigorously. She wanted to drag him out of the house, but before that was done they had broken up all the fittings of the outer door and borne them away on their shoulders. Then she strove to get to the river and among the rocks. Gest was terribly fatigued, but there was no choice but either to brace himself or be dragged down to the rocks. All night long they struggled together, and he thought he had never met with such a monster for strength. She gripped him so tightly to herself that he could do nothing with either hand but cling to her waist. When at last they reached a rock by the river he swung the monster round and got his right hand loose. Then he quickly seized the short sword which he was wearing, drew it and struck at the troll's right shoulder, cutting off her right arm and releasing himself. She sprang among the rocks and disappeared in the waterfall. Gest, very stiff and tired, lay long by the rock. At daylight he went home and lay down on his bed, blue and swollen all over.

On Grettir entering the giant sprang up, seized a pike and struck at him, for he could both strike and thrust with it. It had a wooden shaft and was of the kind called "heptisax." Grettir struck back with his sword and cut through the shaft. Then the giant tried to reach up backwards to a sword which was hanging in the cave, and at that moment Grettir struck at him and cut open his lower breast and stomach so that all his entrails fell out into the river and floated down the stream. The priest who was sitting by the rope saw some debris being carried down all covered with blood and lost his head, making sure that Grettir was killed. He left the rope and ran off home, where he arrived in the evening and told them for certain that Grettir was dead, and said it was a

great misfortune to them to have lost such a man.

Grettir struck few more blows at the giant before he was dead.

Then he drew his sword and went valiantly for Grettir, who defended himself with his shield but would not use his weapons against Thorodd. They fought for a time without his being wounded. Grettir then said:

"Let us stop this play; you will not gain the victory in a battle with me."

Thorodd struck at him most furiously. Grettir was tired of it, so he took hold of him and set him down next to him self, saying: "I could do what I liked with you; but I have no fear of your killing me. I am much more afraid of your grey-headed father, Snorri the Godi, and of his counsels, which have brought many a man to his knees. You should take up tasks which you are able to accomplish; it is no child's play to fight with me."

Grettir was irritated with the thrall; he used his axe with both hands and did not notice what tree it was. Directly the axe touched the tree it turned flat and glanced off into Grettir's right leg. It entered above his right knee and pierced to the bone, making a severe wound.

Seeing that they could do nothing, they sprang on to the roof and began to break it in. Then Grettir got on to his feet, seized a spear and thrust it between the rafters. It struck Kar, Halldor's man from Hof, and went right through him. Angle told them to go to work warily and be careful of themselves. "We shall only overcome them," he said, "if we act with caution."

Then they laid open the end of one of the timbers and bore upon it until it broke. Grettir was unable to rise from his knees, but he seized the sword Karsnaut at the moment when they all sprang in from the roof, and a mighty fray began. Grettir struck with his sword at Vikar, a man of Hjalti the son of Thord, reaching his left shoulder as he sprang from the roof. It passed

across his shoulder, out under his right arm, and cut him right in two. His body fell in two parts on the top of Grettir and prevented him from recovering his sword as quickly as he wished, so that Thorbjorn Angle was able to wound him severely between the shoulders. Grettir said: "Bare is his back who has no brother!"

Illugi threw his shield before Grettir and defended him so valiantly that all men praised his prowess.

They returned to the attack; Illugi defended himself and Grettir courageously, but Grettir was unfit for fighting, partly from his wounds, partly from his illness. Angle then ordered them to bear Illugi down with their shields, saying he had never met with his like amongst older men than he. They did so, and pressed upon him with a wall of armour against which resistance was impossible. They took him prisoner and kept him. He had wounded most of those who were attacking him and killed three. Then they went for Grettir, who had fallen forward on his face. There was no resistance in him for he was already dead from his wounded leg; his thigh was all mortified up to the rectum. Many more wounds they gave him, but little or no blood flowed.

When they thought he was quite dead Angle took hold of his sword, saying he had borne it long enough, but Grettir's fingers were so tightly locked around the hilt that he could not loosen them. Many tried before they gave it up, eight of them in turn, but all failed. Angle then said: "Why should we spare a forest-man? Lay his hand upon the log."

They did so, and he hewed off the hand at the wrist. Then the fingers straightened and were loosed from the hilt. Angle took his sword in both hands and hewed at Grettir's head. So mighty was the blow that the sword could not hold against it, and a piece was broken out of the edge. When asked why he spoilt a good weapon, he replied: "It will be more easily known if there be any question."

They said this was unnecessary, as the man was dead before. "I will do more," he said, and struck two or three blows at Grettir's neck before he took off his head.

Dromund took the sword, at once raised it aloft and struck a blow at Angle. It came into his head with such force that it penetrated to his jaw and Thorbjorn fell dead to the ground.

The Story of Burnt Njal
(Njal's Saga>)

Originally written in Icelandic, sometime in the 13th Century A.D. Author unknown.

Translation by Sir George W. DaSent (London, 1861). This edition is in the PUBLIC DOMAIN.

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Now Atli sees a bare place for a weapon on Wolf, and shot a spear through him and now the battle grows hot: Atli leaps up on Hrut's ship, and clears it fast round about, and now Auzur turns to meet him, and thrust at him, but fell down full length on his back, for another man thrust at him. Now Hrut turns to meet Atli: he cut at once at Hrut's shield, and clove it all in two, from top to point; just then Atli got a blow on his hand from a stone, and down fell his sword. Hrut caught up the sword, and cut his foot from under him. After that he dealt him his death-blow.

Then Thorwald snatched up a fishing-knife that lay by him, and made a stab at Thiostolf; he had lifted his axe to his shoulder and dashed it down. It came on Thorwald's arm and crushed the wrist, but down fell the knife. Then Thiostolf lifted up his axe a second time and gave Thorwald a blow on the head, and he fell dead on the spot.

Then Glum got angry, and cut at him with his hand-axe, but he threw his axe in the way, and the blow fell on the haft with a downward stroke and bit into it about the breadth of two fingers. Thiostolf cut at him at once with his axe, and smote him on the shoulder, and the stroke hewed asunder the shoulderbone and collarbone, and the wound bled inwards. Glum grasped at Thiostolf with his left hand so fast, that he fell; but Glum could not hold him, for death came over him.

"Then she has no hand in this deed," says Hrut, and drew his sword. Thiostolf saw that, and would not be behind hand, so he cuts at Hrut at once. Hrut got out of the way of the stroke by a quick turn, and at the same time struck the back of the axe so smartly with a side-long blow of his left hand, that it flew out of Thiostolf's grasp. Then Hrut made a blow with his sword in his right hand at Thiostolf's leg, just above the knee, and cut it almost off so that it hung by a little piece, and sprang in upon him at the same time, and thrust him hard back. After that he smote him on the head, and dealt him his death-blow.

He was a tall man in growth, and a strong man -- best skilled in arms of all men. He could cut or thrust or shoot if he chose as well with his left as with his right hand, and he smote so swiftly with his sword, that three seemed to flash through the air at once. He was the best shot with the bow of all men, and never missed his mark. He could leap more than his own height, with all his war-gear, and as far backwards as forwards. He could swim like a seal, and there was no game in which it was any good for any one to strive with him; and so it has been said that no man was his match.

Oliver had given Gunnar a good sword; Gunnar now drew it, and had not yet put on his helm. He leapt at once on the forecastle of Vandil's ship, and gave one man his death-blow. Karli ran his ship alongside the other side of Gunnar's ship, and hurled a spear athwart the deck, and aimed at him about the waist. Gunnar sees this, and turned him about so quickly that no eye could follow him, and caught the spear with his left hand, and hurled it back at Karli's ship, and that man got his death who stood before it. Kolskegg snatched up a grapnel and cast it at Karli's ship, and the fluke fell inside the hold, and went out through one of the planks and in rushed the coal-blue sea, and all the men sprang on board other ships.

Against Gunnar came Vandil, and smote at once at him with his sword, and the blow fell on his shield. Gunnar gave the shield a twist as the sword pierced it, and broke it short off at the hilt. Then Gunnar smote back at Vandil, and three swords seemed to be aloft, and Vandil could not see how to shun the blow. Then Gunnar cut both his legs from under him, and at the same time Kolskegg ran Karli through with a spear.

Hallgrim and his men leapt on board Gunnar's ship. Gunnar turns to meet him, and Hallgrim thrust at him with his bill. There was a boom athwart the ship, and Gunnar leapt nimbly back over it. Gunnar's shield was just before the boom, and Hallgrim thrust his bill into it, and through it, and so on into the boom. Gunnar cut at Hallgrim's arm hard, and lamed the forearm, but the sword would not bite. Then down fell the bill, and Gunnar seized the bill, and thrust Hallgrim through,...

After that Atli thrust at him with his spear, and struck him about his middle. Kol swept at him with his axe, but missed him, and fell off his horse, and died at once.

He saw that he had thrust his spear in the ground by him. Brynjolf goes along with the smoke right up to him, but he was eager at his work, and saw him not. Brynjolf gave him a stroke on the head with his axe, and he turned so quick round that Brynjolf loosed his hold of the axe, and Atli grasped the spear, and hurled it after him. Then Brynjolf cast himself down on the ground, but the spear flew away over him.

Brynjolf rode at Thord, and smote at him with his axe. He smote at him at the same time with his axe, and hewed in sunder the haft just above Brynjolf's hands, and then hewed at him at once a second time, and struck him on the collar-bone, and the blow went straight into his trunk. Then he fell from horseback, and was dead on the spot.

After that they fall on him, and he breaks a spear of each of them, so well did he guard himself. Then Skiolld cut off his hand, and he still kept them off with his other hand for some time, till Sigmund thrust him through. Then he fell dead to earth.

Sigmund took up his weapons, but Skarphedinn waited the while. Skiolld turned against Grim and Helgi, and they fell hotly to fight. Sigmund had a helm on his head, and a shield at his side, and was girt with a sword, his spear was in his hand; now he turns against Skarphedinn, and thrusts at once at him with his spear, and the thrust came on his shield. Skarphedinn dashes the spearhaft in two, and lifts up his axe and hews at Sigmund, and cleaves his shield down to below the handle. Sigmund drew his sword and cut at Skarphedinn, and the sword cuts into his shield, so that it stuck fast. Skarphedinn gave the shield such a quick twist, that Sigmund let go his sword. Then Skarphedinn hews at Sigmund with his axe; the "Ogress of war." Sigmund had on a corselet, the axe came on his shoulder. Skarphedinn cleft the shoulder-blade right through, and at the same time pulled the axe towards him. Sigmund fell down on both knees, but sprang up again at once.

"Thou hast lilted low to me already," says Skarphedinn, "but still thou shalt fall upon thy mother's bosom ere we two part."

"III is that then," says Sigmund.

Skarphedinn gave him a blow on his helm, and after that dealt Sigmund his death-blow.

Grim cut off Skiolld's foot at the ankle-joint, but Helgi thrust him through with his spear, and he got his death there and then.

Now, it must be told how Otkell rides faster than he would. He had spurs on his feet, and so he gallops down over the ploughed field, and neither of them sees the other; and just as Gunnar stands upright, Otkell rides down upon him and drives one of the spurs into Gunnar's ear, and gives him a great gash, and it bleeds at once much.

"That I cannot do," says Hallbjorn; "thou wilt strive to kill my brother for all that, and it is a shame if I sit idly by." And as he said this he thrust at Gunnar with a great spear which he held in both hands.

Gunnar threw his shield before the blow, but Hallbjorn pierced the shield through. Gunnar thrust the shield down so hard that it stood fast in the earth (1), but he brandished his sword so quickly that no eye could follow it, and he made a blow with the sword, and it fell on Hallbjorn's arm above the writs, so that it cut it off.

Skamkell ran behind Gunnar's back and makes a blow at him with a great axe. Gunnar turned short round upon him and parries the blow with the bill, and caught the axe under one of its horns with such a wrench that it flew out of Skamkell's hand away into the river. ...

... Gunnar gives another thrust with his bill, and through Skamkell, and lifts him up and casts him down in the muddy path on his head.

Audulf the Easterling snatches up a spear and launches it at Gunnar. Gunnar caught the spear with his hand in the air, and hurled it back at once, and it flew through the shield and the Easterling too, and so down into the earth.

Otkell smites at Gunnar with his sword, and aims at his leg just below the knee, but Gunnar leapt up into the air and he misses him. Then Gunnar thrusts at him the bill and the blow goes

through him.

Then Kolskegg comes up, and rushes at once at Hallkell and dealt him his death-blow with his short sword. There and then they slay eight men.

"I dreamt, methought, that I was riding on by Knafaholes, and there I thought I saw many wolves, and they all made at me; but I turned away from them straight towards Rangriver, and then methought they pressed hard on me on all sides, but I kept them at bay, and shot all those that were foremost, till they came so close to me that I could not use my bow against them. Then I

took my sword, and I smote with it with one hand, but thrust at them with my bill with the other. Shield myself then I did not, and methought then I knew not what shielded me. Then I slew many wolves, and thou, too, Kolskegg; but Hjort methought they pulled down, and tore open his breast, and one methought had his heart in his maw; but I grew so wroth that I hewed that wolf asunder just below the brisket, and after that methought the wolves turned and fled. Now my counsel is, brother Hjort, that thou ridest back west to Tongue."

Sigurd Swinehead came first and had a red targe, but in his other hand he held a cutlass. Gunnar sees him and shoots an arrow at him from his bow; he held the shield up aloft when he saw the arrow flying high, and the shaft passes through the shield and into his eye, and so came out at the nape of his neck, and that was the first man slain.

A second arrow Gunnar shot at Ulfhedinn, one of Starkad's men, and that struck him about the middle and he fell at the feet of a yeoman, and the yeoman over him. Kolskegg cast a stone and struck the yeoman on the head, and that was his deathblow.

Then Starkad said, "'Twill never answer our end that he should use his bow, but let us come on well and stoutly." Then each man egged on the other, and Gunnar guarded himself with his bow and arrows as long as he could; after that he throws them down, and then he takes his bill and sword and fights with both hands. There is long the hardest fight, but still Gunnar and Kolskegg slew man after man.

So Bork and Thorkel both ran forward and were quicker than Thorgeir. Bork made a blow at Gunnar, and Gunnar threw his bill so hard in the way, that the sword flew out of Bork's hand; then he sees Thorkel standing on his other hand within stroke of sword. Gunnar was standing with his body swayed a little on one side, and he makes a sweep with his sword, and caught Thorkel on the neck, and off flew his head.

Kol Egil's son, said, "Let me get at Kolskegg," and turning to Kolskegg he said, "This I have often said, that we two would be just about an even match in fight."

"That we can soon prove," says Kolskegg.

Kol thrust at him with his spear; Kolskegg had just slain a man and had his hands full, and so he could not throw his shield before the blow, and the thrust came upon his thigh, on the outside of the limb and went through it.

Kolskegg turned sharp round, and strode towards him, and smote him with his short sword on the thigh, and cut off his leg, and said, "Did it touch thee or not?"

"Now," says Kol, "I pay for being bare of my shield."

So he stood a while on his other leg and looked at the stump.

"Thou needest not to look at it," said Kolskegg; "'tis even as thou seest, the leg is off."

Then Kol fell down dead.

But when Egil sees this, he runs at Gunnar and makes a cut at him; Gunnar thrusts at him with the bill and struck him in the middle, and Gunnar hoists him up on the bill and hurls him out into Rangriver.

Then Starkad said, "Wretch that thou art indeed," Thorir Easterling, "when thou sittest by; but thy host, and

father-in-law Egil, is slain."

Then the Easterling sprung up and was very wroth. Hjort had been the death of two men, and the Easterling leapt on him and smote him full on the breast. Then Hjort fell down dead on the spot.

Gunnar sees this and was swift to smite at the Easterling, and cuts him asunder at the waist.

A little while after Gunnar hurls the bill at Bork, and struck him in the middle, and the bill went through him and stuck in the ground.

Then Kolskegg cut off Hauk Egil's son's head, and Gunnar smites off Otter's hand at the elbow-joint. Then Starkad said, "Let us fly now. We have not to do with men!"

Gunnar said, "Ye two will think it a sad story if there is naught on you to show that ye have both been in the battle."

Then Gunnar ran after Starkad and Thorgeir, and gave them each a wound. After that they parted; and Gunnar and his brothers had then wounded many men who got away from the field, but fourteen lost their lives, and Hjort the fifteenth.

Gunnar strings his bow, and takes his arrows and throws them on the ground before him, and shoots as soon as ever they come within shot; by that Gunnar wounded many men, but some he slew.

Then Thorgeir Otkell's son spoke and said, "This is no use; let us make for him as hard as we can."

They did so, and first went Aunund the Fair, Thorgeir's kinsman. Gunnar hurled the bill at him, and it fell on his shield and clove it in twain, but the bill rushed through Aunund. Augmund Shockhead rushed at Gunnar behind his back. Kolskegg saw that and cut off at once both Augmund's legs from under him, and hurled him out into Rangriver, and he was drowned there and then.

Then a hard battle arose; Gunnar cut with one hand and thrust with the other. Kolskegg slew some men and wounded many.

Thorgeir Starkad's son called out to his namesake, "It looks very little as though thou hadst a father to avenge."

"True it is," he answers, "that I do not make much way, but yet thou hast not followed in my footsteps; still I will not bear thy reproaches."

With that he rushes at Gunnar in great wrath, and thrust his spear through his shield, and so on through his arm.

Gunnar gave the shield such a sharp twist that the spearhead broke short off at the socket. Gunnar sees that another man was come within reach of his sword, and he smites at him and deals him his death-blow. After that, he clutches his bill with both hands; just then, Thorgeir Otkell's son had come near him with a drawn sword, and Gunnar turns on him in great wrath, and drives the bill through him, and lifts him up aloft, and casts him out into Rangriver, and he drifts down towards the ford, and stuck fast there on a stone; and the name of that ford has since been Thorgeir's ford.

Master Thorkell went up to the homestead, and the tyke lay on the top of the house, and he entices the dog away with him into a deep hollow in the path. Just then the hound sees that there are men before them, and he leaps on Thorkell and tears his belly open.

Aunund of Witchwood smote the hound on the head with his axe, so that the blade sunk into the brain. The hound gave such a great howl that they thought it passing strange, and he fell down dead.

Thorgrim the Easterling went and began to climb up on the hall; Gunnar sees that a red kirtle passed before the windowslit, and thrusts out the bill, and smote him on the middle. Thorgrim's feet slipped from under him, and he dropped his shield, and down he toppled from the roof.

Then he goes to Gizur and his band as they sat on the ground.

Gizur looked at him and said, "Well, is Gunnar at home?

"Find that out for yourselves," said Thorgrim; "but this I am sure of, that his bill is at home," and with that he fell down dead.

Then they made for the buildings. Gunnar shot out arrows at them, and made a stout defence, and they could get nothing done. Then some of them got into the out houses and tried to attack him thence, but Gunnar found them out with his arrows there also, and still they could get nothing done.

So it went on for a while, then they took a rest, and made a second onslaught. Gunnar still shot out at them, and they could do nothing, and fell off the second time. Then Gizur the White said, "Let us press on harder; nothing comes of our onslaught."

Then they made a third bout of it, and were long at it, and then they fell off again.

Gunnar said, "There lies an arrow outside on the wall, and it is one of their shafts; I will shoot at them with it, and it will be a shame to them if they get a hurt from their own weapons."

His mother said, "Do not so, my son; nor rouse them again when they have already fallen off from the attack."

But Gunnar caught up the arrow and shot it after them, and struck Eylif Aunund's son, and he got a great wound; he was standing all by himself, and they knew not that he was wounded.

"Out came an arm yonder," says Gizur, "and there was a gold ring on it, and took an arrow from the roof, and they would not look outside for shafts if there were enough in doors; and now ye shall made a fresh onslaught."

"Let us burn him house and all," said Mord.

"That shall never be," says Gizur, "though I knew that my life lay on it; but it is easy for thee to find out some plan, such a cunning man as thou art said to be."

Some ropes lay there on the ground, and they were often used to strengthen the roof. Then Mord said, "Let us take the ropes and throw one end over the end of the carrying beams, but let us fasten the other end to these rocks and twist them tight with levers, and so pull the roof off the hall."

So they took the ropes and all lent a hand to carry this out, and before Gunnar was aware of it, they had pulled the whole roof off the hall.

Then Gunnar still shoots with his bow so that they could never come nigh him. Then Mord said again that they must burn the house over Gunnar's head. But Gizur said, "I know not why thou wilt speak of that which no one else wishes, and that shall never be."

Just then Thorbrand Thorleik's son, sprang up on the roof, and cuts asunder Gunnar's bowstring. Gunnar clutches the bill with both hands, and turns on him quickly and drives it through him, and hurls him down on the ground.

Then up sprung Asbrand his brother. Gunnar thrusts at him with his bill, and he threw his shield before the blow, but the bill passed clean through the shield and broke both his arms, and down he fell from the wall.

Gunnar had already wounded eight men and slain those twain (1). By that time Gunnar had got two wounds, and all men said that he never once winced either at wounds or death. ...

... Gunnar made a stout and bold defence, and now wounds other eight men with such sore wounds that many lay at death's door. Gunnar keeps them all off until he fell worn out with toil. Then they wounded him with many and great wounds, but still he got away out of their hands, and held his own against them a while longer, but at last it came about that they slew him.

Hroald had a spear in his hand, and Hogni rushes at him; Hroald thrusts at him, but Hogni hewed asunder the spear-shaft with his bill, and drives the bill through him.

Kol hews at him, and the blow fell on Thrain's shield, and cleft it down from top to bottom. Then Kol got a blow on the arm, from a stone and then down fell his sword.

Thrain hews at Kol, and the stroke came on his leg so that it cut it off. After that they slew Kol, and Thrain cut off his head, and they threw the trunk overboard, but kept his head.

Then the Vikings shot at them and the fight began, and the chapmen guard themselves well. Snowcolf sprang aboard and at Olaf, and thrust his spear through his body, but Grim thrust at Snowcolf with his spear, and so stoutly, that he fell overboard. Then Helgi turned to meet Grim, and they two drove down all the Vikings as they tried to board, and Njal's sons were ever where there was most need. Then the Vikings called out to the chapmen and bade them give up, but they said they would never yield.

... Kari springs up on Snowcolf's ship; he turns to meet him and smites at him with his sword. Kari leaps nimbly backwards over a beam that lay athwart the ship, and Snowcolf smote the beam so that both edges of the sword were hidden. Then Kari smites at him, and the sword fell on his shoulder, and the stroke was so mighty that he cleft in twain shoulder, arm, and all, and Snowcolf got his death there and then. Gritgard hurled a spear at Kari, but Kari saw it and sprang up aloft, and the spear missed him. Just then Helgi and Grim came up both to meet Kari, and Helgi springs on Gritgard and thrusts his spear through him, and that was his death blow; ...

Now Kari turns to meet Earl Melsnati, and Melsnati hurled a spear at him, but Kari caught the spear and threw it back and through the earl.

He rushes at them, axe in air, and smote at Hrapp's leg, but Hrapp gave himself a sudden turn, and he missed him. Hrapp springs on his feet as quick as he can, and caught up his axe. Then Asvard wished to turn and get away, but Hrapp hewed asunder his back-bone.

He walks across a ploughed field, and there six men sprang up with weapons, and fall upon him at once; but he made a stout defence, and the end of the business was that he slays three men, but wounds Thrand to the death, and drives two to the woods, so that they could bear no news to the earl.

Then the earl and his men fall on them, but they defended themselves well, and Njal's sons were ever where there was most need. The earl often offered peace, but they all made the same answer, and said they would never yield.

Then Aslak of Longisle pressed them hard and came on board their ship thrice. Then Grim said, "Thou pressest on hard, and 'twere well that thou gettest what thou seekest;" and with that he snatched up a spear and hurled it at him, and hit him under the chin, and Aslak got his death wound there and then.

A little after, Helgi slew Egil the earl's banner-bearer.

Then Sweyn, Earl Hacon's son, fell on them, and made men hem them in and bear them down with shields, and so they were taken captive.

Thrain was just about to put his helm on his head; and now Skarphedinn bore down on them, and hews at Thrain with his axe, "the ogress of war," and smote him on the head, and clove him down to the teeth, so that his jaw-teeth fell out on the ice. This feat was done with such a quick sleight that no one could get a blow at him; he glided away from them at once at full speed. Tjorvi, indeed, threw his shield before him on the ice, but he leapt over it, and still kept his feet, and slid quite to the end of the sheet of ice.

Both Grim and Helgi see where Hrapp is, and they turned on him at once. Hrapp hews at Grim there and then with his axe; Helgi sees this and cuts at Hrapp's arm, and cut it off, and down fell the axe.

"In this," says Hrapp, "thou hast done a most needful work, for this hand hath wrought harm and death to many a man."

"And so here an end shall be put to it," says Grim; and with that he ran him through with a spear, and then Hrapp fell down dead.

Tjorvi turns against Kari and hurls a spear at him. Kari leapt up in the air, and the spear flew below his feet. Then Kari rushes at him, and hews at him on the breast with his sword, and the blow passed at once into his chest, and he got his death there and then.

Thangbrand shot a spear through Thorwald, but Gudleif smote him on the shoulder and hewed his arm off, and that was his death.

The Baresark rushed in with his weapons. He comes into the room, and treads at once the fire which the heathen men had hallowed, and so comes to the fire that Thangbrand had hallowed, and dares not to tread it, but said that he was on fire all over. He hews with his sword at the bench, but strikes a crossbeam as he brandished the weapon aloft. Thangbrand smote the arm of the Baresark with his crucifix, and so mighty a token followed that the sword fell from the Baresark's hand.

Then Thangbrand thrusts a sword into his breast, and Gudleif smote him on the arm and hewed it off. Then many went up and slew the Baresark.

They went on the way to meet Hauskuld as he came back, and lay in wait for him north of the farm-yard in a pit; and there they bided till it was about mideven (1). Then Hauskuld rode up to them. They jump up all of them with their arms, and fall on him. Hauskuld guarded himself well, so that for a long while they could not get the better of him; but the end of it was at last that he wounded Lyting on the arm, and slew two of his serving-men, and then fell himself. They gave Hauskuld sixteen wounds, but they hewed not off the head from his body. They fared away into the wood east of Rangriver, and hid themselves there.

Skarphedinn leaps over the stream at once, and alights on the sandy brink on the other side. There upon it stands Hallgrim and his brother. Skarphedinn smites at Hallgrim's thigh, so that he cut the leg clean off, but he grasps Hallstein with his left hand. Lyting thrust at Skarphedinn, but Helgi came up then and threw his shield before the spear, and caught the blow on it. Lyting took up a stone and hurled it at Skarphedinn, and he lost his hold on Hallstein. Hallstein sprang up the sandy bank, but could get up it in no other way than by crawling on his hands and knees. Skarphedinn made a side blow at him with his axe, "the ogress of war," and hews asunder his backbone. Now Lyting turns and flies, but Helgi and Grim both went after him, and each gave him a wound, but still Lyting got across the river away from them, and so to the horses, and gallops till he comes to Ossaby.

With that he ran straight into the booth until he comes before Lyting, and smites him with an axe on the head, so that it sunk in up to the hammer, and gives the axe a pull towards him.

Lyting fell forwards and was dead at once.

Skarphedinn and his band had agreed that they would all give him a wound. Skarphedinn sprang up from behind the fence, but when Hauskuld saw him he wanted to turn away, then Skarphedinn ran up to him and said, "Don't try to turn on thy heel, Whiteness priest," and hews at him, and the blow came on his head, and he fell on his knees. Hauskuld said these words when he fell, "God help me, and forgive you!"

Then they all ran up to him and gave him wounds.

Then Hroald Auzur's son ran up to where Skarphedinn stood, and thrust at him. Skarphedinn hewed the spearhead off the shaft as he held it, and made another stroke at him, and the axe fell on the top of the shield, and dashed back the whole shield on Hroald's body, but the upper horn of the axe caught him on the brow, and he fell at full length on his back, and was dead at once.

"Little chance had that one with thee, Skarphedinn," said Kari, "and thou art our boldest."

"I'm not so sure of that," says Skarphedinn, and he drew up his lips and smiled.

Kari, and Grim, and Helgi, threw out many spears, and wounded many men; but Flosi and his men could do nothing.

But when Helgi heard that, he cast away the cloak. He had got his sword under his arm, and hewed at a man, and the blow fell on his shield and cut off the point of it, and the man's leg as well. Then Flosi came up and hewed at Helgi's neck, and took off his head at a stroke.

Flosi snatched the spear from him, and launched it at Ingialld, and it fell on his left side, and passed through the shield just below the handle, and clove it all asunder, but the spear passed on into his thigh just above the knee-pan, and so on into the saddle-tree, and there stood fast.

Then Flosi said to Ingialld, "Did it touch thee?

"It touched me sure enough," says Ingialld, "but I call this a scratch and not a wound."

Then Ingialld plucked the spear out of the wound, and said to Flosi, "Now bide thou, if thou art not a milksop."

Then he launched the spear back over the river. Flosi sees that the spear is coming straight for his middle, and then he backs his horse out of the way, but the spear flew in front of Flosi's horse, and missed him, but it struck Thorstein's middle, and down he fell at once dead off his horse.

There lay a pole-axe in the corner of the dais. Asgrim caught it up with both hands, and ran up to the rail at the edge of the dais, and made a blow at Flosi's head. Glum Hilldir's son happened to see what he was about to do, and sprang up at once, and got hold of the axe above Asgrim's hands, and turned the edge at once on Asgrim; for Glum was very strong. Then many more men ran up and seized Asgrim, but Flosi said that no man was to do Asgrim any harm, "For we put him to too hard a trial, and he only did what he ought, and showed in that that he had a big heart."

There he met Grim the Red, Flosi's kinsman, and as soon as ever they met, Thorhall thrust at him with the spear, and smote him on the shield and clove it in twain, but the spear passed right through him, so that the point came out between his shoulders. Thorhall cast him off his spear.

Kari Solmund's son turned now thither where Ami Kol's son and Hallbjorn the Strong were in front, and as soon as ever Hallbjorn saw Kari, he made a blow at him, and aimed at his leg, but Kari leapt up into the air, and Hallbjorn missed him. Kari turned on Arni Kol's son and cut at him, and smote him on the shoulder, and cut asunder the shoulder blade and collar-bone, and the blow went right down into his breast, and Ami fell down dead at once to earth.

After that he hewed at Hallbjorn and caught him on the shield, and the blow passed through the shield, and so down and cut off his great toe. Holmstein hurled a spear at Kari, but he caught it in the air, and sent it back, and it was a man's death in Flosi's band.

Thorgeir Craggeir came up to where Hallbjorn the Strong was in front, and Thorgeir made such a spear-thrust at him with his left hand that Hallbjorn fell before it, and had hard work to get on his feet again, and turned away from the fight there and then. Then Thorgeir met Thorwalld Kettle Rumble's son, and hewed at him at once with the axe, "the ogress of war," which Skarphedinn had owned. Thorwalld threw his shield before him, and Thorgeir hewed the shield and cleft it from top to bottom, but the upper horn of the axe made its way into his breast, and passed into his trunk, and Thorwalld fell and was dead at once.

Kari Solmund's son came up where Bjarni Broddhelgi's son had the lead. Kari caught up a spear and thrust at him, and the blow fell on his shield. Bjarni slipped the shield on one side of him, else it had gone straight through him. Then he cut at Kari and aimed at his leg, but Kari drew back his leg and turned short round on his heel, and Bjarni missed him. Kari cut at once at him, and then a man ran forward and threw his shield before Bjarni. Kari cleft the shield in twain, and the point of the sword caught his thigh, and ripped up the whole leg down to the ankle. That man fell there and then, and was ever after a cripple so long as he lived.

Then Kari clutched his spear with both hands, and turned on Bjarni and thrust at him; he saw he had no other chance but to throw himself down sidelong away from the blow, but as soon as ever Bjarni found his feet, away he fell back out of the fight.

Thorwalld Tjorfi's son of Lightwater got a great wound, he was shot in the forearm, and men thought that Halldor Gudmund the Powerful's son had hurled the spear, but he bore that wound about with him all his life long, and got no atonement for it.

"I see him kinsman," said Asgrim, and then he shot a spear at Skapti, and struck him just below where the calf was fattest, and so through both his legs. Skapti fell at the blow, and could not get up again, and the

only counsel they could take who were by, was to drag Skapti flat on his face into the booth of a turf-cutter.

And with that he caught hold of him, and lifted him up aloft, and thrust him head down into the broth-kettle. Solvi died at once; but then a rush was made at Hallbjorn himself, and he had to turn and fly.

Flosi threw a spear at Bruni Haflidi's son, and caught him at the waist, and that was his bane; he was one of Gudmund the Powerful's band.

Thorstein Hlenni's son took the spear out of the wound, and hurled it back at Flosi, and hit him on the leg, and he got a great wound and fell; he rose up again at once.

Then they passed on to the Waterfirthers' booth, and then Hall and Ljot came from the east across the river, with all their band; but just when they came to the lava, a spear was hurled out of the band of Gudmund the Powerful, and it struck Ljot in the middle, and he fell down dead at once; and it was never known surely who had done that manslaughter.

Flosi and his men turned up round the Waterfirther's booth, and then Thorgeir Craggeir said to Kari Solmund's son, "Look, yonder now is Eyjolf Bolverk's son, if thou hast a mind to pay him off for the ring."

"That I ween is not far from my mind," says Kari, and snatched a spear from a man, and hurled it at Eyjolf, and it struck him in the waist, and went through him, and Eyjolf then fell dead to earth.

Thorgeir Craggeir runs thither where Thorkell Sigfus' son stood, and just then a man ran behind his back, but before he could do Thorgeir any hurt, Thorgeir lifted the axe, "the ogress of war," with both hands, and dashed the hammer of the axe with a back-blow into the head of him that stood behind him, so that his skull was shattered to small bits.

"Slain is this one," said Thorgeir; and down the man fell at once, and was dead.

But when he dashed the axe forward, he smote Thorkell on the shoulder, and hewed it off, arm and all.

Against Kari came Mord Sigfus' son, and Sigmund Sigfus' son, and Lambi Sigurd's son; the last ran behind Kari's back, and thrust at him with a spear; Kari caught sight of him, and leapt up as the blow fell, and stretched his legs far apart, and so the blow spent itself on the ground, but Kari jumped down on the spear-shaft, and snapped it in sunder. He had a spear in one hand, and a sword in the other, but no shield. He thrust with the right hand at Sigmund Sigfus' son, and smote him on his breast, and the spear came out between his shoulders, and down he fell and was dead at once, With his left hand he made a cut at Mord, and smote him on the hip, and cut it asunder, and his backbone too; he fell flat on his face, and was dead at once.

After that he turned sharp round on his heel like a whipping-top, and made at Lambi Sigurd's son, but he took the only way to save himself, and that was by running away as hard as he could.

Now Thorgeir turns against Leidolf the Strong, and each hewed at the other at the same moment, and Leidolf's blow was so great that it shore off that part of the shield on which it fell.

Thorgeir had hewn with "the ogress of war," holding it with both hands, and the lower horn fell on the shield and clove it in twain, but the upper caught the collarbone and cut it in two and tore on down into the breast and trunk. Kari came up just then, and cut off Leidolf's leg at mid-thigh, and then Leidolf fell and died at once.

Now they all rose up and ran at them, and Modolf Kettle's son was quickest of them, and thrust at Kari with his spear. Kari had his shield before him, and the blow fell on it, and the spear stuck fast in the shield. Then Kari twists the shield so smartly, that the spear snapped short off, and then he drew his sword and smote at Modolf; but Modolf made a cut at him too, and Kari's sword fell on Modolf's hilt, and glanced off it on to Modolf's wrist, and took the arm off, and down it fell, and the sword too. Then Kari's sword passed on into Modolf's side, and between his ribs, and so Modolf fell down and was dead on the spot.

Grani Gunnar's son snatched up a spear and hurled it at Kari, but Kari thrust down his shield so hard that the point stood fast in the ground, but with his left hand he caught the spear in the air, and hurled it back at Grani, and caught up his shield again at once with his left hand. Grani had his shield before him, and the spear came on the shield and passed right through it, and into Grani's thigh just below the small guts, and through the limb, and so on, pinning him to the ground, and he could not get rid of the spear before his fellows drew him off it, and carried him away on their shields, and laid him down in a dell.

There was a man who ran up to Kari's side, and meant to cut off his leg, but Bjorn cut off that man's arm,

and sprang back again behind Kari, and they could not do him any hurt. Kari made a sweep at that same man with his sword, and cut him asunder at the waist.

Then Lambi Sigfus' son rushed at Kari, and hewed at him with his sword. Kari caught the blow sideways on his shield, and the sword would not bite; then Kari thrust at Lambi with his sword just below the breast, so that the point came out between his shoulders, and that was his deathblow.

Then Thorstein Geirleif's son rushed at Kari, and thought to take him in flank, but Kari caught sight of him, and swept at him with his sword across the shoulders, so that the man was cleft asunder at the chine.

A little while after he gave Gunnar of Skal, a good man and true, his deathblow. As for Bjorn, he had wounded three men who had tried to give Kari wounds, and yet he was never so far forward that he was in the least danger, nor was he wounded, nor was either of those companions hurt in that fight, but all those that got away were wounded.

So those three rode on past them; but the six others then came riding right up to them, and they all leapt off their horses straightway in a body, and turned on Kari and his companion.

First, Glum Hildir's son rushed at them, and thrust at Kari with a spear; Kari turned short round on his heel, and Glum missed him, and the blow fell against the rock. Bjorn sees that and hewed at once the head off Glum's spear. Kari leant on one side and smote at Glum with his sword, and the blow fell on his thigh, and took off the limb high up in the thigh, and Glum died at once.

Then Vebrand and Asbrand the sons of Thorbrand ran up to Kari, but Kari flew at Vebrand and thrust his sword through him, but afterwards he hewed off both of Asbrand's feet from under him.

In this bout both Kari and Bjorn were wounded.

Then Kettle of the Mark rushed at Kari, and thrust at him with his spear. Kari threw up his leg, and the spear stuck in the ground, and Kari leapt on the spear-shaft, and snapped it in sunder.

So he ran in up the hall, and smote Gunnar Lambi's son on the neck with such a sharp blow, that his head spun off on to the board before the king and the earls, and the board was all one gore of blood, and the earl's clothing too.

Brodir went through the host of the foe, and felled all the foremost that stood there, but no steel would bite on his mail.

Wolf the Quarrelsome turned then to meet him, and thrust at him thrice so hard that Brodir fell before him at each thrust, and was well-nigh not getting on his feet again; but as soon as ever he found his feet, he fled away into the wood at once.

Heimskringla or The Chronicle of the Kings of Norway
by Snorri Sturlson

(c.1179-1241)

Originally written in Old Norse, app. 1225 A.D., by the poet and historian Snorri Sturlson. English translation by Samuel Laing (London, 1844).

The text of this edition is based on that published as "Heimskringla: A History of the Norse Kings" (Norroena Society, London, 1907), except for "Ynglinga Saga", which for reasons unknown is curiously absent from the Norroena Society edition. "Ynglinga Saga" text taken from Laing's original edition (London, 1844).

This electronic edition was edited, proofed, and prepared by Douglas B. Killings (DeTroyes@AOL.COM), April 1996. Some corrections and "Ynglinga Saga" added courtesy of Ms. Diane Brendan, May 1996.

1. Ynglinga Saga

Odin could make his enemies in battle blind, or deaf, or terror-struck, and their weapons so blunt that they could no more but than a willow wand; on the other hand, his men rushed forwards without armour, were as

mad as dogs or wolves, bit their shields, and were strong as bears or wild bulls, and killed people at a blow, but neither fire nor iron told upon themselves. These were called Berserker.

As they were going across a river at a place called Skjotan's [the Weapon's] Ford, a labouring thrall came running to the river-side, and threw a hay-fork into their troop. It struck the king on the head, so that he fell instantly from his horse and died.

Yngve had a short sword upon his knees, and the guests were so drunk that they did not observe the king coming in. King Alf went straight to the high seat, drew a sword from under his cloak, and pierced his brother Yngve through and through. Yngve leaped up, drew his short sword, and gave Alf his death-wound; so that both fell dead on the floor.

He observed at last that it was the bull, and rode up to it to kill it. The bull turned round suddenly, and the king struck him with his spear; but it tore itself out of the wound. The bull now struck his horn in the side of the horse, so that he instantly fell flat on the earth with the king. The king sprang up, and was drawing his sword, when the bull struck his horns right into the king's breast. The king's men then came up and killed the bull. The king lived but a short time, and was buried in a mound at Upsal.

2. Halfdan the Black Saga

King Sigtryg, son of King Eystein, who then had his residence in Hedemark, and who had subdued Raumarike before, having heard of this, came out with his army against King Halfdan, and there was great battle, in which King Halfdan was victorious; and just as King Sigtryg and his troops were turning about to fly, an arrow struck him under the left arm, and he fell dead.

Hake got up and went after them a while; but when he came to the ice on the lake, he turned his sword-hilt to the ground and let himself fall upon the point, so that the sword went through him. He was buried under a mound on the banks of the lake.

3. Harald Harfager's Saga

King Athelstan gave Hakon a sword, of which the hilt and handle were gold, and the blade still better; for with it Hakon cut down a mill-stone to the centre eye, and the sword thereafter was called the Quernbite (1). Better sword never came into Norway, and Hakon carried it to his dying day.

ENDNOTES:

(1) Quern is the name of the small hand mill-stones still found in use among the cottars in Orkney, Shetland, and the Hebrides. This sword is mentioned in the Younger Edda. There were many excellent swords in the olden time, and many of them had proper names.

4. Hakon the Good's Saga

"King Hakon, whose sharp sword dyes red
The bright steel cap on many a head,...
"The body-coats of naked steel,
The woven iron coats of mail,
Like water fly before the swing
Of Hakon's sword -- the champion-king.
About each Gotland war-man's head
Helm splits, like ice beneath the tread,
Cloven by the axe or sharp swordblade,
The brave king, foremost in the fight,
Dyes crimson-red the spotless white
Of his bright shield with foemen's gore. --
Amidst the battle's wild uproar,
Wild pealing round from shore to shore."

It was also but a short space of time before Eyvind did come up swinging his sword, and made a cut at the king; but Thoralf thrust his shield so hard against Eyvind that he tottered with the shock. Now the king takes his sword Kvernbit with both hands, and hewed Eyvind through helm and head, and clove him down to the shoulders. Thoralf also slew Alf Askman.

Then flew an arrow, one of the kind called "flein", into Hakon's arm, into the muscles below the shoulder; and it is said by many people that Gunhild's shoe-boy, whose name was Kisping, ran out and forwards amidst the confusion of arms, called out "Make room for the king-killer," and shot King Hakon with the flein. Others again say that nobody could tell who shot the king, which is indeed the most likely; for spears, arrows, and all kinds of missiles flew as thick as a snow-drift.

5. Saga of King Harald Grafeld and of Earl Hakon Son of Sigurd

Now when they came to the house they attacked the king, and Herse Klyp, it is said, ran him through with his sword and killed him; but instantly Klyp was killed on the spot by Erling Gamle (A.D. 965).

6. King Olaf Trygvason's Saga

The time and place for the combat were settled, and that each should have twelve men with him. When they met, Olaf told his men to do exactly as they saw him do. He had a large axe; and when Alfvine was going to cut at him with his sword he hewed away the sword out of his hand, and with the next blow struck down Alfvine himself. He then bound him fast. It went in the same way with all Alfvine's men. They were beaten down, bound, and carried to Olaf's lodging. Thereupon he ordered Alfvine to quit the country, and never appear in it again; and Olaf took all his property.

Many fell on both sides, but the most by far on Hakon's side; for the Jomsborg vikings fought desperately, sharply, and murderously, and shot right through the shields. So many spears were thrown against Earl Hakon that his armour was altogether split asunder, and he threw it off. So says Tind Halkelson: --

"The ring-linked coat of strongest mail
Could not withstand the iron hail,
Though sewed with care and elbow bent,
By Norn, on its strength intent.
The fire of battle raged around, --
Odin's steel shirt flew all unbound!
The earl his ring-mail from him flung,
Its steel rings on the wet deck rung;
Part of it fell into the sea, --
A part was kept, a proof to be
How sharp and thick the arrow-flight
Among the sea-steeds in this fight."

ENDNOTES:

(1) Norn, one of the Fates, stands here for women, whose business it was to sew the rings of iron upon the cloth which made these ring-mail coats or shirts. The needles, although some of them were of gold, appear to have been without eyes, and used like shoemaker's awls. -- L.

Vigfus, a son of Vigaglum, took up an anvil with a sharp end, which lay upon the deck, and on which a man had welded the hilt to his sword just before, and being a very strong man cast the anvil with both hands at the head of Aslak Holmskalle, and the end of it went into his brains. Before this no weapon could wound this Aslak, who was Bue's foster-brother, and forecastle commander, although he could wound right and left. Another man among the strongest and bravest was Havard Hoggande. In this attack Eirik's men boarded Bue's ship, and went aft to the quarter-deck where Bue stood. There Thorstein Midlang cut at Bue across his nose, so that the nosepiece of his helmet was cut in two, and he got a great wound; but Bue, in turn, cut at Thorstein's side, so that the sword cut the man through.

There sat also a very handsome man with long hair, who twisted his hair over his head, put out his neck,

and said, "Don't make my hair bloody." A man took the hair in his hands and held it fast. Thorkel hewed with his axe; but the viking twitched his head so strongly that he who was holding his hair fell forwards, and the axe cut off both his hands, and stuck fast in the earth.

And he ran at him with uplifted axe; but the viking Skarde swung himself in the rope, and let himself fall just before Thorkel's feet, so that Thorkel fell over him, and Vagn caught the axe and gave Thorkel a death-wound.

Earl Hakon, and many with him, were sitting upon a piece of wood, and a bow-string twanged from Bue's ship, and the arrow struck Gissur from Valders, who was sitting next the earl, and was clothed splendidly. Thereupon the people went on board, and found Havard Hoggande standing on his knees at the ship's railing, for his feet had been cut off (1), and he had a bow in his hand.

ENDNOTES:

(1) This traditionary tale of a warrior fighting on his knees after his legs were cut off, appears to have been a popular idea among the Northmen, and is related by their descendants in the ballad oœ Chevy Chase. -- L.

They then kept themselves awake both; the one, as it were, watching upon the other. But towards day the earl suddenly dropped asleep; but his sleep was so unquiet that he drew his heels under him, and raised his neck, as if going to rise, and screamed dreadfully high. On this Kark, dreadfully alarmed, drew a large knife out of his belt, stuck it in the earl's throat, and cut it across, and killed Earl Hakon. Then Kark cut off the earl's head, and ran away.

When the king saw where Thorer Hjort, who was quicker on foot than any man, was running to, he ran after him with his dog Vige. The king said, "Vige! Vige! Catch the deer." Vige ran straight in upon him; on which Thorer halted, and the king threw a spear at him. Thorer struck with his sword at the dog, and gave him a great wound; but at the same moment the king's spear flew under Thorer's arm, and went through and through him, and came out at his other-side. There Thorer left his life; but Vige was carried to the ships.

ENDNOTES:

(1) Both in land and sea fights the commanders appear to have been protected from missile weapons, -- stones, arrows, spears, -- by a shieldburg: that is, by a party of men bearing shields surrounding them in such a way that the shields were a parapet, covering those within the circle. The Romans had a similar military arrangement of shields in sieges -- the testudo. -- L.

Einar Tambarskelver, one of the sharpest of bowshooters, stood by the mast, and shot with his bow. Einar shot an arrow at Earl Eirik, which hit the tiller end just above the earl's head so hard that it entered the wood up to the arrow-shaft. The earl looked that way, and asked if they knew who had shot; and at the same moment another arrow flew between his hand and his side, and into the stuffing of the chief's stool, so that the barb stood far out on the other side. Then said the earl to a man called Fin, -- but some say he was of Fin (Laplander) race, and was a superior archer, -- "Shoot that tall man by the mast." Fin shot; and the arrow hit the middle of Einar's bow just at the moment that Einar was drawing it, and the bow was split in two parts.

"What is that."cried King Olaf, "that broke with such a noise?"

"Norway, king, from thy hands," cried Einar.

"No! not quite so much as that," says the king; "take my bow, and shoot," flinging the bow to him.

Einar took the bow, and drew it over the head of the arrow. "Too weak, too weak," said he, "for the bow of a mighty king!" and, throwing the bow aside, he took sword and shield, and fought Valiantly.

The king stood on the gangways of the Long Serpent. and shot the greater part of the day; sometimes with the bow, sometimes with the spear, and always throwing two spears at once. He looked down over the ship's sides, and saw that his men struck briskly with their swords, and yet wounded but seldom. Then he called aloud, "Why do ye strike so gently that ye seldom cut?" One among the people answered, "The swords are blunt and full of notches." Then the king went down into the forehold, opened the chest under the throne,

and took out many sharp swords, which he handed to his men; but as he stretched down his right hand with them, some observed that blood was running down under his steel glove, but no one knew where he was wounded.

King Olaf and Kolbjorn the marshal both sprang overboard, each on his own side of the ship; but the earl's men had laid out boats around the Serpent, and killed those who leaped overboard. Now when the king had sprung overboard, they tried to seize him with their hands, and bring him to Earl Eirik; but King Olaf threw his shield over his head, and sank beneath the waters. Kolbjorn held his shield behind him to protect himself from the spears cast at him from the ships which lay round the Serpent, and he fell so upon his shield that it came under him, so that he could not sink so quickly.

7. Saga of Olaf Haraldson (St. Olaf)

It is said that Einar was the strongest man and the best archer that ever was in Norway. His shooting was sharp beyond all others; for with a blunt arrow he shot through a raw, soft ox-hide, hanging over a beam. He was better than any man at running on snow-shoes, was a great man at all exercises, was of high family, and rich.

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When the mass was finished Olaf stood up, held his hands up over his head, and bowed down before the altar, so that his cloak hung down behind his shoulders. Then King Hrorek started up hastily and sharply, and struck at the king with a long knife of the kind called ryting; but the blow was received in the upper cloak at the shoulder, because the king was bending himself forwards. The clothes were much cut, but the king was not wounded. When the king perceived the attack he sprang upon the floor; and Hrorek struck at him again with the knife, but did not reach him, and said, "Art thou flying, Olaf, from me, a blind men?"

Arnliot had a large halberd, of which the upper part was mounted with gold, and the shaft was so long that with his arm stretched out he could scarcely touch the top of it; and he was girt with a sword.

Gaut immediately sprang up, and struck with a hand-axe over the heads of the people, and the stroke came on Karl's head; but the wound was slight. Thord the Low seized the stick-axe, which lay in the field at his side, and struck the axe-blade right into Karl's skull.

He struck his sword at the king; but Arnbjorn ran in, and the thrust pierced him under his armour into his stomach, and Arnbjorn got his deathwound.

He had twelve large coats of reindeer-skin made for him, with so much Lapland witchcraft that no weapon could cut or pierce them any more than if they were armour of ring-mail, nor so much.

Then the bonde-army pushed on from all quarters. They who stood in front hewed down with their swords; they who stood next thrust with their spears; and they who stood hindmost shot arrows, cast spears, or threw stones, hand-axes, or sharp stakes.

He struck the lenderman before mentioned (Thorgeir of Kviststad) across the face, cut off the nose-piece of his helmet, and clove his head down below the eyes so that they almost fell out.

King Olaf hewed at Thorer Hund, and struck him across the shoulders; but the sword would not cut, and it was as if dust flew from his reindeer-skin coat. So says Sigvat: --

"The king himself now proved the power
Of Fin-folk's craft in magic hour,
With magic song; for stroke of steel
Thor's reindeer coat would never feel,
Bewitched by them it turned the stroke
Of the king's sword, -- a dust-like smoke
Rose from Thor's shoulders from the blow
Which the king though would end his foe."

Thorer struck at the king, and they exchanged some blows; but the king's sword would not cut where it met the reindeer skin, although Thorer was wounded in the hands. Sigvat sang thus of

it: --

"Some say that Thorer's not right bold;
Why never yet have I been told
Of one who did a bolder thing
Than to change blows with his true king.
Against his king his sword to wield,
Leaping across the shield on shield
Which fenced the king round in the fight,
Shows the dog's (1) courage -- brave, not bright."

The king said to Bjorn the marshal, "Do thou kill the dog on whom steel will not bite." Bjorn turned round the axe in his hands, and gave Thorer a blow with the hammer of it on the shoulder so hard that he tottered. The king at the same moment turned against Kalf and his relations, and gave Olaf his death-wound. Thorer Hund struck his spear right through the body of Marshal

Bjorn, and killed him outright; and Thorer said, "It is thus we hunt the bear." (2) Thorstein Knarrarsmid struck at King Olaf with his axe, and the blow hit his left leg above the knee. Fin Arnason instantly killed Thorstein. The king after the wound staggered towards a stone, threw down his sword, and prayed God to help him. Then Thorer Hund struck at him with his spear, and the stroke went in under his mail-coat and into his belly. Then Kalf struck at him on the left side of the neck. But all are not agreed upon Kalf having been the man who gave him the wound in the neck. These three wounds were King Olaf's death; and after the king's death the greater part of the forces which had advanced with him fell with the king.

Thormod was also severely wounded, and retired, as all the others did, back from where there was most danger of life, and some even fled. Now when the onset began which is called Dag's storm, all of the king's men who were able to combat went there; but Thormod did not come into that combat, being unable to fight, both from his wound and from weariness, but he stood by the side of his comrade in the ranks, although he could do nothing. There he was struck by an arrow in the left side; but he broke off the shaft of the arrow, went out of the battle, and up towards the houses, where he came to a barn which was a large building.

Then the nurse-girl looked him in the face, and said, "Dreadfully pale is this man -- why art thou so?" Then Thormod sang: --

"Thou wonderest, sweet sprig, at me,
A man so hideous to see:
Deep wounds but rarely mend the face,
The crippling blow gives little grace.
The arrow-drift o'ertook me, girl, --
A fine-ground arrow in the whirl
Went through me, and I feel the dart
Sits, lovely girl, too near my heart."

The girl said, "Let me see thy wound, and I will bind it." Thereupon Thormod sat down, cast off his clothes, and the girl saw his wounds, and examined that which was in his side, and felt that a piece of iron was in it, but could not find where the iron had gone in. In a stone pot she had stirred together leeks and other herbs, and boiled them, and gave the wounded men of it to eat, by which she discovered if the wounds had penetrated into the belly; for if the wound had gone so deep, it would smell of leek. She brought some of this now to Thormod, and told him to eat of it. He replied, "Take it away, I have no appetite for my broth." Then she took a large pair of tongs, and tried to pull out the iron; but it sat too fast, and would in no way come, and as the wound was swelled, little of it stood out to lay hold of. Now said Thormod, "Cut so deep in that thou canst get at the iron with the tongs, and give me the tongs and let me pull." She did as he said. Then Thormod took a gold ring from his hand, gave it to the nurse-woman, and told her to do with it what she liked. "It is a good man's

gift," said he: "King Olaf gave me the ring this morning." Then Thormod took the tongs, and pulled the iron out; but on the iron there was a hook, at which there hung some morsels of flesh from the heart, -- some white, some red. When he saw that, he said, "The king has fed us well. I am fat, even at the heart-roots;" and so saying he leant back, and was dead. And with this ends what we have to say about Thormod.

8. Saga of Magnus the Good

"Now," says Asmund to the king, "I will pay Harek for my father's murder." He had in his hand a little thin hatchet. The king looked at him, and said, "Rather take this axe of mine." It was thick, and made like a club. "Thou must know, Asmund," added he, "that there are hard bones in the old fellow." Asmund took the axe, went down, and through the house, and when he came down to the cross-road Harek and his men coming up met him. Asmund struck Harek on the head, so that the axe penetrated to the brains; and that was Harek's death-wound. Asmund turned back directly to the king's house, and the whole edge of the axe was turned with the blow. Then said the king, "What would thy axe have done, for even this one, I think, is spoilt?"

9. Saga of Harald Hardrade

Two Iceland men were then with Harald; the one was Haldor (1), a son of the gode Snorre, who brought this account to Iceland; the other was Ulf Uspakson, a grandson of Usvifer Spake. Both were very strong men, bold under arms, and Harald's best friends; and both were in this play. Now when some days were passed the castle people showed more courage, and would go without weapons upon the castle wall, while the castle gates were standing open. The Varings observing this, went one day to their sports with the sword under their cloaks, and the helmet under their hats. After playing awhile they observed that the castle people were off their guard; and instantly seizing their weapons, they made at the castle gate. When the men of the castle saw this they went against them armed completely, and a battle began in the castle gate. The Varings had no shields, but wrapped their cloaks round their left arms. Some of them were wounded, some killed, and all stood in great danger.

It was late in the day when the battle began, and it continued the whole night. King Harald shot for a long time with his bow. So says Thiodolf: --

"The Upland king was all the night
Speeding the arrows' deadly flight.
All in the dark his bow-string's twang
Was answered; for some white shield rang,
Or yelling shriek gave certain note
The shaft had pierced some ring-mail coat,
The foemen's shields and bulwarks bore
A Lapland arrow-scat(1) or more."

ENDNOTES:

(1) The Laplanders paid their seat, or yearly tax, in bows and arrows; and the meaning of the skald appears to be, that as many as were paid in a year were shot at the foe. -- L.

Now the battle began. The Englishmen made a hot assault upon the Northmen, who sustained it bravely. It was no easy matter for the English to ride against the Northmen on account of their spears; therefore they rode in a circle around them. And the fight at first was but loose and light, as long as the Northmen kept their order of battle; for although the English rode hard against the Northmen, they gave way again immediately, as they could do nothing against them. Now when the Northmen thought they perceived that the enemy were making but weak assaults, they set after them, and would drive them into flight; but when they had broken their shield-rampart the Englishmen rode up from all sides, and threw arrows and spears on them. Now when King Harald Sigurdson saw this, he went into the fray where the greatest crash of weapons was, and there was a sharp conflict, in which many people fell on both sides. King Harald then was in a rage, and ran out in front of the array, and hewed down with both hands; so that neither helmet nor armour could withstand him, and all

who were nearest gave way before him. It was then very near with the English that they had taken to flight.

King Harald Sigurdson was hit by an arrow in the windpipe, and that was his death-wound.

Eystein and his men had hastened so fast from the ships that they were quite exhausted, and scarcely fit to fight before they came into the battle; but afterwards they became so furious, that they did not guard themselves with their shields as long as they could stand upright. At last they threw off their coats of ringmail, and then the Englishmen could easily lay their blows at them; and many fell from weariness, and died without a wound.

ENDNOTES:

(1) It is a singular physical circumstance, that in almost all the swords of those ages to be found in the collection of weapons in the Antiquarian Museum at Copenhagen, the handles indicate a size of hand very much smaller than the hands of modern people of any class or rank. No modern dandy, with the most delicate hands, would find room for his hand to grasp or wield with case some of the swords of these Northmen. -- L.

10. Saga of Olaf Kyrre

King Olaf Kyrre was a great friend of his brother-in-law, the Danish king, Canute the holy. They appointed a meeting and met at the Gaut river at Konungahella, where the kings used to have their meetings. There King Canute made the proposal that they should send an army westward to England on account of the revenge they had to take there; first and foremost King Olaf himself, and also the Danish king. "Do one of two things," said King Canute, -- "either take sixty ships, which I will furnish thee with, and be thou the leader; or give me sixty ships, and I shall be the leader." Then said King Olaf, "This speech of thine, King Canute, is altogether according to my mind; but there is this great difference between us; your family has had more luck in conquering England with great glory, and, among others, King Canute the Great; and it is likely that this good fortune follows your race. On the other hand, when King Harald, my father, went westward to England, he got his death there; and at that time the best men in Norway followed him. But Norway was so emptied then of chosen men, that such men have not since been to find in the country; for that expedition there was the most excellent outfit, and you know what was the end of it. Now I know my own capacity, and how little I am suited to be the leader; so I would rather you should go, with my help and assistance."

11. Magnus Barefoot's Saga

King Magnus shot with the bow; but Huge the Brave was all over in armour, so that nothing was bare about him excepting one eye. King Magnus let fly an arrow at him, as also did a Halogaland man who was beside the king. They both shot at once. The one shaft hit the nose-screen of the helmet, which was bent by it to one side, and the other arrow hit the earl's eye, and went through his head; and that was found to be the king's.

Now when the king had come to the nearest ditch there was a very difficult crossing, and few places were passable; so that many Northmen fell there. Then the king called to his lenderman Thorgrim Skinhufa, who was an Upland man, and ordered him to go over the ditch with his division. "We shall defend you," said he, "in the meantime, so that no harm shall come to you. Go out then to those holms, and shoot at them from thence; for ye are good bowmen."

When Thorgrim and his men came over the ditch they cast their shields behind their backs, and set off to the ships.

When the king saw this, he said, "Thou art deserting thy king in an unmanly way. I was foolish in making thee a lenderman, and driving Sigurd Hund out of the country; for never would he have behaved so."

King Magnus received a wound, being pierced by a spear through both thighs above the knees. The king laid hold of the shaft between his legs, broke the spear in two, and said, "Thus we break spear-shafts, my lads; let us go briskly on. Nothing hurts me." A little after King Magnus was struck in the neck with an Irish axe, and

this was his death-wound. Then those who were behind fled. Vidkun Jonson instantly killed the man who had given the king his death-wound, and fled, after having received three wounds; but brought the king's banner and the sword Legbit to the ships.

12. Saga of Sigurd the Crusader and His Brothers Eystein and Olaf

King Sigurd then sailed eastward along the coast of Serkland, and came to an island there called Forminterra. There a great many heathen Moors had taken up their dwelling in a cave, and had built a strong stone wall before its mouth. They harried the country all round, and carried all their booty to their cave. King Sigurd landed on this island, and went to the cave; but it lay in a precipice, and there was a high winding path to the stone wall, and the precipice above projected over it. The heathens defended the stone wall, and were not afraid of the Northmen's arms; for they could throw stones, or shoot down upon the Northmen under their feet; neither did the Northmen, under such circumstances, dare to mount up. The heathens took their clothes and other valuable things, carried them out upon the wall, spread them out before the Northmen, shouted, and defied them, and upbraided them as cowards. Then Sigurd fell upon this plan. He had two ship's boats, such as we call barks, drawn up the precipice right above the mouth of the cave; and had thick ropes fastened around the stem, stern, and hull of each. In these boats as many men went as could find room, and then the boats were lowered by the ropes down in front of the mouth of the cave; and the men in the boats shot with stones and missiles into the cave, and the heathens were thus driven from the stone wall. Then Sigurd with his troops climbed up the precipice to the foot of the stone wall, which they succeeded in breaking down, so that they came into the cave. Now the heathens fled within the stone wall that was built across the cave; on which the king ordered large trees to be brought to the cave, made a great pile in the mouth of it, and set fire to the wood. When the fire and smoke got the upper hand, some of the heathens lost their lives in it; some fled; some fell by the hands of the Northmen; and part were killed, part burned; and the Northmen made the greatest booty they had got on all their expeditions.

13. Saga of Magnus the Blind and of Harald Gille

He ran down to the town, and a few men after him to see what he would do, and also whether they could assist him in any way. When he came near the castle, and the heathens saw him, they sent out eight men fully armed against him; and when they met, the heathen men ran and surrounded him on all sides. Olver lifted his axe, and struck behind him with the extreme point of it, hitting the neck of the man who was coming up behind him, so that his throat and jawbone were cut through, and he fell dead backwards. Then he heaved his axe forwards, and struck the next man in the head, and clove him down to the shoulders. He then fought with the others, and killed two of them; but was much wounded himself. The four who remained took to flight, but Olver ran after them. There was a ditch before them, and two of the heathens jumped into it, and Olver killed them both; but he stuck fast himself in the ditch, so that two of the eight heathens escaped. The men who had followed Olver took him up, and brought him back to Skurbagar, where his wounds were bound and healed; and it was the talk of the people, that no single man had ever made such a bloody onset.

While the Vindlanders were storming the castle, their king and his chiefs were out of the battle. At one place there was a man among the Vindlanders shooting with a bow, and killing a man for every arrow; and two men stood before him, and covered him with their shields. Then Saemund Husfreyja said to his son Asmund, that they should both shoot together at this bowman. "But I will shoot at the man who holds the shield before him." He did so, and he knocked the shield down a little before the man; and in the same instant Asmund shot between the shields, and the arrow hit the bowman in the forehead, so that it came out at his neck, and he fell down dead

One of the heathens in particular fought so bravely, and ventured so near, that he came quite up to the castle-gate, and pierced the man who stood outside the gate with his sword; and although they used both arrows and stones against him, and he had neither shield nor helmet, nothing could touch him, for he was so skilled in witchcraft that weapon could not wound him. Then priest Andres took consecrated fire; blew upon it; cut tinder in pieces, and laid it on the fire; and then laid the tinder on the arrow-point, and gave it to Asmund. He shot this arrow at the warlock; and the shaft hit so well that it did its business, and the man of witchcraft fell dead.

14. Saga of Sigurd, Inge, and Eystein, the Sons of Harald

Sigurd and his men jumped on shore at daylight, came unexpectedly on the people, surrounded the house, and were setting fire to the buildings; but Beintein came out of a store-house with his weapons, well armed, and stood within the door with drawn sword, his shield before him, helmet on, and ready to defend himself. The door was somewhat low. Sigurd asked which of his lads had most desire to go in against Beintein, which he called brave man's work; but none was very hurried to make ready for it. While they were discussing this matter Sigurd rushed into the house, past Beintein. Beintein struck at him, but missed him. Sigurd turned instantly on Beintein; and after exchanging blows, Sigurd gave him his death-stroke, and came out presently bearing his head in his hands.

15. Saga of Hakon Herdebreid ("Hakon the Broad-Shouldered")

Ivar, Hakon Mage's son, laid his ship so that the stems struck together; and he got a boat-hook fastened on Gregorius, on that part of his body where the waist is smallest, and dragged him to him, by which Gregorius stumbled against the ship's rails; but the hook slipped to one side, or Gregorius would have been dragged over-board. Gregorius, however, was but little wounded, for he had on a plate coat of armour. Ivar called out to him, that he had a "thick bark."

A man of King Hakon's troop shot an arrow at Gregorius, which hit him under the throat, and thus ended his life.

They changed the watch with each other in the night, and those who had been before on watch lay down and slept; but all completely armed. It was their custom, when they went to sleep, that each should have his helmet on his head, his shield over him, sword under the head, and the right hand on the sword-handle.

16. Magnus Erlingson's Saga

In this tumult King Hakon received his death-wound. When his men knew he had fallen they rowed with all their might against the enemy, threw away their shields, slashed with both hands, and cared not for life. This heat and recklessness, however, proved soon a great loss to them; for Erling's men saw the unprotected parts of their bodies, and where their blows would have effect. The greater part of Hakon's men who remained fell here; and it was principally owing to the want of numbers, as they were not enough to defend themselves.

Erling himself was wounded in the left side; but some say he did it himself in drawing his sword.

Nikolas and his men defended themselves with bow-shot, hand-shot, and stones of the chimney; but the Birkebeins hewed down the houses, broke up the loft, and returned shot for shot from bow or hand. Nikolas had a red shield in which were gilt nails, and about it was a border of stars. The Birkebeins shot so that the arrows went in up to the arrow feather. Then said Nikolas, "My shield deceives me." Nikolas and a number of his people fell, and his death was greatly lamented. The Birkebeins gave all the towns-people their lives.

A man was sitting on a bench in the corner, and he was a Birkebein, but nobody had observed him; and when he saw and recognised his chief's body he sprang up suddenly and actively, rushed out upon the floor, and with an axe he had in his hands made a blow at King Magnus's neck between the shoulders. A man saw the axe swinging, and pulled the king to a side, by which the axe struck lower in the shoulder, and made a large wound. He then raised the axe again, and made a blow at Orm, the King-brother, who was lying on a bench, and the blow was directed at both legs; but Orm seeing the man about to kill him, drew in his feet instantly, threw them over his head, and the blow fell on the bench, in which the axe stuck fast; and then the blows at the Birkebein came so thick that he could scarcely fall to the ground.

The Historic Sources. The Sagas of Icelanders relate the stories of the people and families lived in Iceland during the settlement and the following centuries. For a variety of reasons, the stories can not be relied on as historical fact. Nevertheless, they are an unique resource, providing a window onto the culture and society of early Iceland.

Hauksbok

A portion of a leaf from Hauksbók, a medieval Icelandic manuscript. This excerpt is from chapter 5 of Eiríks saga rauða, in which Leifur Eiríksson is blown off course on his way to Greenland and ends up in Vínland

Sources for this Project. The sources used in creating this file include:

English translation: Viðar Hreinsson, ed.: The Complete Sagas of Icelanders. Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997.
Icelandic edition: Íslendinga sögur: Orðstöðulykill og texti. Mál og menning, 1998.
Other sources: Cleasby, Vigfusson, and Craigie: An Icelandic Dictionary. Oxford University Press, 1957.

In addition, various editions from the Íslenzk Fornrit series were consulted.

The Method Used to Create This File. I began by selecting key words relating to arms, armor, and combat (e.g., skjöldur and sverð) that are used in the sagas. The Icelandic edition on CD-ROM allows searches on words, finding every instance of the word in the sagas. For each instance of each key word in my list, the file reports saga title, page number, and a short excerpt from the original Icelandic, showing how the word is used in context in the original. In addition, an excerpt from the English translation is given, along with page and volume number.

Some key words were discarded from the list (e.g.,víg) because they resulted in too many false positives. In instances where key words have multiple means (e.g., skot, meaning both a missile, and a narrow passage in a house), only those instances referring to arms or combat were retained.

While I can't be certain that I captured every passage of interest in the sagas, I believe this approach captures the vast majority. Some interesting passages may not have been captured in the list because the Icelandic edition does not index words in certain contexts, such as words in verses, words in proper names, and a few words apparently inadvertently left out of the index.

The data are presented in the form of a pdf version of a spreadsheet file, which can be displayed and searched using Adobe® Reader® (available as a no-cost download).

Other resources used.