

the newsletter of Hurstwic

FALL, 2012

Hurstwic, LLC | P. O. Box 5, Southborough, MA 01772, USA | www.hurstwic.com | info1@hurstwic.com | www.hurstwic.org | ©2012 Hurstwic, LLC

Grappling as Taught in the Sagas

By Kevin Scott, Hurstwic student

The sagas and other evidence suggest that some Viking-age fights ended in grappling, in which a combatant might throw away his weapons and run in to get a grip, resulting in a broken back, a broken neck, or a take-down.

Viking-age people delighted in grappling as a sport, as well. Whenever men congregated, whether for feasting, for government assemblies, or for game festivals, grappling matches were a part of the activities.

An episode from *Grettis saga* gives an unusually clear description of a grappling match to the death between Grettir and Glámur. Grettir Ásmundarson was a fighter of immense strength. He often looked for ways to test his strength, and his uncle Jökull suggested he look in on the farm at Þórhallsstaðir in north Iceland to test himself against Glámur.



Glámur had been the shepherd at the farm, but after being killed by an evil spirit, he haunted the valley, killing the farmhands and the livestock, and riding the roof of the house. Viking-age people believed there were many kinds of supernatural creatures, some beneficial, and some harmful. Some dead people were not content to lie in their graves and instead haunted and harmed the people in the district. Glámur was one of these *afurgöngumaður*, the walking dead.

Grettir arrived at Þórhallsstaðir and was warmly welcomed by the grateful farmer. During the first night, nothing happened. On the second night, Grettir's horse was killed with every bone broken. On the third night, Grettir lay in wait in the hall of the house for the creature to appear. When Glámur entered the hall, Grettir could see the creature looked more like a troll than a man. Thinking Grettir was asleep, Glámur tried to rip Grettir's cloak from him, but Grettir sprang under Glámur's arms, gripped him about the waist, and bent his spine as hard as he could. In response Glámur gripped Grettir's arms so that he was forced to give up his grip.

The two wrestled so violently that the benches in the hall were splintered and broken. Glámur tried to make for the door, dragging Grettir with him. But Grettir knew he'd be at a disadvantage outside where Glámur had more room to fight. Grettir did all he could to keep Glámur inside the house. Glámur was now putting his full strength into dragging Grettir towards the door.

Grettir saw an opportunity. Instead of resisting, he launched himself at Glámur, pushing off on a rock buried in the ground at the doorway. Glámur tumbled backward through the door, landing on his

back with Grettir on top of him.

Then something unexpected happened. The clouds parted and moonlight lit up Glámur's evil eyes, causing Grettir's strength to leave him. Glámur cursed the man, saying that his ghostly eyes would always be in Grettir's sight, causing him to be afraid to be alone.

Grettir's strength returned. He drew his sax and cut off the ghost's head. The ghost was burned, and his ashes were buried far from any inhabited area where they could do no more harm. Grettir later said his strength had never been so thoroughly tested. But Glámur's curse caused Grettir to become afraid of the dark, because he saw phantoms wherever he looked.

Despite Grettir's unhappy fortune, his victory over Glámur can teach us much about Viking unarmed combat. In the fight, at least four moves were used that we practice in our training at Hurstwic. Grettir applied a firm bearhug in an effort to break his opponent's spine. Glámur broke the grip by reaching over Grettir's arms. Grettir used Glámur's strength against him by unexpectedly and forcefully going in the direction Glámur was pulling. And once Glámur was down, Grettir drew his weapon and gave him his deathblow.

It is with this emphasis on unexpected moves, seizing the opportunity, and outthinking your adversary that we routinely practice in our Viking combat practice at Hurstwic. Grappling is just one tool we practice, and many of these same approaches can be applied to other tools.



Evolution of the Sword in the Viking Age, part 1

By [Jeff Pringle](#), [Swordsmith](#)

The European sword underwent significant change during the Viking period, with improvements in shape and material that reflect advances in design and iron smelting technology as well as the changing role of the warrior in society.

The Migration/Vendel period swords were parallel-sided, pattern-welded and hilted very ornately in gold. At the dawn of the Viking age there was a shift to more utilitarian hilts made of iron with simple inlay decoration. By the end of that era, the blades had acquired more taper and were made from a single block of steel, with minimalist hilts of iron decorated with nonferrous overlay.

In this series of articles, we'll look at these changes and their significance.

Blade geometry

Swords are designed as a compromise of many factors: the maximum energy delivered in a cut balanced against speed; maneuverability; and the resistance of the material to bending or breaking. These factors are controlled through the specific shape of the blade and the material chosen for it, as well as the manner in which it is constructed.

The shape of a sword blade can be described in terms of the shape it has in profile and in thickness (called *distal taper*), and these combine to determine the mass distribution, center of gravity and the blade's harmonic qualities, which in turn determine the amount of force delivered in a blow and the maneuverability or speed at which a blow can be made or recovered from.

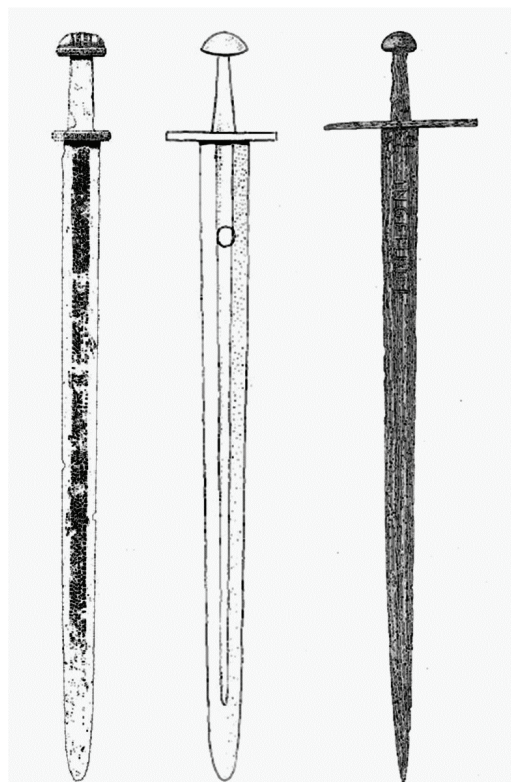
During the Viking period, the blade evolved from a parallel-sided shape whose mass distribution was primarily determined by the distal taper to a blade with both profile and distal taper, which resulted in a more effective sword. In the early Viking period, the sword maker's main option to adjust the center of gravity of the blade was to adjust the thickness of the blade, which does not allow much control over the mass distribution, especially when the need for the blade to resist bending and breaking was taken in to account.

By increasing the profile taper, the center of gravity of the blade can move closer to the hilt, which results in a much more maneuverable blade that delivers as much or more energy to the target in a faster, more efficient way. As a result, the swords can become longer and heavier compared to earlier swords without sacrificing speed. An additional benefit is that the narrower taper allows for a sharper point which is better at piercing mail, the common body armor worn to defend against swords in this period.

Hilt design

While the blades were evolving, the hilts were also changing into more simple, direct forms. The relatively expensive and fragile gold-encrusted hilts of the migration period were replaced by tougher iron hilts made of fewer pieces. These were decorated in ways that used smaller amounts of precious metal. Instead of gold, the use of silver, copper and brass became common. By the end of the era, metal components of the hilt were reduced to a one-piece pommel and a cross guard with simple shapes. Plain, undecorated iron became a common finish.

In the next installment, we'll look at how blade material and construction was changing along with these external features.



Comparison of (left to right) early, middle, and late Viking-age swords

Improvised Weapons

By [William R. Short](#), Hurstwic instructor

The sagas tell us that Viking-age fighters were clever and resourceful, using whatever tools they had available at the moment to succeed in their struggle. Their mindset was one of improvisation, rather than following a set of rules or patterns. Warriors often improvised weapons on the spot, even when excellent conventional weapons were at hand, if they thought those improvised weapons might give them an advantage in a fight.

An example of using an improvised weapon when conventional weapons were readily at hand is the battle at Örlygsstaðir (right), described in chapter 37 of *Eyrbyggja saga*. Arnkell goði was working with two slaves, loading hay onto a sled, when Snorri goði and a large band of men arrived to avenge an earlier killing. Arnkell sent his slaves to get help, and he ripped the runner off the sled and climbed up the haystack to face his attackers alone, protected by the high turf wall behind him.



Using the sled runner, Arnkell was able to break many of his opponents' spearshafts, while he remained unhurt. Eventually, the sled runner broke, so Arnkell took up his sword and shield, which were leaning against the haystack. These weapons were less effective against the armed men facing him. They crowded closer and eventually killed him.

Before the fight, Arnkell looked about him as his enemy approached, assessing the tools available. When he saw something that could be improvised into a weapon more effective than the weapons he carried, he leapt into action, and the improvised weapon worked well until its limits were exceeded and it failed.



Viking-age fighters also used improvised armor. *Vopnfríðinga saga* tells of Helgi Þorgilsson who, at the age of 12 years, prosecuted Svartur for a killing and had the man outlawed. When sheep started disappearing from the farm, Helgi suspected Svartur was responsible.

One night, Helgi left the farm carrying his axe and a shield, and traveled to the highlands where Svartur was hiding. Along the way, Helgi picked up a flagstone and bound it to his chest to create improvised armor. When Helgi met the outlaw, Svartur ran forward with his spear. The shield didn't stop the attack, but the stone armor did. Helgi struck out with his axe, cutting off Svartur's leg, and struck again to give Svartur his death blow.

Helgi looked at the tools available and found one more suitable, improvising an effective defense from the materials he had available to him.

Many other kinds of improvised weapons and improvised defenses are described in the sagas. We try to practice this kind of improvisation in our Viking combat practice at Hurstwic. One drill that we do is to strew the practice floor with stuff: weapons and weapon-like things that could be used as weapons, and then let people spar. In one variant, people are free to pick up weapons from the floor as they see fit, and in other cases, the instructor calls out that one student should immediately drop his weapon (because it has broken or worn out) and find something else to use without getting cut to bits by his sparring partner. The drill helps people learn to make the most of what is immediately available.



How Francia Shaped Frankish Combat

By Chris Paoella, Hurstwic student

In the Viking age, combat was highly individualized. Warriors were part of larger raiding parties or war bands, but each fighter sought to enhance his personal honor and fame through combat. While men were capable of cooperating and could recognize the need for such cooperation, generally each man fought in a much more singular capacity than during classical antiquity, when each warrior was closely tied to the greater whole.



This individualized nature of combat in the ninth and tenth centuries was not solely attributable to the Vikings. The nascent knightly class of Europe also fought for singular fame and glory, even though they themselves were often part of a larger force.

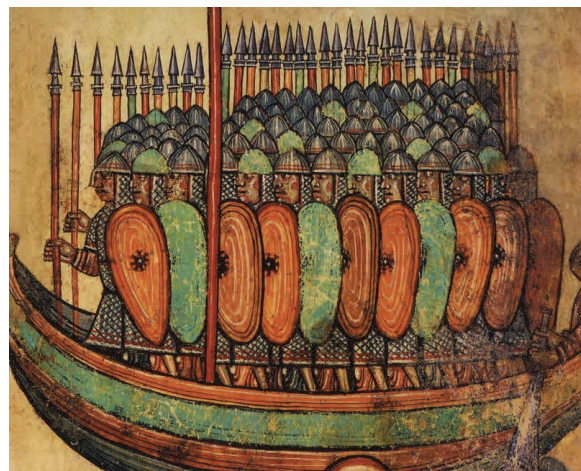
In Western Europe, the Franks and Vikings often met in combat, and the Frankish warriors, too, followed this approach to combat, an approach that was dictated by their environment.

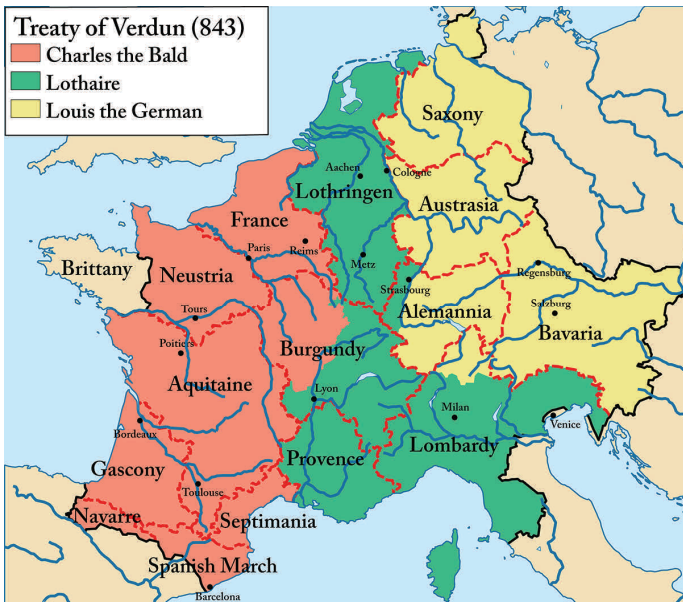
The Francia encountered by Viking raiders was covered by deep forests. The few networks of communication had deteriorated since the decay of Rome. Rivers contributed to the communications networks, but they

were of use only insofar as their courses took them. Once beyond the meandering waterways, the woods impeded travel.

After Rome, Gaul splintered into petty kingdoms under the Merovingians, and the infrastructure of Roman roads fell into disrepair. With the withering of central authority it became impossible to coordinate maintenance of the road networks or to police them.

This lack of coordination had grave consequences for the Franks, whom the Vikings constantly raided. News of impending attacks was slow and intermittent,





because travel and therefore communication was slow, unreliable and perilous. The roads that remained passable were easy targets for brigands, and these remaining arteries became treacherous. The breakdown of security and the transportation network caused the focus of local communities to turn inwards, concentrating on self-sufficiency as much as possible.

Extreme localism was the rule of the day. People tended to regard themselves as locals first; neighboring villages were considered outsiders and therefore fair game for ransacking petty lords.

The difficulty in communication had other implications as well. Organizing large scale armies was impractical. Not only was there the difficulty of spreading word of the muster, but the ability to provide for a large army was a logistical nightmare. Since the roads were in poor condition, bringing in the necessary food and equipment posed considerable problems. Even if an army could be raised, such large scale pitched battles were extremely risky ventures. Battles were chaotic events, and no amount of planning could ensure victory.

The lack of trained, disciplined soldiers harkening back to the days of the Roman legions added to the chaos. Few lords were willing to gamble such a concentration of blood and materiel on the whims of fortune.

This is not to say pitched battles never occurred, rather they were simply very rare.

Consciously or not, the individualism of a warrior on the battlefield was a microcosm of the isolation of individual communities in Francia at the time of the Viking raids. Large-scale armies of trained, disciplined troops capable of executing complex military maneuvers were a thing of the past. Instead, small skirmishes became the norm. They were easier to muster, easier to maintain and easier to maneuver in the dense woods of Francia.

While smaller bands meant smaller engagements, these skirmishes were no less violent. With personal honor and fame at stake, the desire to display valor in the face of the enemy became a driving motivation for tremendous feats of arms and also extreme brutality.

Viking combat was similar to the combat practiced by their opponents and for good reason. It was fast, efficient and easy to organize and maintain in the field. So while the environment helped guide the fighting approach of the Franks and other opponents of the Vikings, the Viking quasi-religious beliefs in fate, luck, and predetermination drove Vikings to seek ways to enhance their own reputation and honor in battle.

In the Footsteps of Hrafnkell Freysgoði

By Michelle Lynn Mielnik

Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða has been called one of the finest short novels ever written in any language. It tells the story of Hrafnkell, a domineering and overbearing *goði* (chieftain) who lived at Aðalból in Hrafnkelsdalur (right) in east Iceland.

Sámur, a weak and powerless man, prepared a case against Hrafnkell in response to a killing and, with the unexpected help of powerful chieftains from the west, had Hrafnkell outlawed. Hrafnkell ignored the judgment, expecting Sámur to be powerless to enforce it, but Sámur and his allies from the west captured Hrafnkell and banished him from the district.



Hrafnkell moved away and re-established himself, having modified his behavior as a result of his humiliating and painful lesson. Sámur, on the other hand, took over Hrafnkell's farm, his chieftaincy, and many of Hrafnkell's bad ways. Sámur clearly was unsuited for the role of *goði*, having failed to carry his vengeance to its completion, and having failed to prepare adequately for possible retaliation.

Years later, Hrafnkell made good his revenge, first by attacking and killing Sámur's brother who had been overseas and uninvolved with any of these activities, and then by attacking Sámur and driving him out of Aðalból. Re-established in his old home, Hrafnkell became a moderate and more well-balanced *goði*, while Sámur, powerless once again, was thoroughly dissatisfied with his new situation.

The sagas are an important source of information in our study of Viking-age combat. The sagas teach us the norms and mores of Viking-age society. While the saga material has been filtered by the Christian authors, we



prepared adequately for possible retaliation.

Years later, Hrafnkell made good his revenge, first by attacking and killing Sámur's brother who had been overseas and uninvolved with any of these activities, and then by attacking Sámur and driving him out of Aðalból. Re-established in his old home, Hrafnkell became a moderate and more well-balanced *goði*, while Sámur, powerless once again, was thoroughly dissatisfied with his new situation.

The sagas are an important source of information in our study of Viking-age combat. The sagas teach us the norms and mores of Viking-age society. While the saga material has been filtered by the Christian authors, we



believe a large dose of Viking-age societal norms remains. The saga is clear that Hrafnkell's overbearing and unjust behavior was not the behavior of a *drengur*, of an honorable man in Viking society. After Sámur took him down a few notches, Hrafnkell changed his ways and took on more of the behaviors and attributes expected of a *goði*. This kind of material and insight into the expected behavior of honorable men and women in the Viking age guides us in our study and practice of Viking-age combat.



Each year, saga-age life is remembered at Hrafnkelsdagur, a celebration of the people and events of the saga. The event includes guided visits to many of the saga sites, as well as events at Aðalból, including games, sports (*above*), handicrafts, stories, lectures, theater (*left*), and food and drink.



For those who would like to walk in Hrafnkell's footsteps on their own, [Hrafnkelssögufélagið](#) has published a [descriptive book](#) containing both the saga text and travel information. Additionally the group has created apps for both [Apple](#) and [Android](#) mobile products to assist a traveler seeking to explore the saga sites.

Hurstwic Viking Combat Training DVD Volumes 2 and 3

By William R. Short, Hurstwic instructor

Shooting has begun for the next two volumes in the series of Hurstwic [Viking combat training DVDs](#). While in Iceland recently, we shot the opening and closing chapter for each DVD at [Eiríksstaðir](#), the reconstructed Viking-age longhouse of Eiríkur raudi (Eirik the red). The sagas tell us that Eiríkur was not reluctant to use his weapons, and so his home seemed like a good place to discuss Viking combat.

The house was built a short distance from the ruins of Eiríkur's 10th century [turfhouse](#) and duplicates the layout and furnishings of a Viking-age longhouse. Eiríkur lived only a short time here. Disputes with neighbors led to killings, resulting in Eiríkur's being banished from the district. He later settled Greenland. While in this house, it is likely that his son Leifur Eiríksson was born, who explored [Vínland](#) (North America).

We expect to shoot the remainder of the material for the new DVDs in our practice room late in 2012. We hope that the two new DVDs will be available early in 2013.



In volume 2, we'll continue the training approach begun in volume 1. We'll revisit some of the same fundamentals and build on them with more advanced drills and more advanced sparring situations. There is new material, too, such as drills and training with projectile weapons. Vikings threw spears, axes, knives, shields, and improvised weapons, such as rocks, and these moves should be a part of your training, as well. We'll also introduce you to the mindset of the Viking warrior, which will help you understand how warriors approached a fight and how they chose their moves, an understanding you can apply to your training.

Volume 3 is planned to be something different. Rather than focusing on martial training, we will show you some specific fighting moves described in the sagas. For each move, we'll discuss the move in the context of the saga and then demonstrate the move at speed. Then, we'll go to the practice room and show how the move is performed, step by step. For those who wish to practice the fighting moves of the Vikings, this material can be added to your training and your sparring. For those interested in Viking culture and history, this material will provide a fascinating look into the mind and the world of the Norsemen.

Look for the latest news and developments about these DVDs on Hurstwic's [Facebook site](#) or on the [Hurstwic website](#).

