

the newsletter of Hurstwic

SPRING, 2012

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Welcome, Guest!

We welcome you to the first number of Hurstwic's newsletter. We plan to publish short, informative articles that focus on Hurstwic's research in Viking-age weapons and their use as revealed by the *Sagas of Icelanders* and other sources. We hope the articles will be useful and interesting to anyone curious about the Viking age. And we hope to be able to provide information not readily found in other sources. We welcome your [comments and suggestions](#).

We are Hurstwic!

We are an [informal group](#) of people with an interest in the Viking age. We are a [registered firm](#) that provides goods and services related to the research and practice of Viking-age combat embodied in the Hurstwic Viking combat training system.



Among us, we have a range of interests and expertise in Viking-age history, mythology, religion, culture, and society. Our interest in Viking-age sagas and poems, combined with our interest in Viking-age weapons and their use that has led us to create an innovative program of research and training in Viking-age combat using a new training methodology that allows us to practice the fighting moves of the people of the sagas.

We are not re-enactors. We are not stage performers. We are not a sports team. Instead, we seek to understand and practice the fighting moves used by Viking-age warriors as seen in the historical sources, such as the *Sagas of Icelanders*, and confirmed in sources such as archaeological evidence and forensic evidence.



In our training and classes, we use the [Hurstwic training system](#), a new approach to teaching historical martial arts. We use a series of drills and exercise to teach martial fundamentals to novices, and then use expanded versions of these exercises to research and build our knowledge of Viking fighting moves. The work is physically vigorous, mentally challenging, educational, and fun.

If you think you might have an interest in practicing these arts, please join us. From time to time, we offer informal workshops and more formal classes. In addition, we hold regular training sessions three times weekly at our home base in central Massachusetts.



If you are too far from us to join our regular training, please consider using the Hurstwic Viking combat training system with your own club, school, or group by becoming an [affiliate of Hurstwic](#). If you have no club or school, please consider starting one, using the Hurstwic system as the basis for your training. Alternatively, we can bring a training workshop to your site, as we

have done for groups in North America and in Iceland in recent years.

For more information about Hurstwic Viking combat training, please visit our website: <http://www.hurstwic.com/>

For more information about our other Viking activities, please visit us at: <http://www.hurstwic.org/>



The tools of a Viking sword

By William R. Short, Hurstwic instructor

"Tool" is the word used to describe the parts of a weapon that might be used in battle. Not surprisingly, almost every part of the weapon has a martial use. The typical double-edged [Viking sword](#) has many tools.



The obvious tool is the "long edge". The two edges of the sword are nominally identical, but are used in different ways. The long edge, the forward edge in line with the warrior's knuckles, allows for powerful attacks (left), as described in the sagas and seen in forensic evidence in the skulls from the Viking-age.

The "short edge", the back edge, may have been used as well (right). Attacks with the short edge are much weaker, but because of the "angulation" of the blade, they allow a warrior to reach around and



attack behind or over a shield, or to the back of an opponent. Forensic evidence shows that most of the battle injuries to the legs in Viking-age skeletal remains are consistent with short-edge attacks.



Yet, our recent [cutting tests](#) suggest that short edge attacks are much weaker than we imagined; so weak that they had little apparent effect on the carcass. So, our research continues.



The sagas tell us that the pommel was used for punching attacks when the goal was to humiliate the opponent, rather than injure him. Jökull knocked Bergur to the ground with his pommel using a blow between the shoulders in chapter 32 of *Vatnsdæla saga*.

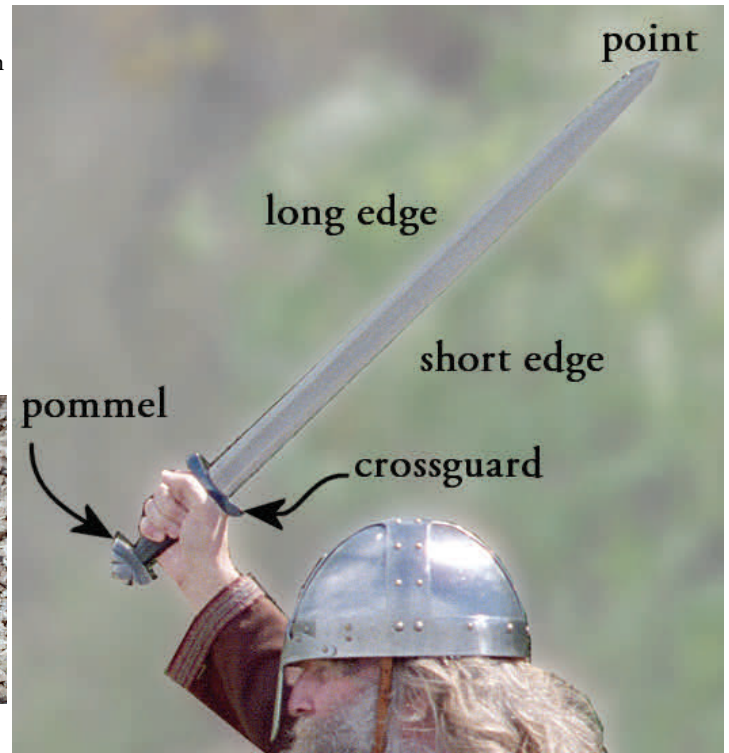


Regardless, it seems likely that a strike with the pommel could cause serious injury. Likewise, the flat of the blade may have been used for non-lethal attacks, although the only examples in the sagas are hits with the flat to inanimate objects, such as a door.

The point was used for thrusting attacks. Some historical Viking-age swords have rather rounded points, yet even these can be used to make devastating attacks.

In swords from later periods, when crossguards were much longer, the guard was used for trapping blades, for striking an opponent, and for wrenching limbs. Those sorts of moves seem unlikely with a Viking sword, which had a short guard.

Viking-age warriors were clever and aggressive, and it seems likely they took advantage of every tool of their weapon when fighting.



Thor

By Kevin Scott, Hurstwic student

Everyone who knows anything about Vikings knows who [Thor](#) (Þór) is, and they know he's not the blond, beardless man depicted in movies and comics. The myths and poems tell us he is red-haired and bearded, strong, and easy to anger. He is the powerful protector of gods and of men. At Hurstwic, we use the stories of Thor as one of the research tools for researching Viking combative methods, and what we learn from these stories influences our training. The battle between Thor and the giant named [Hrungnir](#) teaches us about the fighting approach of the Vikings.

Hrungnir challenged Thor to a duel. At the dueling site, Thor's servant and battle companion, Thjalfi (Þjálfi), tricked Hrungnir into thinking that Thor was planning an attack from below, so the giant put his shield beneath him and stood on it. Thor hurled his hammer Mjöllnir at the giant, who counter-attacked by hurling his own weapon—a huge whetstone—at Thor. The whetstone hit the hammer and shattered. A piece of the whetstone lodged itself in Thor's head, but Mjöllnir flew true to Hrungnir's head and crushed the giant's skull.

Even though Thor was a God of nearly unparalleled strength, tactics were very important to his success in battle. Thor feinted low while attacking high, a tactic we use in our sparring. Additionally, Thor often uses his hammer as a projectile, as he did against Hrungnir. We see the same kind of move used in the sagas. Many things were used as projectiles with lethal results including stones found on the ground, spears, axes, and even swords. Thor, like other Viking-age fighters, did whatever needed to be done when it was needed in order to win the fight. Likewise, we train to use weapons as projectiles, both in isolation training and sometimes in our research sparring.

Thor's approach to a battle is also seen in the story that tells of how Thor recovered his hammer after it had been stolen by [Thyrm](#)



(Þrymr), another giant. Þrymr demanded the hand in marriage of the goddess Freyja in exchange for returning the hammer. Thor dressed in a bridal gown and took Freyja's place in order to recover his hammer, and the lost honor caused by its theft. This cross-dressing was extremely dishonorable and distasteful, but Thor did what was necessary, regardless of the cost, to regain his lost honor. Thor repaid Þrymr by crushing his skull with the hammer, along with the skulls of the other wedding guests.



Thor's hammer is short in the handle, which resulted when Loki, the trickster god, tormented the dwarves [Eitri and Brokk](#) as they forged the hammer, which Loki did so he wouldn't lose a bet. Regardless of its deficiencies, Thor wielded the hammer effectively in battle, taking advantage of its strengths. And Viking-age fighters did the same, using what was available in their fight. They used their shield for hitting, and stones for throwing. They picked up and used improvised weapons ranging from whale bones to clothes beaters



to sled runners. In our combat training, we practice these same improvisational skills in sparring (left), which makes our training intense, surprising, and fun.

Another story that illustrates the fighting approach of Thor takes place in the hall of [Utgard-Loki](#) (Utgardaloki), yet another giant. In the hall, Thor and his travelling companions were invited to demonstrate their skills for the entertainment of the assembled giants, who taunted the travelers for their weak and puny efforts. Thor, angered, asked for someone to step forward to wrestle with him. The giants brought forth Elli, an old woman who was Utgard-Loki's nurse maid as an infant. Elli forced Thor to his knees.

It seems that Vikings were well versed in armed combat and empty-hand combat, as well. Thor was a skilled grappler, but the giants were trick-

ing the travelers. None of their matches were what they seemed. No one can withstand Elli (which means "old age"). Thor, a powerful god armed with a powerful hammer, was skilled in wrestling. We who are not gods, likewise, research and practice our grappling skills. In the combative lab, we try out wrestling combined with armed combat, a combination that often appears in the sagas.

Thor, like his fighting style, is simple, direct, clever, and aggressive. Although he may be slow-witted at times, he fights with his head as well as with his body. This is the approach we take in our combat training at Hurstwic.



The Franks and the Vikings

By Chris Paoella, Hurstwic student

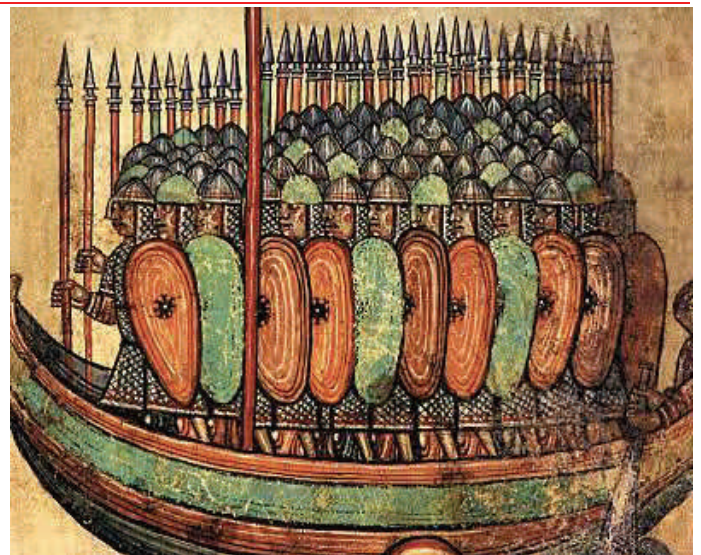
Charles, the leader of the Franks in the 8th century, is reported to have stood at his window crying, as he watched the Viking ships sail away. "I have no fear of these worthless rascals doing any harm to me; but I am sad at heart to know that even during my lifetime they have dared to touch this shore; and I am torn by a great sorrow because I foresee what evil things they will do to my descendants and their subjects."

Charles' fears were well-founded. Vikings, primarily from Denmark, successfully raided Frankish lands (in what is now France and the Low Countries) repeatedly during the Viking age.

Yet the Frankish people and the Viking people would seem to would seem to be evenly matched. They used very similar weapons. Neither were professional soldiers. Charlemagne even had coastal fortifications built to resist the Vikings. Why then, were the Vikings so successful against the Franks?

It seems the Vikings pitted their greatest strength against the Franks' greatest weakness; that is speed versus organization. It takes strong central authority to maintain an organized network of defense, and that authority was lacking with the death of Louis the Pious in 840 and the later division of the empire. Despite the network of fortifications and the armed peasant levies raised by local rulers, Charlemagne's defenses were ill suited to deal effectively with lightning-fast small scale raids along the coast. News spread slowly in Carolingian Gaul. The Roman system of roads fell into disrepair, so travel was slow and perilous. Likewise, communication was slow and unreliable. By the time the locals learned a Viking raid was imminent, it was already too late to raise an effective defense.

Future articles in this series will look more deeply into the relationship between the Franks and the Vikings during the Viking age.

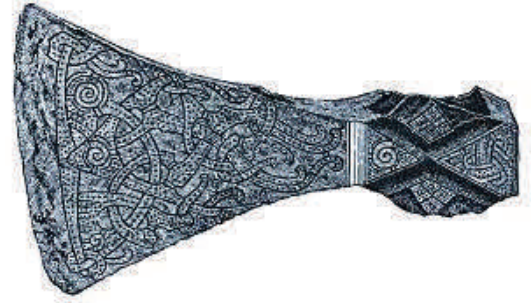


Marking Your Weapon

By Mike Cicale, Hurstwic student

So, bold warrior—you've just received a new weapon. How are you going to mark it as your own? Some modern reproductions of Viking-age weapons are adorned with runes: inlaid silver in the blade, or the owner's name carved into the wood. But how were weapons marked in the Viking age?

Sigrdrifumál, a poem in the *Poetic Edda* teaches engraving [runes](#) on swords for magical protection. The Tyr rune, mentioned in *Sigrdrifumál*, is called a *Victory-rune* and should be carved into three places on the sword. While intricate decorations are found on many historical crossguards, pommels, and axe-heads of the period (for example, the [Mammen axehead](#), right), few runic inscriptions are found on weapons. One of the few is the 9th century sax of Beagnoth (above) found in the River Thames. The Vikings used runes for everything from graffiti to monuments, but the archaeological evidence for runic inscriptions on weapons is slight.



Some Viking-age sword blades are marked with the [maker's name](#), typically with pattern-welded iron wire inlaid into the blade. Ulfberht (left) or Ingerlrii are common marks. There are so many swords marked Ulfberht, for example, that they cannot all be from the hand of one smith. More likely, they represent the output of a blade-making workshop that produced blades for generations. Additionally, it now seems likely that at least some of the Ulfberht blades are counterfeits: inferior blades made during the Viking age but marked as Ulfberht to fool the unwary.

So what might be appropriate for a modern reproduction weapon? Runes for victory as taught by *Sigrdrifumál* are one possibility. Another plausible inscription is the name of the owner, or the name of the weapon. Most Viking-age weapons were named. Bolli Bollason carried his father's sword, *Fótbítir* (Leg-biter) and used it to avenge his father's death. Other sword names that show up in the sagas include: *Grásíða* (Gray-sides), borrowed from a slave, broken in a duel, and then refashioned into a spear; *Jarlsnautr*, (Gift of the earl); *Brynubítir* (Mail-biter), a sword apparently accomplished at biting through mail; *Skrymr* (Boaster); *Dragvandill* (Draw-wand, as in a wand for slicing); *Langr* (Long); *Hvítingr* (the White One), where "white" often meant shining; *Nadr* (Viper); *Fjörsváfnir* (Life-taker); *Gunnlogi* (Battle-flame).

Viking-age people prized decorated objects, and their weapons were no exception. We find beautifully decorated weapons from the Viking age, and blades marked with the maker's name. But we find few other markings. Thus, the modern warrior is free to speculate.



So, bold Viking, mark your new weapon with what you want from it. Mark it to tell people that you own it and control it. Mark it to hail the gods and gain their help in the combat ahead. Mark it to show you believe in your own power and might (*trúa á mátt sinn og megin*). Mark it to warn your enemies of the weapon's power and characteristics in battle (leg-biter, mail-biter) and inspire fear. Mark it to please yourself.



Death and the Viking Warrior

By Ryan Coffmann, Hurstwic student

Gísla saga tells the story of Gísli Súrsson, a courageous fighter who was forced into outlawry. He often dreamed vivid dreams, and he told of his dreams in verse. Near the end of his life, his dreams foretold of his death:

I dreamed a dream of her,
Goddess of riches,
She washed my hair in foam of Odin's fires
Spilled from the well of swords.
And it seemed to me that
the bearer of hand-flame
Was blood-red from the wound-blizzard
Of the fire-breaker of wrists.

The verse expressed the view of Viking-age people that death was inevitable. They believed that the time of a man's death was determined at the moment of his birth by the three [Norns](#) (*Nornar*), the women of destiny who lived under the world-tree Yggdrasil.



This predestination meant that nothing could save a man destined to die, but nothing could stop a man whose time had not yet come. This view is expressed many times in the sagas, but nowhere more clearly than in *Sverris saga*. It takes the form of a parable told by King Sverrir to his fighting men before a battle.

A farmer accompanied his son to the warships and gave him counsel, telling him to be valiant and hardy in perils. "How would you act if you were engaged in battle and knew beforehand that you were destined to be killed?"

The son answered, "Why then should I refrain 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 then should I refrain from pushing forward to the utmost?"

The farmer said, "In every battle you fight, 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."



This belief caused Viking-age people to be bold and adventuresome. There was nothing to lose and everything to gain by being bold, since as is said in *Heiðarviga saga*, there is truth in the old saying that there's no slaying of a man destined to live.

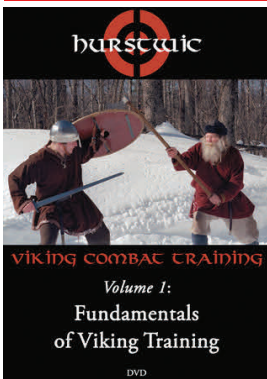
This view influences our research and practice of Viking-age fighting at Hurstwic. For moral, legal, and other reasons, we are not fighting to the death. For one thing, we'd be left with very few students with whom we could train. But we try to spar very, very hard from time to time, making the hits quite painful. We try bold and daring moves, knowing there is the risk of a painful hit if the move doesn't work. Sometimes, your time has come to receive the hit, but sometimes, it has not. In either case, we continue swinging our weapons and making attacks until the round ends. We don't use a point system. We don't stop and simulate death after a good



hit. [Forensic studies](#) of Viking-age fighters show that they didn't stop fighting after a hit, either. You don't know when it is your time to die, so you continue the fight until your fated time.



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Hurstwic Viking Combat Training Volume 1

Learn the fighting moves taught in the sagas and practiced by Hurstwic using the [new DVD](#), *Fundamentals of Viking Training*. We show you the tools, the drills, and the exercises we use in our research and practice of Viking-age combat. The DVD begins with an introduction to Viking history and culture, and then moves to the practice room where we demonstrate and teach you the fundamentals of Viking fighting. We finish with sparring, the true test of how well these fighting moves work.

The DVD is divided into 11 chapters and runs for 75 minutes. It is now available both in a domestic NTSC version and in an international PAL version. A [video preview](#) is available on YouTube. Order the DVD directly from [Hurstwic](#), or from [Amazon](#) and other vendors.

Whether you are a beginner, or an experienced fighter, this DVD can help you grow to become a stronger Viking fighter. Join us in our practice of Viking-age fighting moves.

