



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

**Góð vopn á sjó og landi: An examination of the *atgeirr* and *kesja* in
Old Norse literature and Scandinavian archaeology**

Ritgerð til MA-prófs í 2014

K. James McMullen

May, 2014

Háskoli Íslands
Íslensku- og menningardeild
Medieval Icelandic Studies

**Góð vopn á sjó og landi: An examination of the *atgeirr* and *kesja* in
Old Norse literature and Scandinavian archaeology**

Ritgerð til MA-prófs í Íslensku- og menningardeild

K. James McMullen

Kt.: 251082-3599

Leiðbeinandi: Helgi Þorláksson

May, 2014

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	1
Note on translations	2
Introduction	3
Chapter 1: The <i>atgeirr</i>	14
Chapter 2: The <i>kesja</i>	32
Appendix of Images	46
Bibliography	57

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the support and assistance of a great number of individuals in the Arnarnagneyan Institute and Háskóli Íslands, as well as my fellow students, friends, and family.

My undergraduate Honours advisers at Brock University, Angus Somerville and Andrew McDonald, deserve credit for introducing me to Old Norse and suggesting I apply for the Medieval Icelandic Studies MA in the first place. The head of the Medieval Icelandic Studies program for my intake year, Torfi Tulinius, also deserves a great deal of thanks; not only for organizing the program, but for also providing invaluable assistance insofar as actually getting to Iceland was concerned. My adviser, Helgi Þorláksson, has provided invaluable support and guidance with this thesis, and deserves a great deal of thanks as well, as does Haraldur Bernharðsson, whose advice on the etymology of weapon-words proved to be more fertile than he'd likely expected.

I would like to give my thanks to my fellow students in the MIS program, particularly Ryder, David, and Paul, without whom this thesis would not have even begun, as well as Magda for her assistance with my translation from German. My editors, Sofie and Luke, whose tireless pointing out of grammatical and logical failures has been invaluable, deserve a great deal of thanks.

Finally, my parents, Josie and Terry, and my dear friends Hannah, Katy, Molly, Renée, and Richard, deserve more thanks than I am capable of giving. Without their love and support I would not have been able to finish this thesis. This one's for you, guys.

A Note on Translations

Unless otherwise noted, all texts in Old Norse and German have been translated from the original by me. Any normalization of Old Norse texts from diplomatic editions will be located in a footnote.

Introduction

The *atgeirr* and *kesja* are weapons used in memorable scenes in both Brennu-Njáls saga and Egils saga but, despite the prominent roles held by *atgeirar* and *kesjur* in Old Norse texts,¹ there has been relatively little research into identifying these weapons in the archaeological record.² Falk's work has been used by a number of editors, particularly Einar Ólafur Sveinsson and Ludwig Holm-Olsen, in clarifying their editions, though Falk does have certain shortcomings, particularly in terms of examining skaldic verse. Beyond their roles in the defining scenes of their sagas, the *atgeirr* and *kesja* possess unique characteristics which set them apart from the common *geirar* or *spjót*.³

Atgeirar and *kesjur* are used by a number of saga characters of differing social classes, from slaves and farmers to merchants and warriors, a fact which separates them from other weapons mentioned in the family sagas. These weapons, too, occupy a special niche in the realm of Old Norse weapons, in that they are part of a specific group of weapons – including *fleinn*, *gaflak*, and *málaspjót*, among others – which are distinct from more commonly found *geirar* and *spjót*, yet would still be considered spears. Despite the specialized terminology used, a number of editors are content to rely upon less precise terms when translating the words, despite the fact that they may be more familiar to the audience. There is undoubtedly a significance to these weapons based on the existence of their specialized names. They are, without any doubt, spears – a fact attested to in their physical descriptions in Old Norse and the descriptions of their use – but rather than simply be referred to as a *spjót* or *geirr*, they are given these specific names. It is my contention that the existence of these words within the Old Norse lexicon indicates the existence of a general typological category of spear which could be described as *atgeirar* or *kesjur*, though likely not specific 'brands' of spear, as may be inferred by the presence of 'branded' swords between the 9th and 12th centuries in Scandinavia.⁴ This specificity of terminology is all too often overlooked by

1 In addition to Gunnar's *atgeirr* in Brennu-Njáls saga it is stated in Konungs skuggsjá, Holm-Olsen p. XX, that *atgeirar* are weapons which are uniquely suited to certain environments, while *kesjur* occur in kings sagas and family sagas which involve military adventures, especially in continental Europe.

2 There are a number of excellent typologies of spears from a wide variety of archaeological sources, but none have attempted to identify the *atgeirr* or *kesja* as specific types or sub-types of spearheads. Falk's work has been used by a number of editors, particularly Einar Ólafur Sveinsson and Ludwig Holm-Olsen, in clarifying their editions, though Falk does have shortcomings, as will be discussed further.

3 The distinction between *atgeirar* and *geirar*, as well as between *kesjur* and *spjót* will be discussed in their respective sections

4 The name of a particular weapon-making 'brand,' akin to the '+ULFBERH+T' and 'INGELRI' families of swords of the 9th-12th centuries, for example. See Peirce, pp. 7-9, and Oakeshott, pp. 141-149 for brief discussions of the prevalence of 'factory-named' blades in Scandinavia, and the implications thereof.

English-language translations, the editors of which often prefer to stick with traditional glosses,⁵ such as those found in Geir Zöega,⁶ Sigfús Blöndal,⁷ Árne Böðvarsson and Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon,⁸ and Cleasby-Vigfusson.⁹ The English glosses, using terms such as 'halberd' or 'bill' for *atgeir* and *kesja* are anachronistic and foreign insertions, while in Icelandic both *atgeirar* and *kesjur* are referred to as *höggspjót*. In only one case, that of Sigfús Blöndal's translation of *kesja* into Danish, does this pattern deviate, with Sigfús referring to the *kesja* as “[en Slags] Lanse.”¹⁰

The difficulty with maintaining the trend in English-language translations to refer to *atgeirar* and *kesjur* as halberds or bills stems first from the fact that the translated weapons are both anachronistic and culturally out of place for the periods in which the sagas are set. Halberds do not begin appearing in Northern European visual sources until the late 13th century,¹¹ and then they are less akin to their later combination spear/axe form and appears to be more closely related to large 'Dane-axes.'¹² Neither do bills, nor any objects resembling them, appear within the catalogue of artefacts provided by Rygh.¹³ Beyond the chronological and cultural disconnects inherent in referring to the *atgeirr* and *kesja* as a bill or halberd, there are also linguistic indicators built into the names of the weapons in Old Norse which suggest that they are not related to the halberd or bill. The convention of using the term 'halberd' or 'bill' to describe any shafted weapon not immediately identified as *spjót* or possessing a suffixed declension of 'óxi' as a halberd or bill has its genesis with DaSent and Green's translations of *Brennu-Njáls saga* and *Egils saga*, and has been promoted by the use of the term in works by Oakeshott, Reinhardt, and other modern scholars of the archaeology of weapons.¹⁴ There is also the inclination in archaeological publications to term any hafted or shafted weapon with a hybridized blade optimized for slashing a 'halberd,'¹⁵ which does

5 For examples of translations of *atgeirr*, see DaSent's translation *The story of Burnt Njal: From the Icelandic of the Njáls Saga*, where *atgeirr* is rendered as bill, and Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson's 1960 translation in *The Icelandic Sagas*, where it is rendered as halberd. For examples of the translation of *kesja*, see Green's 1893 translation *The Story of Egils Skallagrimsson*, where even the word *skeggǫxi* is translated as halberd, Pálsson and Paul Edwards translate *kesja* as thrusting-spear in their 1997 translation of *Egils saga*.

6 Zöega, pp. 23, 239

7 Sigfús, p. 47

8 Árne, pp. 42, 491

9 Cleasby-Vigfusson, pp. 30, 337

10 Sigfús, p. 426

11 See Image 1 in Appendix of Images

12 While these weapons could be considered proto-halberds, they lack the dedicated thrusting points of halberds and referring to them as any sort of *geirr* would certainly be an odd choice.

13 See Rygh, objs. 142-732 The objects surveyed run the gamut from household goods and jewellery to weaponry and shield bosses; none of the weapons or household implements bear any resemblance to the thick-bladed bills represented in Image 4 in the Appendix of Images

14 Reinhardt conflates an inverted planing-axe of the Wheeler II type with the *atgeirr* - see "Reinhardt collection" (website.) Oakeshott simply refers to it as "a kind of halberd" - see Oakeshott, p. 119

15 See, for example, Grancsay, pp. 183-185, for a description of a hybrid axe/dagger head which has been termed a halberd.

little to address the confusion generated by imperfect use of the word.

Current scholarship on *atgeirar* and *kesjur*

There is a relative lack of secondary source examination on *kesjur* and *atgeirar*, especially when compared to the exhaustive amount of research which has been made on swords during the viking age.¹⁶ This lack is particularly notable considering their prominence in what is arguably the most popular of the Íslendingasögur, in the case of the *atgeirr*, and the relative ubiquity of *kesjur* in sagas detailing military matters. The current state of scholarship on the *atgeirr* and *kesja* is limited in scope, with few authors taking on the task of identifying these weapons within the archaeological record.

The major source of scholarship regarding these spears can found within the relevant sections of Hjalmar Falk's Altnordische Waffenkunde, which discusses appearances of both the *atgeirr* the *kesja* within the Old Icelandic literary corpus; Oluf Rygh's Norske oldsager, ordnede og forklarede, which contains information regarding Norwegian finds of spearheads and other grave-goods in Norwegian contexts, the importance of which is discussed in the following section; and Signe Horn Fuglesang's Some Aspects of the Ringerike Style, which discusses lugged or winged spears, whose relation to the *atgeirr* will become evident in the relevant chapter. Jan Petersen's De Norske Vikingesverd: En Typologisk-Kronologisk Studie Over Vikingetidens Vaaben also provides a typology of various spearheads within the Norwegian context, and serves as a basis for all future typologies, including Thålin-Bergman's streamlined typology in En ångermanländsk spjutspets, which shifts the focus from physical form to the archeological age of the artefacts themselves.

The work by Thålin-Bergman¹⁷ provides an excellent method of streamlining the options for identification of spears within a particular chronological context, and challenges Petersen's typology by moving the focus of the typology from the physical appearance to the characteristics of the weapons creation. The focus on the construction of the weapon itself, rather than its physical form, is perhaps more practical, as the general form of a spearhead does not change overmuch, as

¹⁶ See, for example, Peirce and Oakeshott, Oakeshott, and Loades.

¹⁷ See Fuglesang, p. 137, for a brief overview of Thålin-Bergman's typology and how they apply to Petersen's original typology.

Oakeshott points out,¹⁸ but with the improvement of technical resources and skills, the construction methods change considerably.

Falk makes detailed assessments of the capabilities and usage of both weapons in Altnordische Waffenkunde,¹⁹ and his discussion of the method of its use provides scholars of weapons archaeology with important details, specifically as to the shape of the blades of the weapons in question. Despite this, the conclusions which he draws are not always commensurate with the total evidence available to scholars; his spare use of pictorial sources,²⁰ lack of reference to skaldic verse, and lack of use of all the saga material available causes the conclusions which he draws on both the *atgeirr* and *kesja* to be in need of revision. His assessment of *atgeirar* is based primarily on Njáls saga, with brief mentions of Laxdæla saga and Konungs skuggsjá, as well as some *fornaldarsögur*.²¹ This is understandable, given the relative rarity of mentions of *atgeirar* within Old Norse texts which do not deal explicitly with legendary material.²² The paucity of *atgeirar* references in non-legendary material is troubling when attempting to determine the existence of the weapon as anything other than a fantastical object, especially as in its most prominent appearance it possesses minor magical powers. The mention of *atgeirar* in both Konungs skuggsjá and Landnámabók,²³ however, suggest that the weapon was known to Scandinavians prior to the late 13th and early 14th centuries,²⁴ and that it was common in particular contexts. This, coupled with the prevalence of *atgeirar* in the hands of Norwegians implies a connection with Norway which Falk does not, unfortunately, examine further, though it is understandable given the scope of his work.

Falk's assessment of the *atgeirr* concludes that it was a relatively heavy weapon, intended mainly for thrusting,²⁵ but does not make any sort of suggestion as to the form of the blade or other identifying characteristics, such as adornments to the sockets or blade shoulders. His sole suggestion as to what the spearhead's form could take is that the *fjoðr*, or blade, must have been

18 Oakeshott, p. 60

19 Falk, pp. 82-83

20 In fact, he uses none when describing the *atgeirr* or *kesja*.

21 Falk, p. 83,

22 Of 45 references in the Old Norse Prose dictionary's entry on *atgeirr*, 23 are from varying manuscripts of Brennu-Njáls saga, 15 from various *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur*, one each from Konungs skuggsjá and Laxdæla, and two each from Landnámabók and Eyrbyggja saga.

23 The incident from Landnámabók is taken from Hrómundar þáttur halta, which uses *spjót* instead of *atgeirr*, suggesting that Sturla Þórðarson changed the weapon to an *atgeirr*. This could have been done for a number of reasons; perhaps to lend an added air of verisimilitude to Landnámabók, though we cannot be certain.

24 The dates for the earliest manuscripts with reference to *atgeirar*, according to “5298kron”

25 Falk, pp. 82-83

relatively thin in order to routinely pass through the bodies of their victims,²⁶ but also refers to it as a *Hauspeer*,²⁷ or hewing-spear, although he only provides three examples of its description as a hewing weapon.²⁸ In fact, the majority of examples of the use of *atgeirar* in the literature, and Falk's own work, refer to it as being used as a thrusting weapon. Based on evidence in medieval textual sources as well as manuscript illuminations, which will be detailed in the proceeding chapter, a case can be argued for the presence of wings or lugs on *atgeirar*, the purpose of which, based on Fuglesang's assessment,²⁹ could have been to allow the weapon to be quickly withdrawn from an opponent during battle. This is in opposition to the commonly held theory that they were part of a hybridized hunting/military weapon and to act as a means of stopping a wounded animal from injuring a hunter while transfixing on the spear.^{30,31} The presence of wings or lugs to facilitate quick removal of the weapon and prevent overpenetration is, of course, a feature which would be desirable if the spear were a warrior's sole weapon, and even were it not, should the warrior have a preference for the use of the spear over another sidearm such as an axe, sword, or sax, ensuring that your spear could be retrieved swiftly would be of primary importance.³² Despite this, Fuglesang does not specifically identify the lugged spear with *atgeirar*, either, instead concentrating on Falk's assessment of lugged spears as *bjarnsviða*, based on a late 16th or early 17th century description by Peder Claussøn Friis.³³ She does not draw any conclusion as to the accuracy of this claim, though she does make the point that lugged spears and lances³⁴ are commonly attested in military art from the Roman period forward.³⁵ While this does help disprove the correlation between lugged war-spears and hunting weapons, it does nothing to clarify what category these weapons would fall into when being mentioned within the text.

Falk's assessment of the *kesja* is likewise concentrated primarily on blade-form to the exclusion of sockets and shafts,³⁶ despite the fact that, unlike with the *atgeirr*, we have several

26 Falk, p. 83

27 Falk, p. 82

28 These examples are discussed more fully in the following chapter.

29 Fuglesang, pp. 136-140

30 A reasonable concern, as even relatively docile game such as deer can cause severe injury with their antlers or hooves, while more fierce animals such as boar and wolves could well be lethal to the hunter should they become transfixing on the spear.

31 Fuglesang, p. 140

32 This is not to suggest, of course, that wings or lugs would be the only way to swiftly retrieve a spear from an injured or fallen opponent, but they certainly do provide an advantage in preventing over-penetration; a fact which would certainly help in close quarters or otherwise crowded battles. There is also the possibility of them being used to aid in parrying, which would allow for a greater range of defensive options in combat; see DeVries, pp. 76-77

33 Fuglesang, p. 137

34 Specifically referring to cavalry weapons, in this case.

35 Fuglesang, p. 138

36 Falk, pp. 78-81

textual sources mentioning the shaft of the *kesja*, as well as its socket. This focus on the blade is understandable, as organic components are often not present in the archaeological record, but the lack of focus on the socket – that is, the element of the spear which joins the head to the shaft – is curious given that there is a detailed description of the *kesja* in *Egils saga*³⁷ which includes mention of the socket of the *kesja*, and *Olafs saga helga*, which includes mention of the relative size of certain *kesjur* shafts when compared to other spears, or possibly other *kesjur*. Further investigation of these elements, however, will demonstrate that they did play a specific role in the classification of these weapons when compared to other spears.

Methodology and sources:

Throughout this work, I will be examining a number of texts, including Kings sagas, *Íslendingasögur*, *Fornaldasögur*, and skaldic verse. The utility of the sagas as sources, of course, poses issues as far as reliability of the descriptions provided is concerned, given that there is a lag of several centuries between the events depicted with the sagas and their earliest recording. In *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, William Miller makes a concise and relevant defence of the use of the sagas as historical sources. While primarily concerned with socio-legal history, Miller's point that the sagas are “...no more pernicious to the discovery of what passes for truth than the stock formulas of scribes in penning legal documents, than the partisanship of chronicles, than the categories imposed on reality by census takers and tax collectors”³⁸ is especially pertinent to this work, as the acceptance of terms from ecclesiastical sources to describe weapons.³⁹ The question, then, is what makes the use of ecclesiastical or legal sources to describe weaponry more valid than sagas or other works of what could be arguably historical fiction?⁴⁰

For an answer, we need not look further than Miller's justification for their use in socio-legal history. His assertion that the sagas are applicable as sources for social and legal histories, both as

³⁷ *Egils saga*, p. 36

³⁸ Miller, p. 46

³⁹ See the general acceptance of *lancea*, *spatha*, and *semispatum* as terms for a wide variety of spears and swords; Coupland's article, for example, notes the conflation of Carolingian long swords and seaxes with the *spatha* and *semispatum* and hand-held spears with the Latin *lancea*, noting a difference between them and the *hastae*, *missilia*, *ango* and *dardo* throwing spears. These terms often appear in ecclesiastical and legal documents and the validity of their appellation is not contested.

⁴⁰ In this case, the sagas would qualify as historical fiction, as the events they describe are typically corroborated by additional sources, but the addition of supernatural elements and obviously literary embellishments, such as the striking physical appearances of the saga protagonists, the inclusion of poetry at dramatically appropriate moments, etc. Add an air of the fictional to them.

discrete and joint fields of studies, is equally applicable when investigating the historicity of weaponry used within the sagas. There is, of course, the chance that scribes in the late 13th and early 14th centuries simply used contemporary terms to describe more esoteric or specialized weapons, in much the same that late 13th century manuscripts show contemporary arms and armour being used in biblical scenes.⁴¹ There is an obvious concern about using Family sagas as sources, given the length of time between the events depicted and their creation, as well as the debate between the Bookprose and Freeprose schools,⁴² but for the purposes of this work we can assume that the terminology and use of weapons is correct, given that are attestations of both *atgeirar* and *kesjur* in skaldic verse.⁴³ Other sagas – especially kings sagas – are written more or less contemporaneously to the events which they describe, and as such their use of terminology to describe weaponry is likely to be an accurate reflection of the terminology used during the period they were writing.

While the quality of sources is an obvious concern for determining the literary evidence and precedent of both *atgeirar* and *kesjur* during the events described in the sagas, we can be fairly certain that, in the case of there is still the issue of determining what, exactly, these weapons looked like. The following section will discuss the general properties of blades, which are essential in determining the primary intended method of use of a bladed weapon. While spears are primarily thrusting weapons, they do generally possess cutting edges along their blades and as such, can be used to cut or chop at an opponent. Discussing the relative qualities of the blade does provide us with the most easily identifiable information in the archaeological record, but it does not give us any details as to how the weapons functioned in use; to that end, a discussion of the dimensions of the shafts themselves is in order. By virtue of being hand-produced, even if in large quantities, no two spear shafts would be identical, but even so, the relative dimensions of the shaft – its length and diameter, specifically – can have a direct impact on the weapon's use in both close combat and as a missile.⁴⁴

41 See Image 4

42 See Gísli, especially pp. 123-250 and 305-309, for a discussion of the historicity of the sagas and the relationship between the Bookprose and Freeprose schools of interpretation for saga studies.

43 Eindriði Einarsson, d. c.1056, mentions *atgeirar* in his *lausavísa* – see Whaley, pp. 806-807 – and Bjarni byskup Kolbeinsson, d. 1233, refers to *kesjur* in his *Jómsvíkingsdrápa* – see Whaley, p. 954 for bibliographical information and p. 982-983 for the stanza in question. Þjóðólfr Árnórsson, b. 1010, also references *kesjur* in *Magnússflokkur*, st. 21 – see Kock p. 170 for the stanza, and Hollander pp. 189-197 for biographical references.

44 A longer shaft would provide a more stable missile, to a point, as the weight of the shaft itself would act as a counterweight for the spearhead, balancing the weapon for throwing, while a shorter shaft would allow for a more easily handled weapon in close-combat. There are, of course, other reasons for preferring a shortened or lengthened spear shaft, including simple user preference.

The texts used will also play an important role in determining the characteristics of the *atgeirr* and *kesja*, as well as assisting in identifying them within the archaeological record. For each weapon, I have used the *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog* to collate references to both *atgeirar* and *kesjur* in the Old Norse prose corpus, and the *Skaldic Project* to collate references to the weapons in skaldic verse. The number of references in the prose particularly is quite large, and varied in their context; sometimes a weapon is referred to obliquely, as is the case with the *atgeirr* in *Styrbjarnar þáttur Svíakappa*,⁴⁵ while others are explicitly referred to, as with the *kesja* in *Egils saga*.⁴⁶

When we are not provided with a description of the weapons, we need to determine their characteristics based on other details and clues provided by the text. Weapons and defensive gear provide fertile ground to work on when trying to divine their physical characteristics, if only because the textual descriptions of their use are, generally, limited by the physical characteristics of the weapons. For example, if a weapon is consistently described as being used to thrust with, one can assume, based on certain common physical properties inherent in weapons designed with thrusting as the primary use, that it will have a relatively narrow profile and an acute point to better facilitate the transfer of kinetic energy into the target.

Another indicator of what a weapon would look like is how it is used in a situation where its wielder needs to act defensively. When a warrior parries with a weapon, they do so typically with either the blade itself or by making use of the weapon's grip or shaft itself to deflect an incoming attack. Axes and spears are capable of being used in this fashion, though there is the risk of the blade of the enemy's weapon sliding along the shaft or haft and injuring the warrior's hand. To that end, spears would have lugs or wings added to them in order to act as a stop while deflecting a blow, much like the lower guard of a sword or the hilt of a dagger or knife. If a spear is used as a primary armament without a shield, it is

By examining the ways in which these weapons are described as being used in the texts, comparing those descriptions with the archaeological record, and using some basic knowledge of physics, physiology, and the surviving suggestions of the combat techniques in use during the ninth through thirteenth centuries from the sagas, we can generate a fairly accurate correlation between

45 Guðbrandr Vigfússon, p. 72

46 *Egils saga*, p.136

the weapons described in the sagas and the artifacts we have available to us.

Once the physical characteristics of each weapon have been determined through the textual examination, we will have a general textual typology of both the *atgeirr* and the *kesja*. This typology will help with the final – and most important – process; that of identifying the weapons within the context of the archaeological record. To do this, I will rely upon two major sources; the spear typology of Jan Petersen in his De Norske Vikingsverde and Oluf Rygh's survey of Scandinavian artefacts in Norske Oldsager. Rygh's catalogue provides a geographical and archaeological context for the finds – setting the weapons within a rough framework of the social capital the wielder possessed – while Petersen's work will provide a greater frame of reference for the weapons in the context of Norse weaponry during the 10th through 13th centuries.

Before delving into a discussion of *atgeirar* and *kesjur*, there is a matter of terminology which must be clarified. The basic terms of spear anatomy – shaft, head, and blade – are fairly self-explanatory, but the specific definitions of blade types and the shapes required to make an efficient use of that blade for particular attacks require a brief explanation, as they are not immediately obvious to the casual observer.

Blade Properties

Weapons are intended to cause as much injury as possible to an opponent, and in the period dealt with during the sources with which we will be primarily concerned – roughly speaking, 985 CE⁴⁷ through roughly 1250 CE⁴⁸ – there is a certain uniformity of technique involved with the use of these weapons in battle. Both the *atgeirr* and *kesja* are generally described in Brennu-Njáls saga, Egils saga, and other sagas as being used as thrusting weapons and, more rarely, as chopping weapons.⁴⁹ By using these textual references in conjunction with some basic information regarding blade geometries and characteristics possessed by the weapons which use the same methods of attack, we can then narrow down potential exemplars in the archaeological record.

47 The approximate date of the battle of Rangá given in Robert Cook's translation of Njáls saga, p. xl

48 An approximate date given the range provided for Konnungs skuggsjá given in Magnús Már Lárusson's edition, p. vii

49 Njáls saga, p. 195 has Högni hewing asunder Gunnar's spear-shaft. Egils saga, p. 138, relates how Þórólfr hews Jarl Hrings men while cutting a path to the Jarl himself.

Blade geometry is a key element of determining the general physical characteristics of a weapon and the artifacts is the blade geometry of the spearhead in relation to its uses. Blade geometry, simply, is the general shape of the blade. For every type of attack one can make with a blade, there is an optimized form, and there are three basic forms of attack with a bladed weapon; thrusting, chopping, and slicing. Thrusting blades tend to be narrow and long, preserving their mass and providing a tightly defined impact area in which they can transfer energy. Chopping or hewing weapons tend to have broad edges and a considerable mass behind them, allowing for more energy to be concentrated in a wider area.

An ideal thrusting blade will be able to concentrate its mass behind a relatively small point in order to transfer as much energy as possible into its target, and will thus need to be narrow in general shape. Because of that narrowness, it will also need to be long, in order to have a relatively high amount of mass behind it, which will increase the kinetic energy of the attack. Additionally, the ideal thrusting blade will also need to be stiff, in order to prevent the blade acting like a spring and absorbing much of the kinetic energy. The most efficient way of stiffening a thrusting blade is to include a central rib or ridge in the blade, making it roughly diamond-shaped in cross-section. This provides rigidity and strength to the point, and ensures that the blade itself compresses as little as possible.

A chopping blade is, as has been mentioned earlier, one which relies on mass and momentum to increase its kinetic energy and disperse it over a wider area than a thrusting weapon. The axe is the stereotypical chopping weapon, and its easy to see why: It has a heavy head with a relatively sharp blade that provides a great deal of mass at the end of a long shaft. The imbalance of the weight when the axe is held in any way other than vertical is noticeable, and adds to the momentum of the swing. While the axe is a perfect example, other, less likely weapons are suited to chopping, such as the single-edged blades found in Norway⁵⁰ and early double-edged viking-age swords.⁵¹ The swords of this period were generally in possession of relatively straight blades, with no distinct thrusting tip, and a centre of gravity located near the lower guard.⁵² The location of the balance point so close to the grip ensured that the blades were easily manoeuvred and were able to

50 See, for example, Pierce, pp. 39-41, and pp. 48-51

51 Typically consisting of blades affixed to hilts of Wheeler's type I-IV and possessing blades that run nearly parallel to each other until they taper to a spatulate tip.

52 See Pierce for a good overview of the handling characteristics of a number of swords from the 8th-13th centuries

be moved quickly, thus increasing the velocity of the attack and, by extension, the kinetic energy transferred to the target.

With the exception of javelins, darts, and other dedicated missile weapons, there are very few weapons which are designed as single-purpose blades. Designing a blade to fulfil multiple uses – whether as a thrusting and hewing weapon, or a thrusting weapon that is light enough to be used as a missile should the need arise – requires that a compromise be made in the construction of the blade between the optimized forms. We see this most clearly in the design of sword blades, with their tapering double-edged blades and semi-pointed tip to aid in chopping, slicing, and thrusting, but spearheads too were capable of being multi-purpose weapons, depending on the context in which they were meant to be used, though they were primarily designed to thrust with. With that in mind, we will begin with an examination of *atgeirar* and the ways which they are depicted as being used in sagas, as well as their suggested uses in later works.

Chapter 1: The *atgeirr*

Atgeirar pose an interesting conundrum for scholars of weapons in Old Norse literature; they are rarely described as being anything other than a thrusting weapon or missile in the works they appear in, yet they are considered to be *hoggspjót* by Falk⁵³ and this has coloured the interpretation of them by following editors and translators.⁵⁴ Falk's description of *atgeirar*, while based on a thorough interpretation of the evidence he selected, does not take into account the full breadth of sources available to the scholar of Old Norse literature, nor does his decision to term the *atgeirr* a *hoggspjót* make sense given the evidence which is available in the literature. To that end, an investigation of the use of *atgeirar* within Old Norse prose and poetry is needed.

The occurrences of *atgeirar* in Old Norse prose and poetry

Atgeirar occur several times throughout the sagas and other prose works in Old Norse,⁵⁵ typically in the hands of individuals who have, for one reason or another, been abroad and had interaction with Continental Europeans. Whether that interaction was in the form of raiding the Continent, engaging in piracy, working as merchants or traders, fighting as mercenaries, or serving as members of foreign courts does not seem to matter; these men returned with a weapon which was uncommon enough in Iceland to merit special notice and its own distinct terminology within the language. The presence of *atgeirar* in Old Norse is not limited to prose from the 13th century and later, however; it is attested to in a *vísur* dated to the 11th century, and another one from the early 13th century,⁵⁶ as well as from numerous warrior-poets in the sagas. It is these references in skaldic verse – especially that of Eindriði Einarsson,⁵⁷ a Norwegian skald – which support the existence of the *atgeirr* not only conceptually as a weapon,⁵⁸ but also implies a likely physical difference marking *atgeirar* out from other spears.

53 Falk, *AW*, p. 82

54 *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 80

55 The Online Old Norse Prose dictionary has a total of 45 references to the noun *atgeirr* in all its grammatical cases; 23 of which come from manuscripts of *Njáls saga*. See *5298kcron* for a complete list of references.

56 Whaley, *Poetry 1*, pp. 806-807, 954, and 982-983

57 Eindriði being the author of the 11th century *lausavísa* which refers to an *atgeirr*.

58 Meaning that there was already a semantic distinction in the minds of poets between *atgeirar* and other spears.

The word *atgeirr* itself is a compound one, and its leading element, ON *at*, suggests implies direction or movement toward an object,⁵⁹ though it may also suggest battle or fight.⁶⁰ The second element, ON *geirr*, refers to a type of spear normally used as a missile.⁶¹ Quite literally, then, *atgeirr* means a battle- or fighting-*geirr*;⁶² which implies, then, that the *atgeirr* was intended primarily for fighting in close combat, rather than as a multi-use missile weapon, an implication which is borne out in the textual evidence provided. The times when an *atgeirr* is thrown are usually during periods of duress or when a distinct tactical advantage is gained or held by throwing the weapon, rather than keeping it in hand for close combat, rather than as a . After all, the benefits of a spear in *mêlée* would greatly appeal to a non- or semi-professional warrior like Gunnar and Hallgrímr: they would be able to keep their enemy at a much longer range than if they were using a sword or axe, and the thrusting motion is a much simpler and more efficient use of the warrior's energy.

The *agteirr* in skaldic verse

The *atgeirr* is mentioned several times in skaldic verse, once in a *lausavísa* by Eindriði Einarsson, once by an anonymous skald in “Brúðskaupsvísur,” twice by Egill Skalla-Grímsson, once by Þorðr Kolbeinsson, once by Haukr Valdísarson's “Íslendingadrápa”, and once by Grettir. Since we are aware of the majority of the poets biographical details, we can be reasonably certain that the *atgeirar* mentioned by them are not anachronistic insertions by scribe or later sources, and thus later attestations of them in sagas would not be unreasonable. The majority of references to *atgeirar* which are made in skaldic verse occur within kennings for warriors. In Eindriði's *lausavísa*, the kenning is “Baldr *atgeirs*,”⁶³ while in “Íslendingadrápa” it is “*atgeirrs þollr*.”⁶⁴ In *Grettis saga*, it is “*atgeira öldraugar*,”⁶⁵ and in “Brúðskaupsvísur” “*ættmenn atgeirs*.”⁶⁶

The other references to *atgeirar* in skaldic verse make reference to the *atgeirr* as a weapon

59 Cleasby-Vigfusson, p. 27

60 Jan de Vries, *AEW*, pp. 16-17

61 Shetileg and Falk, *SA*, p. 385

62 An appellation which Falk agreed with; his gloss of *atgeirr* was Stoßwaffe, ‘thrusting’ or ‘shock weapon’ (along the lines of First World War Stoßtruppen). Falk, *AW* p. 83

63 Whaley, *Poetry 1*, p. 807. Literally the Baldr of the *atgeirr*, i.e. a warrior.

64 Kock, *Skald*, p. 262. Literally, the fir-tree of the *atgeirr*, i.e. a warrior.

65 *Grettis saga*, p. 240. Literally, the snow-storm logs of the *atgeirr*, i.e. warrior.

66 Jón Helgason, *ÍM* p. 130. Literally, kinsmen of the *atgeirr*, i.e. warriors.

in kennings. Specifically, “*atgeirr ýrar*,”⁶⁷ and “*atgeirs tóft*”⁶⁸ are used by Egill Skalla-Grímsson in his poetry, while Þórðr Kolbeinsson prays for “*atgeirs eða goð fleira*” – more *atgeirar* or more gods – before a battle.⁶⁹

The majority of the kennings make it clear that *atgeirar* were associated with dedicated warriors, and Þórðr's verse before a fierce battle suggests that *atgeirar* were something which anyone who was looking to engage in a closely fought battle would prefer to have with them.

The *atgeirr* in non-saga prose sources

The occurrences of the word *atgeirr* in Old Norse tend to coincide either with naval battles or with individuals who are either extremely well-travelled, or know individuals who are. Despite the fact that travel outside of their homeland is something that not many people could afford, let alone engage in, in early medieval Scandinavia, there remains a question as to whether or not the *atgeirr* was a weapon which was deserving of prestige. The primary users of *atgeirar* in the sagas are a pirate, a wealthy farmer, a young boy, and a slave, could the weapon be considered to have any sort of inherent social prestige or implied social standing, like that of a sword?

Given the association of spears with the common soldiery and their more workaday approach to battle is not unsurprising that the spear does not often appear as the primary weapon of the stereotypical saga hero; there is less honour to be had in using a spear when compared to a sword, since the spear is the simplest and least expensive of weapons to manufacture, requiring a small amount of iron or steel when compared to a sword or axe blade,⁷⁰ as well as much less training to use effectively,⁷¹ not to mention far more disposable than other weapons.⁷² These qualities would have no-doubt endeared them to the less wealthy members of a *hirð*, and the

67 *Egils saga*, p. 110. Literally, the *atgeirr* of the female aurochs, i.e. an aurochs horn.

68 *Egils saga*, p. 266. Literally the homestead of the *atgeirr*, i.e. the hand.

69 *Borðfirðinga sögur*, p. 193

70 See Bealer, *AB*, pp. 184-189 for information regarding forging axes, pp. 341-344 for spearheads, and pp. 349-360 for swords. The lack of complexity required to forge a spearhead relative to an axe or sword blade makes them much quicker to produce as well, ensuring their ubiquity as weapons.

71 At its simplest, fighting with a spear becomes an exercise in 'sticking the pointy end in the other man,' whereas swordsmanship and axe-fighting require a greater deal of finesse and strength to be effective in. This, of course, does not serve justice to the complexities involved in higher-level spear fighting, but it does serve to illustrate the relative simplicity of spear fighting when compared with other weapons.

72 Shetelig and Falk, *SA* p. 389

practicality of having a greater reach would have certainly made them attractive to the professional warrior.

While it is easy to write *atgeirar* off as the weapon of those who are of a lower social standing, one needs to keep in mind several facts about the characters associated with the weapon: Hallgrím was indeed a pirate – a profession which would need to be suitably equipped for naval battles – and, as such, his possession of an *atgeirr* makes sense. After all, there are illuminations of *atgeirr*-armed warriors aboard ships which predate the *Konungs skuggsjá* manuscript,⁷³ suggesting that the association of the weapon with naval-based combat was longstanding.

In *Konungs skuggsjá*, the *atgeirr* is mentioned explicitly as a weapon which is useful for ship-borne combat. There is a short discussion of weapons which are appropriate for fighting both on land and on ship, and the father answering his son's questions states:

“...kol oc brænnu steinn er hofuð vapn allra þeira er nu hæfi ec næfnt. Blystœyptir hærsparar oc goðer *atgeirar* eru oc goð vapn a skipi ”⁷⁴

“...coal and sulphur are the chief weapons of all those I have now mentioned. Cast-lead caltrops and good *atgeirar* are also good weapons on board a ship.”

This mention is indicative not only of the status of the *atgeirr* – it is a specialized weapon, rather than simply a generic type of spear – but also gives us insight into the nature of naval warfare during this period. Clearly, there is a great emphasis placed on distance between combatant ships in naval battles, as the ships are crowded and mobility is at a premium. There are ranged weapons suggested – *staflöngur* and *skeptiflettur*, as well as hand- and crossbows⁷⁵ – as well as weapons to destroy ships, and weapons which will restrict the movement of enemy troops; then there are the *atgeirar*. While they are never specifically grouped with any type of weapon – neither close combat, missiles, or anti-ship – they are nonetheless mentioned specifically as good weapons onboard a ship. This is, presumably, due to their multiple uses in combat, both as a close combat weapon and a missile. As will be shown, *atgeirar* are used in both roles quite frequently in the sagas, and it stands to reason that the reason they are included as good weapons for warriors is to

73 See Image 5 in the Appendix of Images for an example of the shipboard warriors identified Danes in a 12th century MS. Given the equipment mentioned as being beneficial for warriors at sea in *Konungs skuggsjá*, it seems likely that they are carrying *atgeirar*.

74 Holm-Olsen, p. 60

75 Holm-Olsen, p. 60

provide a ship with a more versatile offense.

The lack of contemporary Icelandic sources for *atgeirar* is an issue which must be addressed. While they do not appear in Icelandic prose sources, *atgeirar* were no doubt known to Icelanders; the reference to them in skaldic verse by Icelanders – particularly “Íslendingadrápa,” as it is the latest Icelandic verse we have referring to an *atgeirr* – does suggest that they were not unknown in Iceland. Their association with military matters, however, may well have contributed to their lack of popularity among the more isolated Icelandic warriors.

The *atgeirr* in Brennu-Njáls saga

It is without doubt, though, that the most famous and prolific use of the *atgeirr* in Old Norse comes when Gunnar of Hlíðarend is involved in the events of Njáls saga, and it is significant in battle against Hallgrímr, the original owner of the magical *atgeirr*, he does so during a naval battle, rather than on land.⁷⁶ This is important, since *atgeirar* appear to have been weapons especially suited to naval usage.

The famous battle scene at Rangá in Brennu-Njáls saga is an excellent passage to study when trying to determine the physical characteristics of the *atgeirr*. When Skammkell leaps behind Gunnar and strikes at him with an axe, his blow is parried quickly and the *atgeirr* is laid under the *kverk*⁷⁷ of Skammkell's axe, which is then wrenched from his hand. Were that the case, though, then Gunnar would have had to have struck the *kverk* of the axe from below with sufficient force to pull it out of Skammkell's grip immediately, but such an assumption neglects the fact that the shape of the axe head would allow Skammkell to slide the blade of his axe down the shaft of Gunnar's *atgeirr* and thus ignore the attempted parry and threaten Gunnar with the 'horns' of the axe.⁷⁸ Projecting defensive wings or lugs, however, would prevent the axe blade from being manoeuvred down the shaft of the spear and allow Gunnar to maintain control of the parry and thus disarm Skammkell as described in the scene. Without some form of projecting guard, the axe – regardless of the relative form of it – would be unimpeded in its travel along the spear shaft. This would

⁷⁶ Brennu-Njáls saga, pp. 77-82

⁷⁷ Einarr Olafur Sveinsson suggests that the axe used by Skammkell is in fact a *skeggǫx*, though that does not seem likely, given the fact that there seems to have been a distinction made in literature between regular *ǫxir* and *skeggǫxir*, as in Egils saga. See footnote 5 on pp. 137-138 of Brennu-Njáls saga.

⁷⁸ See the section “Defense against a left-handed attack with a two-handed axe” on “Viking Axe Techniques.”

cause the mass of the axe – and the added force Skammkell was exerting – to be brought closer to Gunnar's hand and thus increase the resistance needed in order to dislodge the axe from Skammkell's grip. If there were lugs or wings on the *atgeirr*, however, it would then act like a first-class lever⁷⁹ in this case, and allow Gunnar to magnify the force he was exerting to the point where he would be able to easily pull Skammkell's axe from his hand. Without these projecting points, however, Gunnar's feat becomes essentially impossible, as he is still carrying his sword in one hand and would be unable place the *atgeirr* in such a way that he could both prevent the axe blade from sliding along the shaft and maintain a sufficient amount of force to dislodge the weapon from Skammkell's grip.⁸⁰

Beyond that, Gunnar also uses the *atgeirr* to disarm Borkr during the battle at Þjórsá.⁸¹ When Borkr attacks Gunnar, Gunnar's response is to “...laust við atgeirinum svo hart að sverðið hraut úr hendi Berki.”⁸² The use of *laust* in this description poses some difficulties with interpretation, as Gunnar uses the *atgeirr* again later in the battle to kill Egill,⁸³ though there is no mention of him retrieving it. Given that Borkr is near enough to strike at Gunnar with his sword, it seems unlikely that Gunnar would throw the *atgeirr* to disarm him. Rather, it would make more sense for Gunnar to swiftly move his *atgeirr* to parry Borkr's attack and, with the force of the counter-blow, wrench the sword from his hands. This would allow him to still keep the *atgeirr* so he could attack and kill Egill with it later in the battle.

Gunnar makes continual use of his *atgeirr* as a thrusting weapon throughout the saga. Among the notable incidents are Gunnar's slaying of Skammkell, where he:

“...leggr í annat sinn atgeirinum ok í gegnum Skammkel ok vegr hann upp ok kastar honum í leirgötuna at hofði.”⁸⁴

79 A first-class lever is one wherein the load – in this case, the axe – is located at or beyond the fulcrum relative to the position of the force – which, in this case, is Gunnar's arm-strength. The action of a lever in this specific case is most clearly demonstrated by the use of a pry-bar or crow-bar in removing a nail from a piece of timber.

80 The only way to ensure that sufficient force is applied to the axe while preventing the blade from being levered onto Gunnar's hand or arm would be to have the haft of the axe and the shaft of the spear perpendicular to one another, thus preventing the axe from maintaining its momentum and causing grievous injuries when it strikes Gunnar's hand. Without both hands to support the *atgeirr*, however, it is virtually guaranteed that the momentum of the strike would drive the *atgeirr* downward, and allow Skammkell to recover and re-address his attack, while Gunnar would be off balance and vulnerable to attack.

81 *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 159

82 *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 159

83 *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 159

84 *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 138

“...thrusts again with his *atgeirr* and it goes through Skammkell and he lifts him up and throws him on his head to the muddy path.”

The *atgeirr* is also used, perhaps most memorably, as a thrusting weapon at the beginning of Gunnar's final battle. When Þórgrímr austmaðr made his reconnaissance of Gunnar's hall at Hlíðarendi, he quickly discovers that Gunnar is indeed home when he:

“...leggur út með atgeirinum á hann miðjan.”⁸⁵

“...thrust out with the *atgeirr* into his [Þórgrímr] middle.”

And when Þorbrandr Þorleiksson and his brother Ásbrandr attack Gunnar, he thrusts with both hands through Þorbrandr's body and, a moment later, through Ásbrandr's shield, breaking his arms.⁸⁶ In all instances, the *atgeirr* is described as passing cleanly through whomever or whatever it strikes. This would seem to preclude the presence of any defensive lugs or wings on the *atgeirr*, as they would serve to prevent just this sort of over-penetration. However, if the defensive projections were narrower than the base of the blade, they would not prove to be a hindrance when thrusting through a target: As the blade itself broadened, a wider channel would be made in the target, allowing the narrower wings to pass through unhindered. This, of course, is only one option for a potential *atgeirr*.

The *atgeirr* is also used to hew a spear-shaft apart later in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, when Hogni Gunnarsson and Skarpheðinn Njálsson ambush Hróaldr and Tjörvi at Odda. This scene does provide an interesting example as to how the *atgeirr* was employed, as during the ambush, after:

“...höggr Skarpheðinn Tjörva banahogg. Hróaldr hafði spjót í hendi, ok hleypr Hogni at honum; Hróaldr leggr til Högna; Högni hjó í sundr spjótskaptit með atgeirinum, en rekr atgeirinn í gegnum hann.”⁸⁷

“Skarpheðinn dealt Tjörvi his deathblow. Hróaldr had a spear in his hand, and he leapt at Hogni; Hróaldr laid in toward Hogni; Hogni hewed the spear-shaft asunder with his *atgeirr*, and then drove the *atgeirr* into him.”

That the *atgeirr* is used to hew at, and destroy, a relatively thick piece of wood

85 *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 187

86 *Brennu-Njáls saga*, pp. 188-189

87 *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 195

suggests that not only would its blade be heavy enough to have enough momentum to shatter the spear-shaft, but also that its own shaft – and socket – would be relatively stout in order to resist the sudden shock of such an act without becoming damaged itself. Falk also points out that the *atgeirr* is referred to as being used as a hewing weapon several times in *fornaldursögur*,⁸⁸ although this is his only piece of reference outside of *Brennu-Njáls saga* for the *atgeirr* being used as something other than a thrusting weapon.

Atgeirar in other sagas

References to *atgeirar* occur in a number of *Fornaldasögur*, *Íslendingasögur* and *Riddarasögur*, and are always mentioned in the context of belonging to travellers, whether they are professional warriors or simply concerned with their personal defence while abroad. Although *Njáls saga* contains the majority of references, and will be dealt with in its own section, there are a number of other sagas which reference *atgeirar* in specific contexts, and which can assist with the identification of them.

The earliest reference to an *atgeirr* is in *Þiðreks saga af Bern*. *Atgeirar* are mentioned several times in this *Riddarasaga*, both in context of use as a heavy mêlée weapon and as a missile. Its first occurrence is in the hands of the giant Etgeir, and it is a weapon suitably massive, even for one of his stature.

“Eðgeirr hefir at vápní einn atgæir, sleginn af jární, svá þugan, at eigi fá tólf menn meira lyft.”⁸⁹

“Eðgeir had as a weapon an *atgeirr*, made of iron, so heavy that twelve men could not lift it.”

That the whole *atgeirr* in this case is described as being made of iron places it clearly outside of the realm of normal weapons; it is, after all, carried by a giant. However, it is also Eðgeir's sole weapon, which suggests that he would be capable of defending himself adequately with it, as well as attacking with it. This capacity is important, as the capacity of weapon to be used

88 Falk, *AW*, p. 82

89 *Þiðreks saga af Bern*, vol. 1, p. 50

both offensively and defensively – much in the same way a sword can be used to both attack and defend effectively – is an important consideration when choosing a primary weapon. The *atgeirr* is also shown in Þiðreks saga af Bern to be a weapon which is capable of being used as a missile, rather than solely for close-combat.

“En risinn skýtr gegn honum sínum atgeir, en Heimir lýtr undan fram á söðulbogann, ok flýgr atgeirrinn fyrir ofan hann ok í jörðina, svá at ekki tók upp, ok engi maðr síðan hefir fundit þenna atgeir.”⁹⁰

“But the giant hurled his *atgeirr* against him, and Heimir ducks under his saddle-bow, and the *atgeirr* flies over him and into the earth, such that none could take it, and no man has since found this *atgeirr*.”

The *atgeirr*'s wielder in this case, Aspilian, is another giant and clearly supernatural in his strength and ability. That he hurls his *atgeirr* at Heimir, who then proceeds to evade the attack as though it was not unexpected, suggests that the weapon was not considered to be solely used as a close-combat one. This, again, can help with determining the appearance of the *atgeirr*, as a weapon which can be thrown has a different shape to it than one which is not intended for use as a missile.

Giants are not the only monstrous or supernatural wielder of an *atgeirr*; Hornnef of Sturlaugs saga starfsama, a troll-woman, also carries an unusual *atgeirr*, which finds its way into Sturlaugs possession. The *atgeirr* of the troll-woman Hornnef – and, eventually, Sturlaugr himself – is, much like Eðgeir's, an exceptionally strange weapon. Even when Sturlaugr first sees Hornnef, he can tell...

“þetta kikuendi hefir j hendi addgeir einn. þat þotti honum sem þat mundi ei alpyðlig[t] [u]apn uera er þetta skripi for med...”⁹¹

“That monster had in hand an *atgeirr*, which seemed to him might not be a normal weapon which the creature went with...”

Sturlaugs intuition was not incorrect; the *atgeirr* carried by Hornnef is a magical weapon which is capable of changing size to that of a dagger, as well as cleaving through anything in its

⁹⁰ Þiðreks saga af Bern, vol. 2, p. 586

⁹¹ Fornaldasögur Norðurlanda, vol. 2, p. 334

path. Sturlaugr uses the *atgeirr* as both a thrusting and chopping weapon⁹² in the saga, although when he chops or hews with his *atgeirr*, it is not against an enemy, but rather against rocks which are pinning him to the ground.

While Sturlaugr uses his *atgeirr* solely to hew at the rock which was pinning him, Sóti of Göngu-Hrolfs saga, was apparently renowned for using his *atgeirr* not solely for thrusting:

“Sóti hafði atger at vega með, ok gerði ýmist, hann hjó eðr lagði.”⁹³

“Soti had an *atgeirr* to travel with, and he would both hew and thrust equally with it.”

That Sóti is mentioned as being specifically able to hew and thrust with his *atgeirr* with equal ability implies that hewing is something which, while possible with the *atgeirr*, was not a tactic which was commonly employed. In fact, it is only against inanimate objects (rocks, spear-shafts, etc.) rather than against living foes or their weapons. In fact, with the exception noted in the following section, *atgeirar* are not referred to in as hewing during battle in any sagas which I am presently aware of.

An *atgeirr* appears again in the hands of a supernatural creature, though it is not specifically mentioned as being magical in nature, in Þorleifs þáttr jarlaskálds. Near the end of the *þáttr*, we see Jarl Hakon preparing a *trémaðr* of his creation, called Þorgarðr, to kill the titular Þorleifr, and giving him an *atgeirr*:

“Gyrði Hákon hann atgeir þeim, er [hann] hafði tekit ór hofi þeirra systra ok Horgi hafði átt.”⁹⁴

“Hákon girt him with their *atgeirr* he had taken out of the sisters' temple and which had belonged to Horgi.”

When the battle begins at Öxará, Þorleifr is impaled by the *atgeirr*, which Þorgarðr thrusts at him immediately,⁹⁵ though the poet does succeed in slaying the *trémaðr* in the end. What is significant here is that the *trémaðr* immediately hurls the *atgeirr* at his opponent, hoping that it will

92 Fornaldasögur Norðurlanda, vol. 2, p. 335

93 Guðni, FN 3, p. 210

94 Eyrfiðinga Sögur, p. 226

95 Eyrfiðinga Sögur, p. 226

kill him in one blow. Given that Þorleifr dies almost immediately after slaying the *trémaðr*, this does not seem to be an unreasonable assumption on Þorgarðs behalf.

There is also the mention of *atgeir* in Landnámabók, when Sleitu-Helgi, his brother Jorund, and their men – who are described as both *víkingar* and *frjálsir* – attack the Hrómundarsynir.⁹⁶ The events which transpire are worded in a way which can be confusing:

“Þá er Þorbjörn vildi lúka aptr virkinu, var hann skotinn í gegnum með atgeiri; Þorbjörn tók atgeirinn ór sárinu ok setti milli herða Jorundi, sva at út kom í brjóstit.”⁹⁷

“Then when Þorbjörn was closing the fort, he was shot through the middle with an *atgeirr*; Þorbjörn took the *atgeirr* from the wound and put it between the shoulders of Jorundr, such that it came out through his breast.”

The description of this event – and indeed of the entire battle at the fort – is lacking in detail, but if one assumes that Jorund hurled his *atgeirr* at Þorbjörn while running, and had come close enough to be within range of the *atgeirr* being used as a *mêlée* weapon, then the actions of Þorbjörn do make sense. It is important to note that the event described in Landnámabók is taken from

Atgeirar are not solely used as missiles in sagas, however, nor are they weapons used by supernatural creature, or supernatural in and of themselves, as Jorunds use of the *atgeirr* during the battle against the Hrómundarsynir. In Laxdæla saga, Harðbeinn Helgason is armed with an *atgeirr*, despite being only twelve at the time. His father, Helgi Harðbeinsson, was described as...

“...mikill maður og sterkur og farmaður mikill. Hann var nýkominn þá út...”⁹⁸

“...a great man and strong and a great seaman. He was newly come from abroad...”

This suggests that he would have been familiar with the exigencies of travel at the time and, accordingly, would be armed in a way that would be practical for sailing. Accordingly, it seems reasonable to assume that he would have in his possession a weapon considered to be appropriate for combat at sea, and would give it to his son when he was in the company of two outlaws.⁹⁹ There is another example of the use of an *atgeirr* in Laxdæla, when Harðbeinn is attacked by Þorstein

96 Íslendingabók, Landnámabók, p. 203-204

97 Íslendingabók, Landnámabók, p. 204

98 Laxdæla saga, p. 164

99 Laxdæla saga, pp. 184-186

svart in the shieling:

“...lagði Harðbeinn út atgeiri ór selinu, þar sem hurðin var brotin; lagit kom í stálhúfu Þorsteins svarta, svá at í enninu nam staðar...”¹⁰⁰

“Harðbeinn thrust with the *atgeirr* from the shieling and through the broken door. It thrust into the steel helmet of Þorstein *svart*, and stood in his forehead...”

Harðbeinn's *atgeirr* was, by way of implication, handy enough to be used effectively within a shieling and the fact that the *atgeirr* was small enough to be brought into a relatively cramped space was not considered something to have special note made of – for example, being referred to as *skammskeptum atgeirr* – but the lack of surviving shafts makes researching such a possibility impossible.

In *Eyrbyggja saga*, the hapless slave Svartr was given an *atgeirr* by Vígfúss and told to murder Snorri *goði* while the latter was relieving himself in the evening. Vígfúss, while not mentioned as having gone overseas, was a man whose family was in a near-constant conflict with their neighbours and, as such, could be expected to have a wide variety of weapons available to him. The use of the *atgeirr* in this episode is, in and of itself, a seemingly odd choice, as neither Svartr nor Vígfúss have any explicit or immediate relation to overseas travel or the continent. Given that *Eyrbyggja saga* does contain reference to other rarely mentioned weapons,¹⁰¹ however, it does not seem to be out of context to have an *atgeirr* present. When Svartr is ordered to assassinate Snorri *goði*, he is told:

“...en þá er Snorri gengr til kamars, þá skaltu leggja atgeirinum í gegnum loftsgólfít í bak Snorra, svá fast, at út gangi um kviðinn...”¹⁰²

“...when Snorri walks to the latrine, then shall you thrust the *atgeirr* through the floor and into his back so hard it comes out the belly...”

Given the use of *atgeirar* by a relatively young boy as well as its concealment in the loft of an outhouse, it seems likely that, at least in the Icelandic and Norwegian conceptions of them, *atgeirar* were not particularly large weapons. This is also borne out within the Old Icelandic and

¹⁰⁰*Laxdæla saga*, p. 192

¹⁰¹*Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 161 contains a reference to a *bjarsviða*, a weapon which would apparently be preferred for hunting bears, based on the name, though the weapon itself is not described.

¹⁰²*Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 65-66

Old Norse literary corpora themselves, and the descriptions of *atgeirar* being used in large, closely confined groups of warriors.

In Hálfðanar saga Eysteinsonar, Úlfkell attacks Hrafnkell on-board a ship using an *atgeirr* and, within the confines of ship-board combat, does quite well with it:

“Síðan lagði hann með atgeir til Hrafnkels í gegnum skjöldinn ok báða handleggina, ok vá hann upp ok kastaði honum út á sjóinn.”¹⁰³

“He quickly laid in with the *atgeirr* against Hrafinkel [and thrust] through the shield and both arms, and lifted him up and cast him out into the sea.”

This is entirely consistent with the suggestion in Konungs skuggsjá that the *atgeirr* would be a good choice for use aboard a ship, and consistent with the images we've seen previously of *atgeirar* being used as a thrusting weapon, as in Sturlaugs saga Starfsama. Sturlaugr is also described as hewing with the *atgeirr* which he has won from Hornnef, and this is something which *atgeirar* must have been relatively well-known for, as they are also occasionally referred to as *hoggspjót* in modern Icelandic editions of sagas where they occur, as well as in modern scholarship regarding spears in the sagas.¹⁰⁴

***Atgeirar* in the archaeological record**

What, then, does the *atgeirr* of the textual sources resemble in the archaeological sources? Unfortunately, since there are no extant descriptions of their physical properties of *atgeirar* in surviving texts, the descriptions of the way which the *atgeirr* is used must be analyzed to determine appeared physically, and what elements of the archaeological record are analogous to it. Falk makes a point to equate *atgeirar* with *hoggspjót*, but does not provide any suggestion as to what the *atgeirr* could resemble, beyond a general description of a heavy, narrow blade on a relatively short shaft.¹⁰⁵ While we cannot examine the length of spear-shafts due to the deterioration of organic material in archaeological sites, we can examine the spearheads which have been found in both Icelandic and Continental Scandinavian contexts.

¹⁰³Fornaldasögur Norðurlanda, vol. 4, p. 264

¹⁰⁴Falk, AW, p. 82

¹⁰⁵Falk, AW, pp. 82-83

The Icelandic context for spear-finds is scarce, especially when compared with the greater Scandinavian context, however that should not discount the likelihood of these weapons being used during the 9th-12th centuries in Iceland. What spears have been found tend to fall within later Petersen typologies, particularly Petersen K¹⁰⁶ which indicates a marked preference for this spear-head in local warriors and, presumably, in Norwegian visitors to Iceland. Presumably, given the paucity of references of *atgeirar* in the *Íslendingasögur*, these more common spearheads would be what are referred to by the general term *spjót*, which is far more widespread in the textual sources than *atgeirr*. There are also four spears of the Petersen G and H types within the 68 spears examined by Kristján Eldjárn.¹⁰⁷ Since the general form of these four spearheads falls, broadly, under the type identified by Shetileg and Falk as *geirar*,¹⁰⁸ and thus it is within these typologies – and the related F¹⁰⁹ and later D-types¹¹⁰ – where the search for *atgeirar* is concentrated. Falk

When Hallgrímr first uses the *atgeirr* against Gunnar, he uses it solely as a thrusting weapon, eschewing any chopping or cutting with the weapon. Gunnar continues the usage Hallgrímr introduces; we do not see him using it to hew the limbs from his enemies nor hacking at their shields with it, although Hǫgni does hew with the *atgeirr*. In addition to the use of the weapon as a thrusting implement, Gunnar uses his *atgeirr* to parry Skammkell's axe.¹¹¹ This use of the weapon is highly unusual, as Scandinavian spears of this period – and indeed the vast majority of spear types, regardless of period – lack any sort of defensive accoutrements like the lower guard of a sword, instead being designed with purely offensive use in mind. To parry an axe of the Petersen L- or M-Types¹¹², the spear would have some sort of stop or guard in order to prevent the blade from sliding down the shaft and injuring the spear-man, as has been explained earlier.

The presence of projecting wings, however, could potentially cause some difficulties when looking to resolve other uses of the *atgeirr*. As has been mentioned previously, the *atgeirr* is described as passing – or being intended to pass – clean through the midsection of an opponent

106See Kristján, *KHÍ*, pp. 276-278 and Schmid, p. 30

107Kristján, *KHÍ*, pp. 279-280

108Shetileg and Falk, *SA*, p. 385

109Petersen, *NV*, pp. 27-29

110Petersen, *NV*, pp. 24-26

111*Brennu-Njáls saga*, pp. 137-138

112Presumably; the text states that “Gunnar snerist skjótt að honum ok lýstur við atgeirinum ok kom undir kverk ǫxinni” - and does not state explicitly that it was a *skeggǫx* or bearded axe. Based on the rough chronology of *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Petersen's L- or M Types would be the most likely candidate. See Appendix of Images, Image 4 for examples of the typologies, and Petersen pp. 45-48 for an overview of the types.

several times and, while piecing through shields or helmets is relatively easy for any spear, regardless of the presence or absence of projecting wings, replicating the feat on a human body would be more difficult. If there were large defensive wings, then the spear would only be able to travel so far through the body until it is stopped, and might not burst through as is described in the sagas. The only way that such a feat would be possible would be if the blade of the *atgeirr* were long enough to pass through before reaching the projecting wings or the wings themselves were small enough to not act as a counter to over-penetration.

There are numerous spears from the 9th-11th centuries which have 'lugs' or 'wings' and which may well be the typology of spear that the *atgeirr* falls under. The presence of these lugs, however, call into question the order given to Svartr in *Laxdœla*, namely that when he kills Snorri he is to thrust so hard that the blade of the *atgeirr* passes through Snorri entirely, and the description of Þorgarðr thrusting Hǫrgis *atgeirr* through Þorleifr. This is entirely dependent on the size of the wings or lugs on the spear, however, and should they be larger than the blade is wide, it can be easily explained in one of two ways, both equally likely: First, it could be that the blade of the *atgeirr* – which, as a hand-made object, would not fall within a specific set of guidelines for its size – could have been long enough that such a feat was possible without it being halted by any defensive lugs. The second option is that the order Vigfúss gave was intentionally hyperbolic, simply meaning that Svartr was to show Snorri no mercy and strike as hard as he possibly could during the assassination, and that Þorgarðr, as a *trémaðr*, was simply so powerful that the defensive wings passed through Þorleifr.

Fortunately, however, we do not need to rely upon the possibility of exceptionally long *atgeirar* or supernatural strength to explain the instances of total penetration in the sagas. Winged and lugged spears from the period in question have projections which do not extend beyond the width of the blade,¹¹³ suggesting that they were there to act purely as parrying or defensive aids. This coincides quite well with the descriptions of *atgeirar* penetrating through their targets, as well as reconciling their ability to be used defensively, since the blade would create a large enough wound channel to allow the projection to pass through while the projections could still be used analogously to the lower guard of a sword when in close combat.

¹¹³See Kristján, *KHÍ*, pp. 278, 280, 281, and 283; Images 6-9 in the Appendix of Images; Shetlig and Falk, *SA*, p 387

The use of the *atgeirr* as a missile must also be addressed. As mentioned above, there are numerous scenes in sagas where the *atgeirr* is thrown. These incidents are rare enough to assume that the *atgeirr*, while perfectly capable of being used as a missile at relatively short range, was intended to be utilized primarily as a close combat weapon. Barring the incident in Landnámabók,¹¹⁴ the individuals throwing their *atgeirar* had supplementary sidearms to rely upon when they are bereft of their *atgeirar*. This is a reasonable course of action when one considers that, when closing with an enemy – or when they are closing with you – it can be more beneficial to deprive them of a shield¹¹⁵ than to have the added reach. Of course, if the *atgeirr* is the primary or sole armament of the warrior, then hurling it would obviously disadvantage them greatly. However, in the sagas, *atgeirar* are thrown only when their wielder feels that they are in possession of a distinct tactical advantage – whether they are supernaturally strong when compared to their enemy, near enough that they can recover the weapon quickly once it is thrown, in an ambush, etc. – and not as routine matter of combat.

The fact that the *atgeirr* was described as being used primarily to thrust with in Brennu-Njáls saga, and frequently used as a missile in other sagas, dictates the geometry of the blade. It would need to have a stiff blade in order to provide an efficient and powerful thrust, as well as having a broad cross-section in order to make a larger, more lethal wound in an opponent when it pierces them. As was made clear in Konungs skuggsjá,¹¹⁶ *atgeirar* were weapons which were multi-purpose and very tough – they would have to be, if they were a primary weapon during a ship-board battle – and as such, their blades must reflect that. There is also the issue of defending oneself adequately with an *atgeirr*, as Gunnar does on numerous occasions and, presumably, the ship-borne warriors of Konungs skuggsjá would as well. The presence of defensive wings or lugs would be a boon in defensive situations, as has been demonstrated in the section detailing Gunnar's disarming of Skammkell and, as has been explained, would not seriously impact the *atgeirs* ability to pierce an enemy when thrown or thrust with great enough force.

The later Petersen type D spears, as well as the F, G, and H¹¹⁷ all possess the desired characteristics which make it suitable for use in the manner which is described in the texts; they are

114Jörundr may well have been carrying an axe, sax, or sword with him, though it is not mentioned in the narrative of Landnámabók.

115The *atgeirr* is frequently described in Brennu-Njáls saga as penetrating shields when wielded in hand and, at the battle of Rangá, Gunnar accomplishes the feat while throwing it as well.

116Holm-Olsen, pp. 60

117See Images 6, 8, and 9 in the Appendix of Images

suitably broad for hewing with, and . Falk makes a detailed assessment of the *atgeirr*'s capabilities and usage in Altnordische Waffenkunde,¹¹⁸ and his assessment of the method of its use in the sagas parallels the analysis herein. He asserts that the *atgeirr* would have to be a stoutly-shafted weapon in order to endure the stresses placed on it by the sort of use it is described as seeing, which is a reasonable assumption, as slim-shafted spears would also have the tendency to snap when an excess of pressure or torque are applied to them. His assertion, however, that the *atgeirr* would be primarily a throwing weapon due to the mention in Konungs skuggsjá's section on naval warfare does not seem to correspond with the general tone of the section on naval warfare. The *atgeirr* is mentioned alongside what can be considered, for lack of a better term, area-denial weapons, rather than with missile weapons in the discussion regarding naval warfare. This suggests that the *atgeirr* was seen as a weapon intended primarily for close combat, rather than as a missile, or at the very least was something which was considered to be a specialized weapon, along the lines of the sulphur and caltrops mentioned in the same section.

Additionally, his suggestion that the *atgeirr* must have been a narrow-bladed weapon is dubious. The blade could have been wide and relatively thin, rather than narrow and, correspondingly, thick.¹¹⁹ There is nothing in any of the extant texts to suggest that the *atgeirr* was a narrow bladed weapon, nor do the methods of its use imply that it is particularly narrow or delicate. It may have a longer than average blade, explaining the frequency of the blade being described as passing through an individual's body. Falk's assertion that it is a *hauspeer* or *hoggsþjót* of some sort, which implies by its very name that the weapon is primarily intended as a chopping or hewing weapon, is also dubious, as has been discussed. The more likely case is that the *atgeirr* was a weapon primarily intended to thrust, but capable of being used as a hewing weapon should it be absolutely essential, though, and even then not without it being an extreme situation, such as Hogni's sundering of Hróaldr's spear in Brennu-Njáls saga.

There remains the question, though, of usefulness in practical situations when compared to other weapons. The *atgeirr* is specifically mentioned as a weapon which is preferable for use in naval battles. This, of course, brings up the question as to why this type of spear and, again, we are drawn to the basic layout of the head. The lugs would provide an additional defensive measure for

¹¹⁸Falk, AW, pp. 82-83

¹¹⁹A narrow blade which was also thin would not provide sufficient stiffness to be an effective thrusting weapon, and if it were forged to an extreme stiffness, it would not have sufficient strength to resist any great torsional or transectional forces, possibly snapping under battlefield conditions.

the user, something which no warrior – sea-borne or otherwise – would willingly pass up when choosing a weapon. Taking Shetelig and Falk's suggestion of *geirar* being used primarily as throwing spears, and extrapolating with Jan De Vries' interpretation of the prefix *at-*, it seems reasonable to assume that *atgeirar* were weapons which were equally suited to close combat and use as a missile. Their description as *hoggspjót*, however, is still not satisfactory, as they are not referred to as being used to hew at living targets, only inanimate objects – shields, spear-shafts, and rocks.

The final analysis of the *atgeirr*, then, is that the weapon was primarily intended for thrusting, but could also be used as a chopping weapon if needs be. Based on the information in Konungs skuggsjá, the sagas examined, and the illumination from M 736 folio, leaf 9 verso,¹²⁰ it is a weapon ideally suited – and perhaps solely intended – for naval actions. Its suitability for naval battle stems from a shorter than usual shaft, coupled with defensive projections which would allow the wielder to either continue to defend themselves when bereft of the protection of a shield while still posing a credible threat or, as Gunnar demonstrates, wielding a second weapon if they are capable of such a feat.

¹²⁰See Image 5 in Appendix of Images

Chapter 2: The *kesja*

The occurrences of *kesjur* in Old Norse texts

Unlike *atgeirar*, which are mentioned only in a few Old Norse sources, *kesjur* appear in a number of Old Norse texts, with nearly thirty separate works making reference to the weapon.¹²¹ The huge variety of texts in which the word appears suggests that the *kesja* was a weapon which would have been both well-known and perhaps instantly recognized by the audience. Because of the large number of references, however, I will limit myself to three texts: Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar eptir Oddr munk Snorrason, as it contains the oldest reference to the *kesja* in the extant corpus;¹²² Sverris saga which, as a roughly contemporary account of events,¹²³ provides probably the most reliably accurate examples of the use of *kesjur* in battle; and finally Egils saga, as it is arguably the most popular saga to involve a *kesja* and contains what is possibly the finest description of any weapon's design in the sagas.

Kesjur in skaldic verse

Like with the *atgeirr*, the earliest recorded references to *kesjur* occur within skaldic verse; the first reference is from the “Magnússflokkur” of Þjóðólfr Arnórsson from the 11th century,¹²⁴ and we are told specifically that the soldiers led by Sveinn were being hard-pressed by the *kesjur* of Magnús' soldiers. In Bjarni byskup Kolbeinnsson's “Jómsvíkingdrápa,” we are told that, during the fierce, final battle of the Jómsvíkingar, many men were killed and that *kesjur* were a key part of their deaths.¹²⁵ These references place the *kesja* squarely within the realm of military equipment, the sort of weapons which would not be found carried by those who had not served with an army – whether as a mercenary, as we will see with Egill, or as a recruited soldier, as was the case with

121The ONP has 52 *kesja* references listed, as well as five additional references to words related to *kesja*. The references to the word *kesja* without any modification come from 29 separate sources. The full list of *kesja* references is available at <http://www.onp.hum.ku.dk/webart/k/ke/43240ckron.htm>

122Finnur Jónsson's 1932 edition of Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar eptir Oddr munk Snorrason is based on the AM 310 4to, which has been dated to approximately 1250.

123Indrebø's 1920 edition of Sverris saga is based on the AM 327 4to manuscript, which has been dated to c.1300; this places its creation within 100 years of the events in the saga, and thus puts it potentially closer to the historical realities of the events contained within it than a number of other sagas.

124See Kock p. 170 for the stanza, and Hollander pp. 189-197 for biographical references.

125See Whaley, pp. 982-983

King Sverris men.

In Magnúss saga ins góða, Þjóðólfr Arnórsson refers to *kesjur* which have *snæri* attached to them,¹²⁶ which could serve several purposes. The first, and perhaps most obvious, is that the *snæri* are there to ensure the soldiers do not lose hold of their *kesjur* during battle and, if they do, they can retrieve them quickly. Egill uses a similar technique with his sword during his duel with Berg-Qnnundr, ensuring that he can quickly bring it to bear once he loses his *kesja*.¹²⁷ This would also allow the soldiers to retrieve their *kesjur* in the event that they miss when throwing them at the enemy. Another possible explanation for the *snæri* could be that the soldiers were using them to add extra accuracy and speed to their throws when using the *kesjur* as missile weapons, similar in principle to the Greek *ankule*.¹²⁸

The final reference to *kesjur* in skaldic verse occurs in Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar, when the skald Steinn Herdísarson describes the weapons borne by warriors aboard the ship he was on. The term he uses is *hákesja*,¹²⁹ which describes long-shafted *kesjur* used, apparently, for battles at sea. The apparently great length of the *hákesja* would allow an attacking crew to thin out the ranks of an enemy ship before closing near enough to board, providing a distinct tactical advantage for the ship whose crew carried them.

These references in skaldic verse indicate quite clearly that *kesjur* were versatile weapons, capable of being used in both close and long range combat, and that it was the blade of the *kesja*, rather than any particular length of shaft, which defined it as a *kesja* rather than a *spjót*.

Kesjur in Old Norse prose

The word *kesja* occurs twice in the earliest manuscripts of Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar eptir Oddr munk Snorrason,¹³⁰ both times appearing during large-scale battles, rather than duels. This

¹²⁶Heimskringla III, p. 57

¹²⁷Egils saga, p. 168

¹²⁸See Gardner, “Throwing,” and Harris, “Greek Javelin” for more information regarding the use of *ankule* to increase the accuracy of a thrown projectile.

¹²⁹Heimskringla III, p. 147

¹³⁰AM 310 4to

trend continues in other sources, including Sverris saga. There is also the curious presence of two compound words – *kesjufleinn* and *kesjulag* – which occur in Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar,¹³¹ which is dated to the early sixteenth century,¹³² and Sverris saga, dated to the early fourteenth century,¹³³ respectively. The first compound means literally a *kesja*-pike,¹³⁴ suggesting a great length to the shaft of the weapon when compared to a regular *kesja*, and possibly a relation to the *hákesja* referred to in Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar. This also has several implications as to the understanding of the form and employment of the *kesja* in the mind of the author and audience, at least by the first quarter of the sixteenth century. One can surmise that, because of the distinction made with the word *kesjufleinn* as opposed to the standard element *kesja*, the idea of the way which *kesjur* were employed as a dedicated mêlée weapon was uncommon enough for the author to make note of it. We are given the impression in Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar eptir Oddr munk Snorrason that *kesjur* are weapons used primarily as missiles in combat – a fact which is at odds with the occurrences of the term *kesjulag*, and later descriptions of the use of *kesjur* in the sagas, but makes sense given that spears were multi-use weapons. The two relevant references from AM 310 4to which indicate that *kesjur* were thrown during the bombardment phase of battle are made in passages that demonstrate Óláfr's martial prowess:

“En þá er hann barðisk undir merkjum, þá tók hann á lopti fljúgandi *kesjur* ok qrvar, svá vinstri hendi sem hægri, ok sendi aptr jafnt báðum höndum.”¹³⁵

"And when he was fighting boldly under the banner, then he took the flying *kesjur* and arrows from the air, with his left hand as much as his right and sent them back with both hands equally."

“...þá skaut Óláfr konungr til jarls báðum höndum þrím *kesjum* skammskeptum.”¹³⁶

"Then King Óláfr hurled three short-shafted *kesjur* toward the jarl with both hands."

In these scenes, Óláfr is clearly handling a sort of missile. However, what is important to note is that the second section, when the King is purposely hurling missiles at his enemies and not

131 Guðni FN Vol. 3, p. 46

132 It is contained in the AM 152 fol manuscript, which has been dated to approximately 1525, but contains a number of leaves which have been dated to 1300; the relevant section to the discussion – 116r-125v – belongs to the later portion of the manuscript rather than earlier.

133 Sverris saga is contained in AM 327 4to, which is dated to approximately 1300.

134 Presumably, a weapon with the head of a traditional *kesja*, but having a much longer shaft as befits a pike. There is also the possibility that the *kesjufleinn* is simply conflated with the pike, a weapon which was beginning to make its presence known in Europe at this time.

135 Færyinga saga, Ólafs saga Odds, p.267

136 Færyinga saga, Ólafs saga Odds, p.345

simply returning them, the *kesjur* are described as short-shafted. This is an important element of the design to note, as it suggests that the *kesja* was not normally possessed of a shaft that was considered to be especially short for a spear, and such modification was possibly made in order to allow a warrior to carry more missiles into a battle. This information is relevant when attempting to determine the most common use of the *kesja*, on the battlefield, but does little in terms of providing information regarding the shape of the spearhead.

The second compound word, *kesjulag*, means, literally, 'thrusting with *kesjur*,' however the implications of it are rather different from what the direct translation implies. Both occurrences in *Sverris saga* make a clear distinction between close combat where swords or other hewing weapons are involved, and the use of the *kesja* in *kesjulag*. The passages in question make the distinction quite clearly:

“Sóttu Magnúss konungs menn fast at Óláfssúðinni, báru á þá grjót ok skot ok kesjulög. En fyrir því at þeir stungu stöfnum at kómu þeir ekki höggum við.”¹³⁷

“King Magnús' men sought to press [or assault] the Óláfssúð hard, bringing against it rocks and missiles and *kesjulag*. But since their stems had met, they could not come to hewing.”

With the ships still maintaining a small distance between their respective flanks, Magnús and Sverris men were unable to engage in the usual method of close combat – presumably with axes, scythes, or other weapons mentioned in *Konungs skuggsjá*¹³⁸ – and were thus only able to thrust at one another with their *kesjur* rather than bring any other weapons to bear. The lack of missile fire is important to note in this stage of the battle, as well. Given the fact that there is a distance between the two ships, one would assume that missiles – whether in the form of stones, arrows, darts, or dedicated throwing spears – would be employed. The implication of their absence, however, is that the *kesjulag* occurs at a range far too close for effective bombardment, while still being too far away from the enemy to assault them practically.

There is a distinction between battle-spaces which is also evident in the assault on the Óláfssúð, as the battle off the coast of Norðnes does not play out in the way one would expect a typical naval battle to. The ships are not brought alongside each other initially, as would be

¹³⁷ *Sverris saga*, p. 86

¹³⁸ Holm-Olsen, p. 60

expected. Instead, the *Ólafssúð* moves across the prows of Magnús' ships, a tactic which prevents the other ships from bringing all of their warriors to bear in a boarding action, while still allowing Sverrir's warriors to attack with missiles. Unfortunately, being so greatly outnumbered, the battle turns into a traditional engagement when the *Ólafssúð* is boarded. The important thing to note, though, is that the *kesjulag* itself is mentioned here as specifically differentiated from bombardment or close combat.

On land, we have incidents of *kesjulag* as well; in this case, it is during a confused bout of fighting at night between Magnús' men and the *Birkibeinar*.

“En þeir er á skipunum váru heyrðu ganga lúðra ok heróp upp á vølluna Þá reru þeir at landi ok settu upp merki sín, gengu síðan upp til þeira ok vilja duga sínum mǫnnum. En fyrir því at myrkt var finna þeir eigi fyrr en flóttamenninir hlaupa upp á þá ok því næst mœttu þeir kesjulögum ok sverðhoggum Birkibeina.”¹³⁹

“And those on the ship, hearing trumpets blown and war-shouts from the field, rowed their ship to land, set up their standard, and went to the aid of their men. And because it was dark, the fleeing men came unexpectedly, running against them and then next they were hit by the *kesjulag* and sword-hewing of the *Birkibeinar*.”

It seems that the *kesjulag* was not something that referred to a pitched battle with fixed battle-lines or shield-walls, but rather referred to the use of the *kesja* in a dispersed or individual manner. When it is first used in the text, the ships in question are still mobile, not yet brought close enough to one another for boarding and, as such there is very little opportunity for warriors to strike at one another and they must content themselves with hurling missiles and stabbing at their enemies from a relative distance with their *kesjur*. The second reference also implies that there was a lack of normal battle-space during the attack, given the confused and disordered state of the *Heklungar*.

There is another mention of *kesja* which is of note: Harald *kesja*, son of Erik Ejegod, King of Denmark in the late eleventh century, took *kesja* as his byname. He is described in the Dansk biografik Lexikon as follows:

139 *Sverris saga*, p. 112

“H. var en kraftig Kriger, som med Færdighed svang sin «Kesje», det svære, bredbladede Spyd; saaledes maa han have faaet sit Tilnavn «*Kesja*» i Lighed med andre Krigere, der nævntes efter deres Kesje, Spyd eller Sværd.”

"He was a powerful warrior, who swung his *kesja*, the heavy, broad-bladed spear, with great skill; thus he must have got his surname “*kesja*” in the same way as other warriors, who also were named after their *kesja*, spear, or sword.”¹⁴⁰

The reference here is telling for a number of reasons. First, it shows that the *kesja* was in common enough use during the 11th century to be used not only as a byname but also to be associated with military prowess. Secondly, Bricka's suggestion that other warriors took *kesja* as an epithet supports the idea that there was an ubiquity to the weapon, which removes it from the sphere of being a weapon used primarily by the nobility and moves it definitively into the area of professional or semi-professional warriors. The only curious element of Bricka's explanation is the description of the *kesja* as broad-bladed. As will be shown, the *kesja* was not likely to have had a particularly broad blade and, in fact, was likely to be narrower in profile than typical spears of the day.

When the *Heklungar* are attacked by the *Birkibeinar* in *Sverris saga*, the attack is not described as following the standard rules where formations meet one another, exchange missiles, and then charge. Rather, the *Heklungar* are said to 'meet the *kesjulag*' of the *Birkibeinar* during their advance, which implies that the *Heklungar* were unprepared for the assault and, quite possibly, were in loose order or a column-of-march, which allowed the *Birkibeinar* ambush to take full advantage of the confusion of the battle. This is also evident during the final battle during the bændr uprising at Oslo, when the bændr lines broke:

“Þá lugu lindiskildinir at þeim ok dugði ekki fyrir kesjulögum Birkibeina.”¹⁴¹

“Their linden shields failed them, and they could not stand before *kesjulags* of the *Birkibeinar*.”

Much like the first attack against the fleeing *Heklungar*, the ambush routs the

140 Bricka, p. 75

141 *Sverris saga*, p. 260

Heklungar and what began as battle between two relatively ordered formations of soldiers dissipates to the point where it is perhaps better viewed as a collection of duels or small skirmishes, rather than a single large-scale event.

Sverris saga includes numerous scenes where the *kesja* is mentioned as being used as a missile weapon,¹⁴² most obviously during the ambush by the *bœndr* during their uprising at Oslo.¹⁴³ but the saga's author also makes an important distinction that the *kesja* was a weapon commonly carried by the semi-professional Scandinavian warrior rather than the impressed or volunteering landowner. Prior to the Battle of Nidarós, Sverrir's army – such as it was – was composed primarily of poorly-armed farm-labourers.¹⁴⁴ When Sverrir's party is approached by one of these supporters, it is noted that the man – Eyvindr – carries no weapon other than a heavy tree-branch.¹⁴⁵ While such a weapon would be of great value to the duellist or heroic warrior fighting in single combat with ample room to manoeuvre, a soldier would find little use for it. As such, one of Sverrir's men – Hjarrandi hviða – commends Eyvindr's bravery for wishing to face the enemy armed only with a great club, but seems to realize the folly of allowing a man to be armed so in combat when he loans Eyvindr his own personal *kesja* and hand-axe.¹⁴⁶

The loan of his personal weapons so close to battle suggests that Hjarrandi would have had access to replacement equipment – after all, it would hardly do for him to go into battle alongside his king while unarmed. The loan of the hand-axe would be in and of itself a significant reduction in Hjarrandi's efficacy in battle should there be no replacement for it, but the gift of the *kesja* is far more worth noting; it suggests a place for Eyvindr – possibly replacing Hjarrandi – within the front few ranks of battle, where his *kesja* would be able to be used alongside others in a formation. Insofar as Hjarrandi's replacement of his weapons is concerned, it is likely that the *kesja* would be a weapon which would be of primary concern to replace, since – as a spear – it would be able to provide an extension of Hjarrandi's range in battle, as well as ensure he could take part in at least two of the three phases of combat – the intermediary meeting of formations, and the close combat or hewing phase. If he carried multiple *kesjur*, then it is likely that he could participate in the initial bombardment as well without disarming himself. This scene suggests either an ubiquity for the

142 cf. *Sverris saga* p. 223, 252 & *Færyinga saga*, *Ólafs saga Odds*, pp.267, 345

143 *Sverris saga*, pp. 59-61

144 Ibid.

145 *Sverris saga*, pp. 59-61. It should be noted that a tree-branch, provided it is of sufficient strength, would make a formidable club in the hands of a strong man, as Eyvindr clearly is described. However, its value in a pitched battle, where lines of soldiers would face one another, would be dubious at best. The great amount of space needed to swing such an object with sufficient force to be lethal – or at least dangerous – would severely limit its employment.

146 Ibid., p. 60

kesja in the Norwegian armies of the day which would negate the loss of such a weapon for one of the King's personal coterie, or that the value of spear-armed infantry en masse was greater than having a small group of spear-armed bodyguards surrounding the king.

There is another scene of implied ubiquity for the *kesja* in military usage later in the saga, when Sverrir is wounded at Íluvellir. His attacker, Brynjólfir, son of Kálf sendimaðr, managed to wound the king in his ear and neck. The response from Sverrir's men was swift and decisive:

“...ok þegar stóðu sverðin ok kesjurnar svá þykkt á honum Brynjólfi at hann mátti varla falla fyrir.”

"...and then stood swords and *kesjurnar* so thickly in him that Brynjólfir could hardly fall to the ground."¹⁴⁷

While doubtless involving a good deal of hyperbole, it is noteworthy that the author – who, it must be remembered, was writing roughly contemporaneously to the events of the saga, and at the behest of Sverrir himself¹⁴⁸ – states that it was *kesjur* rather than *spjótin*, *fleinarnir*, *atgeirarnir*, or any other weapon that brought down Brynjólfir, along with *sverð*. This was likely a very conscious decision by the author of the saga. After all, the weapons which meted out retribution to one who would attack the king were both those of the nobility – the swords – and those of, presumably, the common soldier, which would certainly assist with cementing the idea of Sverrir being a king beloved by his subjects.

The relatively common occurrence of *kesjur* in Old Norse, especially in texts dealing with Norwegian military events, suggests that the weapon was one which could be found in the budding semi-professional armies of contemporary Norway. This affiliation of the *kesja* with the militaries of the time also suggests that *kesjur* were both straightforward in design – being able to be made in great quantities, and in a great number of forges of varying quality, in order to fulfil the needs of large numbers of soldiers – as well as being an extremely efficient weapon for use during large-scale battles. This efficiency is likely due to the multi-use nature of the weapon, as *kesjur* are used as missiles far more frequently than other spears, especially in *Sverris saga*. The lack of hewing with *kesjur* in *Sverris saga* suggests that the *kesja* functioned not very differently from a regular

¹⁴⁷ *Sverris saga*, p. 75

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3

spjót in battle. What distinction between the two weapons, then, could be their physical shape.

Unfortunately, the ubiquity of the *kesja* amongst militaries of the era does not assist us with identifying them within the archaeological record. Fortunately, *Egils saga* contains a great number of references to *kesjur*, including the famous description of Þórólfr's *kesja* at the Battle of Brunanburh and duel against Berg-Qnundr,¹⁴⁹ where it appears as though it is not only a common choice of long-arm¹⁵⁰ for Egill, but also for other professional or semi-professional warriors. The majority of the occurrences of *kesjur* in *Egils saga* are, appropriately, concerning battles or duels, where the actions of Egill, Þórólfr, and Berg-Qnundr all provide key information as to not only the use of the *kesja*, but also its physical form.

The first – and perhaps the most famous – reference to *kesjur* in *Egils saga* is at the battle of Brunanburh. This single sentence provides what is possibly one of the most detailed descriptions of a weapon in Old Norse, which is a rarity in and of itself, but is also of great value to determining the physical form of the *kesja*. Þórólfr's *kesja* is described as follows:

“...fjōðrin var tveggja álna lōng ok sleginn fram broddr ferstrendr, en upp var fjōðrin breið, falrinn bæði langr ok digr, skaftit var eigi hæra en taka mátti hendi til fals ok furðuliga digrt. ”

"...the spear-blade was two ells long and the edges were forged to a square point, and the top of the spear-blade was broad, the socket both long and stout, the shaft was just high enough for the hand to touch the socket, and was extremely thick."¹⁵¹

While we can assume that the saga's author has taken some liberties with the description,¹⁵² there are several elements of it which we can consider reliable, the most important of which is that the blade's dimensions are essentially given. The fact that it is described as having been forged with its edges coming to a square point is especially important, as it implies that the *kesja* had a quadrangular cross section, which narrows the field of possible candidates significantly. The description of the socket as being long and stout also assists with narrowing the field of potential

¹⁴⁹ *Egils saga*, pp. 168-169

¹⁵⁰ As opposed to a side-arm like his swords. It provides Egill with a variety of longer-ranged options for confronting his opponents, including thrusting and throwing, while a sword, axe, or sax would only allow him to be effective at close range combat.

¹⁵¹ *Egils saga*, p.136

¹⁵² There are no extant spearheads two ells – approximately 91.5 centimetres – in length; indeed, most sword blades of the era do not reach such a length.

kesjur in the archaeological record, as there are several types of blades which could fit the description above. Insofar as the fact that the blade of the *kesja* is described as being a massive two ells¹⁵³ in length is concerned, it is doubtless that the saga author took some poetic license, giving his heroes – for both Egill and Þórólfr carry the same arms at Brunanburh – weapons which would set them head and shoulders above their compatriots. The *kesjur* are, in that respect, no different in intent from Gunnar's singing atgeirr, although considerably more mundane; the blades, while immense and thus requiring great strength to wield effectively, were still forged by normal smiths and not imbued with any sorcery or granted any extraordinary abilities.

Another element from Egils saga to consider – and one which is common with the references to the weapon in Óláfrs saga and Sverris saga – is that Egill and Berg-Qnundr both hurl their *kesjur* at one another during their duel. While Berg-Qnundr's *kesja* bounces off of Egill's angled shield, Egill's own is driven squarely into Berg-Qnundr's flat shield.¹⁵⁴ This deflection is an important element of identifying the the *kesja* as the flatness of shields from the period when Egils saga is set would generally cause a spear with a wide blade – that is to say one with a lenticular cross section – to stick into the boards when it is stopped mid-flight, provided it was not held parallel or nearly-parallel to the flight-path of the spear, while a quadrangular spearhead with very small projecting cutting edges would need to hit the timber directly or bounce off, as Berg-Qnundr's did.

This propensity to hurl the *kesja* cannot be ignored while examining the archaeological record. Given the descriptions provided in Óláfrs saga Odds, Sverris saga, and Egils saga of *kesjur* being used both as a missile and a mêlée weapon, it is reasonable to assume that the spearhead was relatively heavy, in order to facilitate a thick enough shaft to be used in close combat, and that the mention of *skammskeptar kesjur* refer to an anomalously short weapon. After all, a short-shafted missile weapon would need to have a much smaller head in order to be balanced enough to throw with any degree of accuracy.¹⁵⁵ Given the paucity of metre-long spearheads in the archaeological record, we can be fairly certain that the *kesjur* were not monstrously large swords-on-sticks, as is suggested by the description in Egils saga, but it seems likely that they did possess relatively large

¹⁵³ Approximately 94-95cm

¹⁵⁴ Egils saga, p. 168

¹⁵⁵ A heavier head requires more weight at the opposite end to balance it; a short-shafted weapon with a heavy head would, while causing a large amount of damage to its target, be accurate only at a relatively short distance, as it would tend to drop much more quickly than a weapon with a longer – and thus more balanced – shaft.

heads and sockets. This will also assist with narrowing the field of potential candidates for *kesjur* in the archaeological record.

It should also be noted that, unlike the *atgeirr*, the *kesja* is found in all three major battle-spaces of the Viking Age. It is a soldier's weapon, first and foremost, and is most often employed in relatively large-scale conflicts, as is made evident in *Ólafs saga Trygvassonar*, *Sverris saga* and *Egils saga*. It is also used in a naval context, when Egill attacks the men on Rognvaldr's ship. Egill also carries his *kesja* when he fights his heroic duel against Berg-Qnnundr, and both men hurl their *kesjur* at one another. This use of the weapon regardless of the environment might simply be an affectation of Egill's, but it is not likely – after all, Berg-Qnnundr is also armed with a *kesja*, and as he was leading a company of men to capture Egill at the time. It is likely that Berg-Qnnundr would have chosen to outfit himself with weapons which would be best used not only alone, but also in a group of men, should his group be forced to face Egill's group in a pitched battle.

Kesjur in the archaeological record

As mentioned, the *kesja*'s description in *Egils saga* gives us several candidates for examination. First, though, there is a matter of terminology to address, specifically the term *brynþvari*. While *Egils saga* indicates that the style of *spjót* described was also referred to as *brynþvari*,¹⁵⁶ Sigurður Nordal suggests that the *brynþvari* was a type of *kesja*, as well as a *hoggspjót*,¹⁵⁷ and Falk confirms that *brynþvarar* were related to *kesjur*,¹⁵⁸ but states that *kesjur* were primarily missiles, rather than close combat weapons, but could be used in both cases.¹⁵⁹ This leads to a great deal of confusion when comparing the weapons, as De Vries indicates that *kesjur* were dedicated missiles¹⁶⁰ and *brynþvarar* were armour-piercing spears.¹⁶¹ Neither etymology implies any hewing, which suggests that Falk and Nordal's assessments of *kesjur* as *hoggspjót*¹⁶² may be false. While we do have instances of *kesjur* being used to hew with,¹⁶³ they are not particularly common; certainly not common enough to warrant the appellation of *hoggspjót* be given to *kesjur*.

¹⁵⁶*Egils saga*, p. 136

¹⁵⁷See *Egils saga*, p. 136, footnote 1

¹⁵⁸Falk, *AW*, p. 80

¹⁵⁹Falk, *AW*, pp. 78-79

¹⁶⁰De Vries, *AEW*, p. 307

¹⁶¹De Vries, *AEW*, p. 62

¹⁶²Falk, *AW*, 80

¹⁶³*Egils saga*, p. 138, though Nordal does use the term *spjót* instead of *kesja* in his edition.

The description of the *brynþvari* given in Egils saga could well be one of a *kesja* as well, as the description of the weapon given in Nordal's edition varies from the manuscript in AM 132 fol, where it is referred to as a *kesja*, rather than a *spjót*.¹⁶⁴ This makes the *kesja* of Egils saga an interesting weapon to examine in light of Falk's assessment that *brynþvarar* were a distinct subtype of *kesjur*.¹⁶⁵ While it does seem a reasonable assessment, given that the description of the *brynþvari* suggests a heavy weapon meant solely for close combat rather than use as a missile.¹⁶⁶ Unfortunately, apart from the short, thick shaft, the description gives us very little to differentiate *kesjur* from *brynþvarar*, considering that there was already a mention of short-shafted *kesjur* in Óláfs saga Odds,¹⁶⁷ which implies that standard *kesjur* had relatively long shafts. The only other element which could have a particular significance to distinguishing the *brynþvari* from a *kesja* is the *járnteinn* through the *falr* of the weapon. This iron spike could refer to any number of different accoutrements on a spear socket, but considering that Þórólfr is described as hewing with his *brynþvari*,¹⁶⁸ it seems likely that this is a projecting point intended to pierce armour.

When attempting to identify the we should look for the most obvious attribute of the *kesja* – the blade. While it is likely that the hyperbolically large blades of the *kesja* in Egils saga have no analogue in the archaeological record the description does give us a good footing to begin looking. The first element to examine is the blade's geometry, and its cross-section in particular. The description in Egils saga indicates that the blade likely has a quadrangular cross-section,¹⁶⁹ which does significantly limit the list of potential candidates. There are a number of general types of spearheads, identified in Rygh as R519-R523,¹⁷⁰ R530 and 532a,¹⁷¹ which possess quadrangular cross-sections. These spears, by virtue of the stiffness imparted by the quadrangular shape of their cross-section, would make excellent weapons for piercing armour and certainly qualify themselves for the appellation of *brynþvari*¹⁷² given in Egils saga.¹⁷³ Due to their quadrangular cross-sections,

164See Bjarni, ES1, p. 82

165Falk, AW, p. 80

166A large, heavy head combined with a thick, short shaft would make for a very difficult to handle missile.

167Óláfs saga Odds, p. 345

168Egils saga, p. 138

169The description of the blade as being '*ferstrendr*,' or square, in shape suggests a blade cross section that is more acute than the more common lenticular cross sections.

170See Image 7 in the Appendix of Images for the objects in Rygh.

171See Image 10 in the Appendix of Images for objects R530 and R532a

172Literally 'armour spears,' although the implication is that they were armour *piercing* spears. The quadrangular cross-section provides an added amount of stiffness to the point, though it does thicken the overall dimensions of the blade and reduce it's effectiveness as a hewing weapon.

173Egils saga, p. 138

these objects make excellent candidates for further examination in the hope that they contain all of the other features of the *kesja* as described in Egils saga.

The description of the spear-blade being “broad above” is curious, to say the least, and does pose a degree of difficulty in determining just what is being described. If the saga author was referring to the width of the blade at the point, then the *kesja* would be a rather poor weapon for piercing, as well as being grossly unaerodynamic when used as a missile, so we can rule that out. It is likely, then, that the description of the *kesja* in Egils saga refers to a bulge in the blade, whether at the mid-point or closer to the end of the blade itself. Both options would provide a degree of stability to the *kesja* as it was thrown, as well as making it more easily wielded in one hand during battle. The question, though, is what is the blade broader than? The safe assumption is that the blade is broader at one point than the socket, which eliminates R522 as a candidate for the *kesja*. While spears with a head similar to R522 do indeed taper to an acute point from a flare near the middle of the blade, the flared portion is not wider than the socket and, as such, could not be considered to be particularly broad. Falk would appear to disagree with this assessment, instead interpreting the *kesja* as a distinct weapon from the *brynþvari* described in Egils saga.¹⁷⁴ Falk's suggestion that the *kesja* was a spear similar to R520, and that the *brynþvari* was more akin to the spears found at Nydam Mose¹⁷⁵ does not seem to hold weight when the difference in age between the spears found at Nydam Mose and the reference to *brynþvarar* at Brunanburh are taken into account.¹⁷⁶ Furthermore, the physical appearance of the R520 spear does not match the description of the *brynþvari* in Egils saga, being relatively short-socketed, and having blades with a fairly consistent width and minimal taper. Instead, spears similar to R519 and 521 might be more likely candidates. Unfortunately, the R519 type, while broad at the base and tapering sharply to a quadrangular point, does not appear to have been found in great enough numbers, or in the correct context, for Petersen to include them within his typology at all. Spears similar to R521, however, appear in Petersen as exemplars of his I-type and, while not considerably broad at the base, do taper to a quadrangular point and are possessed of a relatively long blade, making them good representations of the long *kesjur* described in Egils saga.

¹⁷⁴Falk, pp. 80-81

¹⁷⁵Ibid.

¹⁷⁶The spears found at the Nydam Mose site are dated to no later than the fifth century CE, while the battle of Brunanburh is dated to the second quarter of the tenth century CE. See the Nydam Society's site on weapons for information regarding the dating of the weapons found at Nydam Mose, and Giles' translation of Wendover, p. 249

The next element of the *kesja* to be examined is the socket connecting the spear-head to the shaft. The relative thickness of spear sockets is uniform throughout the candidates in Rygh, but it could be that the saga author was simply embellishing this element of the weapon to set the Skalla-Grímsynir apart from their compatriots. The length of the socket, however, is of great importance as a longer socket provides more protection for the shaft of the spear, thus denying the opportunity for an opponent to shatter the weapon and leave its wielder unable to attack effectively. With the exceptions of R521, R530, and R532a, the sockets of the spears in Rygh tend to fall within a range of 7 to 15 centimetres in length, once the proper scaling has been accounted for. The sockets of R521, R530, and R532a, however, are much longer, extending upwards of 18 centimetres in length, once the scale has been accounted for. The length of the socket would then, suggest that these three spear-heads are members of the typology under which the *kesja* would fall. Falk's choices of exemplar for his *kesja* is possessed of socket which falls within the average range of types in Rygh, though it is on the shorter end of the spectrum.¹⁷⁷

With the assumption that R521, R530, and R532a are indeed the most likely of the previously mentioned candidates to be *kesjur*, the question now is which typology do they fall under in Petersen? Fortunately, Petersen has used the same exemplars as Rygh when generating his typology of spears and we can find object R521 as the exemplar for his I-type spears.¹⁷⁸ There is, however, another category of spears, not represented in Rygh, which could prove to be the *kesja*. Petersen's F-type spear is possessed of all of the qualities mentioned in the description from Egils saga: it has a roughly quadrangular cross-section due to a prominent mid-rib; it has a distinct flaring at the base of the blade, making it significantly more broad than the socket or shaft of the spear; its socket is quite long – as long as the blade itself, in fact; and its shape would lend itself well to being thrown, as the prominent flare at the base of the blade would provide some aerodynamic lift to the projectile.

Despite these characteristics, however the F-type spearheads lack a defining characteristic given in the description of Þórólfr and Egill's *kesjur*; they are simply not that long. At approximately 36 centimetres, once scaling is accounted for, the exemplar provided in Petersen is nearly a third the size of the *kesjur* described in Egils saga. By way of comparison, the I-type spears presented in Petersen are approximately 66 centimetres in length, with the sockets making up

¹⁷⁷ R520 having a socket approximately 10 centimetres in length, based on the image provided; see Image 7 in Appendix.

¹⁷⁸ See Appendix of Images, Images 7 & 8

approximately a third of the total size. While these spears are certainly not as massive as the weapons described in Egils saga, they do come close to the gigantic proportions of Þórólfr and Egill's weapons. This great length does provide a number of advantages for the *kesja* and its wielder, the most important of which is that it allows for a sizable distance to be maintained between combatants, while at the same time limiting the likelihood of the spear-shaft being damaged or broken during battle. The I-type spearheads would also make admirable missiles, as their great length would add mass to the head of the spear while their narrow profile would prevent any loss of aerodynamic qualities when it was hurled.

There is also the relatively late arrival of the form in the context of Scandinavian weapons to examine. The first occurrences of the I-type spearheads occurring near the beginning of the 10th century,¹⁷⁹ which would place it well within the time frame of the Battle of Brunanburh, and it is not inconceivable that the general form would have persisted through until the thirteenth century. The great longevity of these forms should not be discounted, as weapons are not typically subject to any great changes over the course of time, with swords being the great exception to the rule. Once a spear form has been found which performs its task reliably and effectively, there is little incentive to make any alterations to the basic profile. It is not inconceivable, then, that the Peterson I-type spear, with a possible lengthening of the blade by the time of the writing of Egils saga, maintained a presence in the armouries of Scandinavian nobles for such a long time, along side other weapon forms which did not change overmuch, such as the *skeggǫx* and regular axe-head.

In an Icelandic context, spears of the I-type appear only once,¹⁸⁰ although this is not terribly surprising, considering that *kesjur* are associated with military adventures; even in the sagas, few Icelanders associate themselves with the war-fighting element of a King's court, instead focusing more on the social, political, and financial elements of courtly life. The spear found in Kaldárhöfða, though, is of a considerable length¹⁸¹ and would certainly have been a useful weapon to have at ones side during a pitched battle, making it a reasonable extrapolation for the narrator of Egils saga to provide the Skalla-Grímsynir with weapons of a similar, if somewhat more heroic, form. It is entirely possible that whomever owned the I-type spear was, at some point, employed as a mercenary or a *hirðmaðr* in a Continental or English army and returned to Iceland with his *kesja*, though that begins to move solidly into the realm of conjecture.

¹⁷⁹Petersen, p. 31

¹⁸⁰Kristján, pp. 278-279

¹⁸¹Kristján reports it as 63cm in length, making it roughly 1.3 ells in length and certainly a candidate for something similar to the *kesjur* used by Egill and Þórólfr at Brunnanburh

Appendix of Images



Image 1:

Detail of an illumination from MS. Arundel 83 (the 'Howard Psalter and Book of Hours'), 132v, ca. 1310 in England, showing a proto-halberd or possibly sparða¹⁸² in the hands of the leftmost guard, although it notably lacks any dedicated thrusting points

¹⁸²A Scottish and Irish weapon commonly referred to as a Sparth Axe, variants of which continued to be used from the 11th to 16th centuries; see Caldwell for more information.



Image 2:

A woodcut of the Battle of Flodden (1513) by Hans Burgkmair (d. 1531), showing the final attack of the English billmen (right) on the Scots pikemen, made shortly after the battle. The bills carried by the English demonstrate the characteristic thick, curving blade with sharp thrusting tip.



Image 3:

Detail of illumination from 7v, MS lat 1023, dated ca. 1295, showing David, Saul, and Goliath armed and armoured in typical late 13th century fashion, with full mail armour and long swords which appear to be Oakeshott Types XII (Saul and David) and XIV (Goliath), both types of which would be contemporaneous to the creation of the manuscript.¹⁸³

¹⁸³See Oakeshott, pp. 206-213 for a discussion of these sword types and their characteristics, as well as their archaeological provenance.



Image 4:

Axe heads of Petersen types L (top) and M (centre, bottom), from Petersen, p. 45

Scale is provided in image, and image has not been resized.



Previous Page:

Image 5:

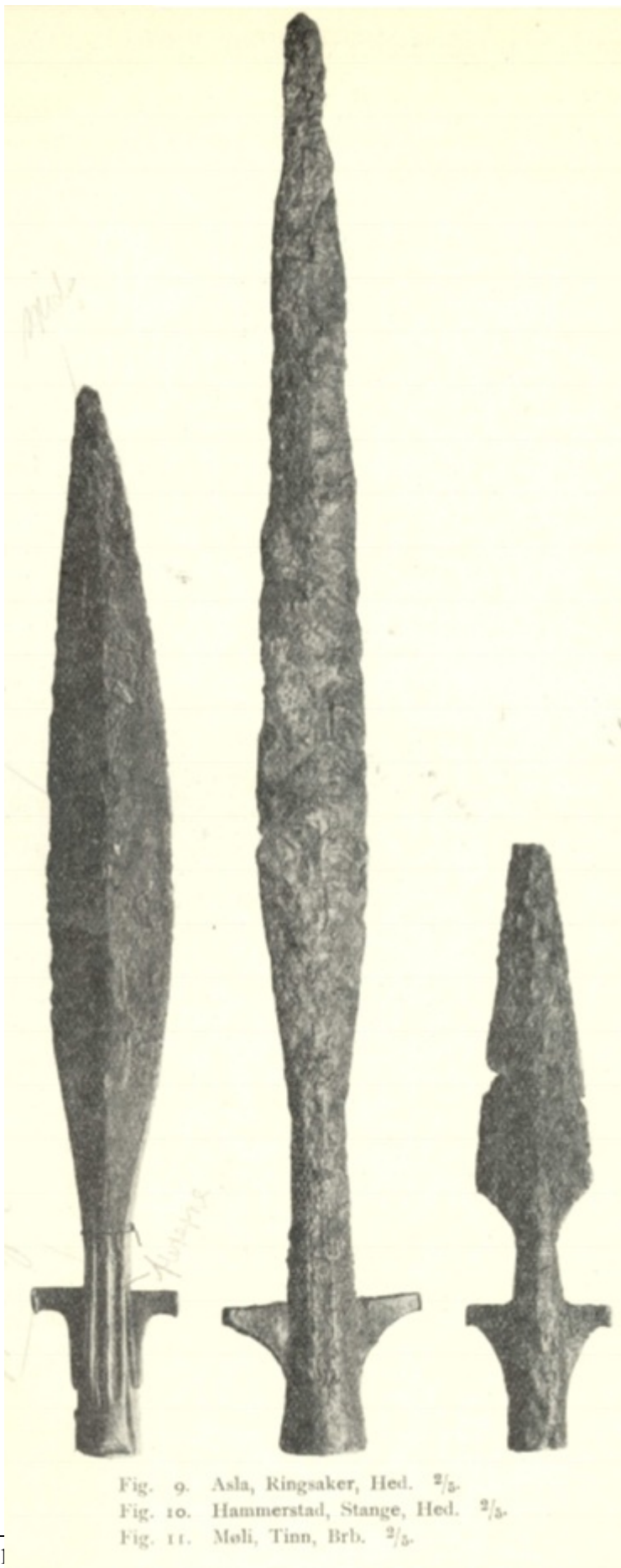
“Invasion of Danes,” M 736 folio 9v, depicting men aboard ships armed with at least four spears with projecting lugs below the heads. The long-shafted axe in the hand of the man disembarking the foremost ship implies a continuity with the ship-board armaments mentioned in Konnungs skuggsjá.

Current Page:

Image 6:

Spears of Petersen type C (left) and D (centre, right).¹⁸⁴ These spears are identified as Thålin type 2, which make them contemporaneous with the events in Njáls saga.

Scale is provided in image, and image has not been resized.





519. $\frac{1}{4}$



520. $\frac{1}{3}$



521. $\frac{1}{3}$

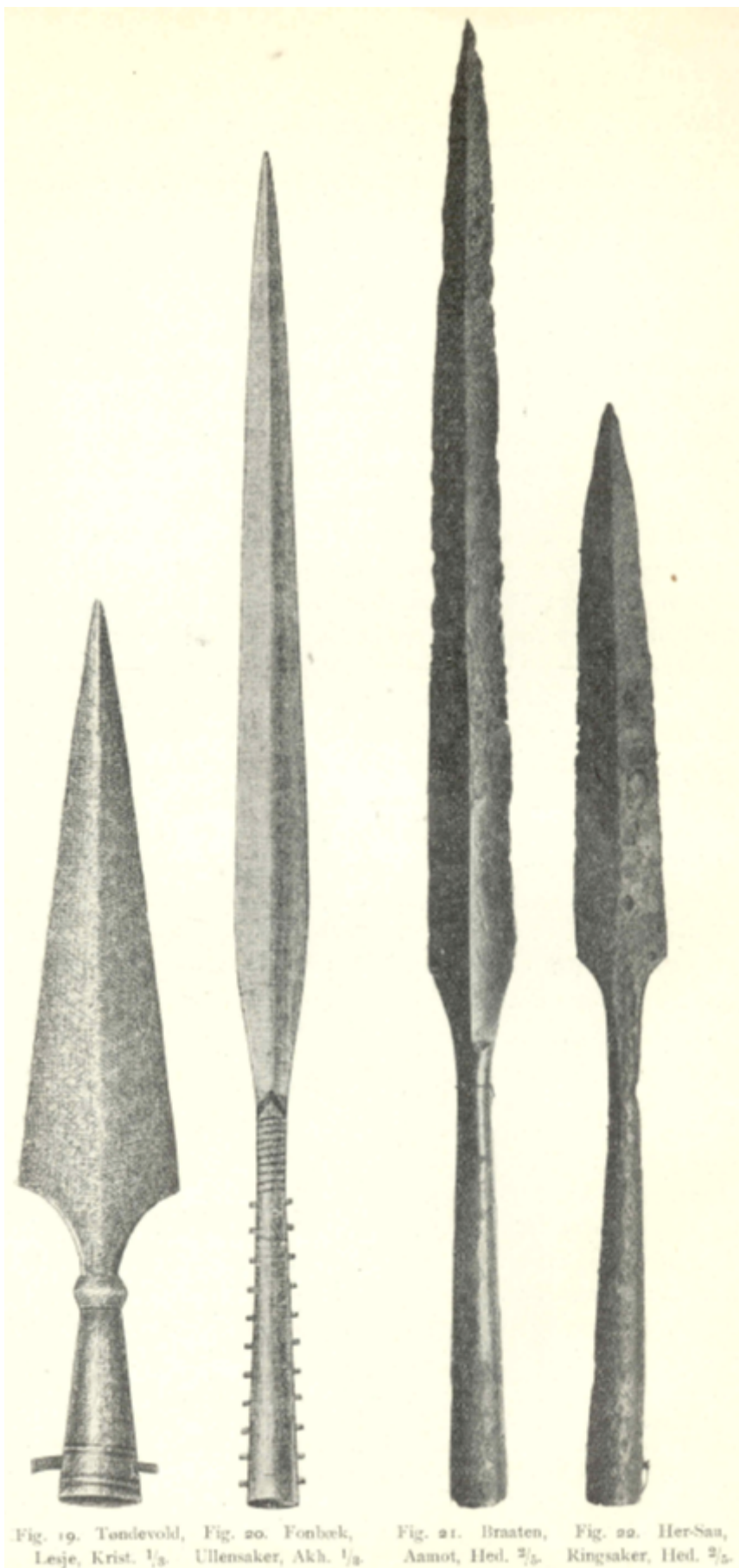


522. $\frac{1}{3}$



523. $\frac{1}{3}$

519—523. Spydspidser af Jern (522 damaseret).
Pointes de lance en fer (522 damasquinée).



Previous Page:

Image 7:

Spears from Rygh, p. 150
 Scale is provided in image,
 and image has not been
 resized.

Current Page:

Image 8:

Spears of Petersen types H
 (left), I (centre pair), and K
 (rightmost). From Petersen,
 p. 32.

Scale is provided in image,
 and image not been resized.



Image 9:

Spearhead of Petersen Type

F. From Petersen, p. 27

Scale is provided in image,
and image has not been
resized.



Image 10:

Spears from Rygh, p. 153

Scale is provided in image,
and image has not been
resized.

Bibliography

- 5298ckron. Website. <http://dataonp.hum.ku.dk/webart/a/at/5298ckron.htm> Retrieved 10/04/2014
- 43240ckron. Website. <http://dataonp.ad.sc.ku.dk/webart/k/ke/43240ckron.htm> Retrieved 10/04/2014
- Árni Böðvarsson and Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon. Íslenzk orðabók. Mál og Menning, Reykjavík, 1992
- Bealer, Alex W. The Art of Blacksmithing. Castle Books, New York. 1995
- Bennet, Matthew. “*La Règle du Temple* as a Military Manual, or, How to Deliver a Cavalry Charge” in Studies in Medieval History: Presented to R. Allen Brown, Christopher Harper, C.J. Holdsworth, and Janet Laughland Nelson, eds. Boydell Press, Rochester. 1989
- bibliotheca Augustana*. Website.
http://www.hs-augsburg.de/~harsch/Chronologia/Lspost11/Bayeux/-bay_tama.html
Retrieved 03/03/14
- Bjarni Aðalbjarnsarson, ed. Heimskringla III, Íslenzk fornrit XXVIII. Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, Reykjavík, 1979
- Bjarni Einarsson ed. Egils saga Skallagrímssonar 1, efter forarbejder af Jón Helgason, Editiones Arnamagnæanæ: Series A, 19. København, 2001
- Björn K. Þórólfsson, and Guðni Jónsson, eds. Vestfirðinga sögur, Íslensk Fornrit VI. Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, Reykjavík,
- British Museum Collection Search: You searched for spear-head viking*. Website.
http://www.britishmuseum.org/system_pages/beta_collection_introduction/beta_collection_search_results.aspx?searchText=spear-head+viking Retrieved 21/09/12
- Buerlein, Robert A (2002). Allied Military Fighting Knives: And the Men Who Made Them Famous. Paladin Press, Boulder. 2002
- “Calculate Your BMI – Metric BMI Calculator” *US Department of Health and Human Services*. Website. <http://nhlbisupport.com/bmi/bmi-m.htm> Retrieved 3/10/12
- Caldwell, David. “Some Notes on Scottish Axes and Long Shafted Weapons,” pp. 262- 276 in Scottish Weapons and Fortifications 1100-1800, David Caldwell, ed. John Donald, Edinburgh, 1981
- Cook, Robert, trans. Njáls saga. Penguin, London. 2001
- Coupland, Simon, “Carolingian Arms and Armour in the Ninth century,” *De Rei Militari*. Website. <http://deremilitari.org/2014/02/carolingian-arms-and-armor-in-the-ninth-century/> Retrieved on 07/04/14
- Cowan, Ross. “Flodden: Scotland's Greatest Defeat,” in Military History Monthly, Volume 37,

October 2013, pp. 52-59

DaSent, Sir George Webbe, trans. The story of Burnt Njal: From the Icelandic of the Njals Saga. Grant Richards, London, 1900

Demmin, Auguste, C.C. Black, trans. An Illustrated History of Arms and Armour. George Bell & Sons, London, 1894

“Den virtuella floren: *Fraxinus excelsior* distribution.” Website.

<http://linnaeus.nrm.se/flora/di/olea/fraxi/fraxexc.jpg> Retrieved 26/09/12

De Vries, Jan. Altnordisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch. E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1962

DeVries, Kelly, and Robert Douglas Smith. Medieval Weapons: An Illustrated History of their Impact. ABC-CLIO, Santa Barbara, 2007

Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, ed. Brennu-Njáls saga, Íslenzk fornrit XII. Hið íslenska fornritafélag, Reykjavík, 1954

----- Eyrbyggja saga, Íslenzk fornrit IV. Hið íslenska fornrit félag, Reykjavík, 1985

----- Laxdæla saga, Íslenzk fornrit V. Hið íslenska fornritfélag, Reykjavík, 1934

“European Ash: European Wood” *European Wood.org*. Website.

<http://jp.europeanwood.org/en/living-with-wood/selected-european-wood-species/european-ash/> Retrieved 3 October, 2012

Falk, Hjalmar. Altnordische Waffenkunde. Dybwad, Kristiana, 1914

Finnur Jónsson, ed. Saga Óláfs Trygvassonar af Oddr Snorrason munk. København. 1932

Fuglesang, Signe Horn. Some Aspects of the Ringerike Style: A phase of 11th century Scandinavian art. Odense University Press, Odense, 1980

Gardiner, E. Norman. “Throwing the Javelin” in The Journal of Hellenic Studies, Vol. 27, pp. 249-273. The Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies, London, 1907

Gísli Sigurðsson. The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2004

Grancsay, Stephen V. “Irish Bronze Age Weapons,” in The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin, New Series, Vol. 7, No. 7, pp. 181-185. New York, 1949

Graham-Campbell, James. Viking artefacts: a selected catalogue. British Museum Publications, London. 1980

Green, Rev. W.C, trans. The Story of Egil Skallagrimsson. Elliot Stock, London, 1893

Griffith, Paddy. The Viking Art of War. Greenhill Books, London. 1995

Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, eds. Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda, Vol. 2. Bókaútgáfan Forni, Reykjavík, 1944

----- Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda, Vol. 3. Prentverk Odds Björnssonar H.F., Reykjavík, 1954

- Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda, Vol. 4. Prentverk Odds Björnssonar H.F., Reykjavík, 1954
- Guðni Jónsson, ed. Þiðreks saga af Bern, Vols. 1&2. Prentverk Odds Björnssonar, Reykjavík, 1984
- "halberd." *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online Academic Edition*. Website.
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/252235/halberd> Retrieved 07/04/2014
- Hampden, Valerie Dawn. "Viking Age Arms and Armor Originating in the Frankish Kingdom,"
 in The Hilltop Review: Vol. 4: Iss. 2, Article 8, 2011
- Harris, H. A. "Greek Javelin Throwing," in Greece & Rome, Second Series, Vol. 10, No. 1, pp. 26-36. Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Classical Association, Cambridge, 1963
- Hollander, Lee M. The Skalds: A Selection of Their Poems with Introduction and Notes. Ann Arbor Paperback, Ann Arbor, 1968
- Holm-Olsen, Ludvig, ed. and ed. facs. Den gammelnorske oversettelsen av Pamphilus med en undersøkelse av paleografi og lydverk. Thesis. Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi i Oslo, Oslo, 1940
- Indrebø, Gustav, ed. Sverris saga etter Cod. AM 327 4º. Kristiana. 1920
- Johnsen, Oscar Albert & Jón Helgason, eds. Saga Óláfs konungs hins helga : Den store saga om Olav den hellige efter pergamenthåndskrift i Kungliga Biblioteket i Stockholm nr. 2 4to. Oslo, 1941
- Jón Helgason, ed. Íslenzk miðaldarkvæði: Íslandske digte fra senmiddelalderen, Vol. 1. Munksgaard, København, 1936
- Jónas Kristjánsson, ed. Eyfirdinga sögur, Íslenzk fornrit IX. Hið íslenska fornritafélag, Reykjavík, 1956
- Kelly, Patrick. "Understanding Blade Properties," *My Armoury.com*. Website.
http://www.myarmoury.com/feature_properties.html Retrieved 07/04/2014
- Kock, Ernst Albin, ed. Den Norsk-Islandska Skaldediktningen, Vol. 1. Carl Bloms Boktryckeri, Lund, 1946
- Kristján Eldjárn. Kuml og haugfé úr heiðnum sið á Íslandi. Norðri, Akureyri, 1956
- Magnús Már Larússon. Konnungs skuggsjá: Speculum Regale. H.F. Leiftur, Reykjavík, 1955
- Mandia, Scott. *Decline of the Vikings in Iceland*. Website.
http://www2.sunysuffolk.edu/mandias/lia/decline_of_vikings_iceland.html Retrieved 07/04/2014
- "Mass, Weight, Density or Specific Gravity of Different Metals." Website.
http://www.simetric.co.uk/si_metals.htm Retrieved 26/09/12
- Maryon, Herbert. "Pattern-Welding and Damascening of Sword-Blades: Part 1 Pattern-Welding,"
 in Studies in Conservation: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, pp. 25-37. February, 1960

- “Pattern-Welding and Damascening of Sword-Blades: Part 2 the Damascene Process,” in Studies in Conservation: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, pp. 52-60. February, 1960
- Miller, William Ian. Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1990
- Oakeshott, R. Ewart. The Archaeology of Weapons: Arms and Armour from Prehistory to the Age of Chivalry. Dover Publications, New York, 1996
- Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog – Københavns Universitet*. Website. Retrieved 22/04/2014
- Pálsson, Hermann, and Magnus Magnusson. “Njál's saga,” in The Icelandic Sagas, pp. 498-753, Magnus Magnusson, ed. The Folio Society, London, 1999
- Pálsson, Hermann, and Paul Edwards. “Egil's saga,” in The Icelandic Sagas, pp. 67-246, Magnus Magnusson, ed. The Folio Society, London, 1999
- Peirce, Ian, and R. Ewart Oakeshott. Swords of the Viking Age. The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2002.
- Petersen, Jan. De Norske Vikingsverd: En Typologisk-Kronologisk Studie Over Vikingetidens Vaaben. Dybwad, Kristiana, 1919
- Price, Neil, and Stefan Brink, eds. The Viking World. Routledge, New York, 2008.
- “Reinhardt collection.” Website.
<http://www.hankreinhardt.com/Sale/Pole%20arms/pole%20arms%20096.htm> Retrieved 07/04/2014
- Rygh, Oluf. Norske oldsager, ordnede og forklarede. Cammermayer, Kristiana, 1885.
- Schmid, Magdalena. PhD Dissertation, Háskóli Íslands. Unpublished as of 2014.
- Shetileg, Haakon, ed. Viking Antiquities in Great Britain and Ireland, Vol. V. H. Aschehoug & Co, Oslo, 1940
- Shetileg, Haakon, and Hjalmark Falk, E.V. Gordon trans. Scandinavian Archaeology. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1937
- Short, William R. Viking Weapons & Combat Techniques. Westholme, Yeardley, 2009
- Sigfús Blöndal. Íslenzk-dönsk orðabók, Vol. 1 A-L. Íslensk-danskur orðabókarsjóður, Reykjavík, 1980
- Sigurður Nordal, ed. Egils saga, Íslenzk fornrit II. Hið íslenska fornritafélag, Reykjavík, 1933
- Silver, George. “*Paradoxes of Defence*.” Website. <http://www.thearma.org/Manuals/GSilver.htm>
Retrieved 07/04/2014
- skaldic database*. Website. <http://abdn.ac.uk/skaldic/m.php?p=skaldic> Last retrieved 22/04/14
- Spoerl, Joseph S. “A Brief History of Iron and Steel Production,” *A Brief History of Iron and Steel Production*. Website. <http://www.anselm.edu/homepage/dbanach/h-carnegie-steel.htm>

Retrieved 2/07/2012

Sprague, Martina. Norse Warfare: Unconventional Battle Strategies of the Ancient Vikings.

Hippocrene Books, New York. 2007

“Viking Axe Techniques” *Hurstwic: Viking Axe Techniques*. Website.

http://www.hurstwic.org/history/articles/manufacturing/text/viking_axe_techniques.htm Retrieved 1/12/12

Vilhjálmur Finsen, ed. Grágás : Elzta lögbók íslendinga ... eptir skinnbókinni í bókasafni konungs 1-2. København, 1852

Vitruvius, Morris Hicky Morgan, trans. *The Ten Books on Architecture*. Website.

http://www.gutenberg.org/files/20239/20239-h/29239-h.htm#Page_72 Retrieved 21/09/12

Whaley, Diana, ed. Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 1: From Mythical Times to c.1035. Brepols, Turnhout, 2012.

Wheeler, Sir R.E.M. London and the Vikings. London Museum, London, 1927

“Wood Densities.” Website. http://www.engineeringtoolbox.com/wood-density-d_40.html

Retrieved 21/09/12