



**HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS**

**Hugvísindasvið**

# ***Grímr-Visaged War***

***Viking Age Battle, With an Eye to Performance***

**Ritgerð til MA-prófs í Viking and Medieval Norse Studies**

**Steven Daniel Shema**

**September 2014**



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## ABSTRACT

The tools of performance theory are applied to Old Norse material by casting battle in the late Scandinavian Iron Age and medieval period in terms of a performance process. The community analyzed is the hall-based warrior elite that developed throughout the Viking Age. By approaching the material from the performance perspective rather than warrior identity or ideology, a novel set of connections are made between the roles of personal preparation in battle, the role of the supernatural in battle, and the language used to discuss Viking Age battle in the later medieval sources. In particular, the idea of the mask is used to analyze warrior behavior, the idea-complex surrounding Óðinn, and skaldic language. The sources of the Viking Age as they are received today, material or literary, are products of action and interaction and the lens of performance allows for a language that rehabilitates them from a static interpretation.

## ÁGRIP

Aðferðum og hugtökum „framsetningar- og frammistöðufræða“ (performance theory) er beitt við rannsókn á fornorrænum heimildum í því skyni að skoða bardaga á norrænni járnöld sem eins konar sýningarferli (performance process). Sjónum er beint að því samfélagi hermanna sem þróaðist í kringum höfðingja á Víkingaöld og hafði sem félagslegan vettvang höllina. Með því að skoða efniviðinn út frá frammistöðu og framsetningu (performance) fremur en út frá sjálfsmýnd eða hugmyndafræði hermanna, er hægt að draga fram ný tengsl milli þess hvernig þeir undirbjuggu sig undir hernað, hlutverks hins yfirnáttúrulega í bardögum, og þess tungutaks sem notað er um hernað á Víkingaöld í yngri heimildum frá miðöldum. Einkum er staldrað við hugtakið grímu til að greina hegðun hermanna, hugmyndirnar sem hnitast í kringum Óðinn og tungumál dróttkvæða. Heimildir um Víkingatímann, eins og þær birtast okkur í dag, hvort sem þær eru efnislegar eða bókmenntalegar, eru afurðir aðgerða og samskipta. Með því að skoða þær út frá framsetningu og frammistöðu, er hægt að ræða þessar heimildir án þess að túlkun þeirra sé of einhliða og óhagganleg.



かかる時  
さこそ命の  
惜しからめ

かねてなき身と  
思い知らずば

Had I not known  
that I was dead  
already

I would have mourned  
my loss of life.

— Ōta Dōkan, 1432–1486<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by Yoel Hoffmann. 1986. *Japanese Death Poems Written by Zen Monks and Haiku Poets on the Verge of Death*. Boston: Charles E. Tuttle. p. 52.

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## **1. BACKGROUND, THEORY, AND METHOD**

### **1.1 Introductory Material**

#### **1.1.1 Introduction**

The prosecution of violence is a culturally determined act: there are tools, rules, and customs. Violence was a central concern of the Viking Age, one that pervaded many aspects of life. But even in a culture where it is normalized, battle is an unstable environment. This instability leaves it open to the language of the supernatural for causes and outcomes of war, as well as for the tools and actions with which to wage it. The tools and actions of Viking Age war are explored here. The language used to explore them is that of performance.

Performance theory provides a straightforward language for the analysis of any observable action. This study takes the language of performance and maps it onto the experience of battle in the Viking Age. Some brushstrokes are too broad and some are too fine, but the product that emerges is an attempt to understand the experiences that inform the source material from the time. The Viking world was a pre-literary one, where stories were not recorded, but were manifest in the lives of those who heard them and told them. This understanding is crucial to interpretation.

#### **1.1.2 Definitions**

The Viking Age is understood here to be roughly the period from the end of the eighth century to the middle of the eleventh century. This is also referred to as the late Scandinavian Iron Age, with the Migration Age preceding it and the medieval period following it. The terms ‘Old Norse’ and ‘Old Norse world’ are intentionally used to blur the boundaries between the Viking Age and the early medieval period, recognizing that the early medieval period is a fixed lens on the narratives of the Viking Age.

#### **1.1.3 Sources and Conventions**

Names and terms specific to Old Norse have retained their native spellings and are not transliterated in English text. Nominative forms are unaltered and genitives are created by the addition of /’s/ in all instances.

Where Old Norse textual sources are used, the *Íslenzk fornrit* editions are given priority, along with Anthony Faulkes's edition of Snorri's *Edda*, and Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson's *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*. Eddic poetry is taken from Finnur Jónsson's *De Gamle Eddadigte*. When the *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages* edition of verses is used, it is cited "SKALD volume, part, page." Tacitus's *Germania* is the Loeb Library dual-language edition. Verse translations are given in line with the text; prose translations are footnoted. Translations from Old Norse are cited individually. Where I have translated or emended translation, it is initialed (SDS). Other non-English sources are given with the editions and translations used in the works cited.

#### **1.1.4 Gendered Pronouns**

Throughout this text, the male pronoun is used exclusively to speak of warriors in the Old Norse world. There are limited accounts of women on the battlefield in the Viking Age, and the characters of shield-maidens to explore (*Gesta Danorum* 8.2.4, 9.4.1-11 *inter alia*; cf. Price 2002, 332), but the prevailing paradigm in the hall-based culture is strongly gendered, and battle is tied to the male experience.

## 1.2 The Setting

### 1.2.1 Social Change During the Migration Age

In the fourth century, social change was underway in Scandinavia. This is reflected in the novel construction of hall buildings with dedicated social uses that appear in Denmark and Sweden, based on Roman models (Herschend 1998, 17–20; Herschend 1993; Niles 2007, 183). A more stratified, hierarchical society arose, with broader areas influenced by increasingly distant ‘central spaces’ (Brink 1996, 235–48; Brink 1999). In the seventh century, on the cusp of the Viking Age, even larger halls—king’s halls—began to develop (Herschend 1998, 19; Hedeager 2001, 481). This coalescence of power into proto-states spans many centuries. During this time, social mobility increased as well—a result of freed tenants on farmlands—evident from changes in burial frequency and practice (Skre 1999, 420–2).

This change in the shape of farms and communities comes around the same time as a change in religious practice. The cult moves from an outdoor, sun-oriented practice, to an indoor practice, based in these hall spaces (Fabech 1999, 459 with refs).<sup>2</sup> This movement may be traceable to a sixth century geological event that interrupted growing seasons and caused substantial social disruption, including a possible halving of the Scandinavian population (Gräslund and Price 2012, 433). It is this period that is connected with the rise of paramount chieftains, later kings, and their retinues in the hall.<sup>3</sup>

### 1.2.2 Elite Hall Society and Óðinn

The large retinues of these halls were not bound together by kinship ties, but by oaths, ideas, and mutual services. The primary exchange was feasting and status given by the king or chieftain in return for service in battle by his clients (Nordberg 2004, 90; Enright 1996, 69–96). The parallels between an ‘All-father’ god with an army of *einherjar* (the slain warriors of Valhøll) and a lord with his *hirð* (retainers) are self-evident, and the communal experiences of the warriors in the hall with their chieftain are the

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<sup>2</sup> Terry Gunnell reviews this process succinctly in Gunnell 2001.

<sup>3</sup> For a review of the settlement patterns in Denmark during this period and their specific relation to warfare and defence, see Ringtved 1999.

basis for the metaphor of the einherjar and Óðinn (Nordberg 2004, 65, 83–4; Turville-Petre 1964, 68; Schjødt 2008, 353).<sup>4</sup>

Óðinn is an old deity with other Germanic cognates (Kershaw 2000, 8 fn. 12). His origins are unclear, but he likely has a connection to Mercury, who has his own associations with the comitatus (Enright 1996, 217–8). Overall, the religious nature of Viking Age Scandinavia was highly diverse, localized, and non-dogmatic, and it is increasingly hazardous to paint the belief of the time in broad strokes (Brink 2007, 124–5; Price 2002, 26–7; Price 2008, 257–9; for discussion, see Nordberg 2012). However, the elite hall-based culture within the society uncontroversially held Óðinn in a primary position (Nordberg 2004, 91–2; Turville-Petre 1972, 2; Schjødt 2007).<sup>5</sup>

By the end of the Viking Age, these halls and royal courts were well inside the Christian sphere of influence, if not actually Christian. Yet the language and idea-complex of Óðinn and the pagan aspects of battle continued in the hall well into the thirteenth century when Snorri composed the *Edda*. The language of the Odinic warrior is not necessarily tied to cultic belief all throughout this period, but to the traditions of battle and the hall. A warrior culture can be highly conservative (Keegan 1993, 43–6).<sup>6</sup>

It is the men of these chieftains' halls and royal courts in Viking Age Scandinavia—and the women who surround them—who constitute the subject of this study, along with this particular god, Óðinn. But the nature of the sources does not allow a satisfactory study of battle in this period to be confined to these limits. This study, like many others, will reach both before and after this period as well as both north and south—sometimes east and west—to describe the actions of the people who set out from these hall spaces to wage war, hoping to return, if not to the same hall they set out from, to its celestial equivalent in Valhøll.

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the possible historical process behind the propagation of Óðinn/Wodan, see Enright 1996, 217–40.

<sup>5</sup> For more on Óðinn's relationship to the hall, see Hedeager 2001; For an onomastic argument, see Brink 1996.

<sup>6</sup> The example given is the Tokugawa shogunate. A counter example is Shaka Zulu, pp. 28–32.

### 1.3 History of Old Norse Battle Scholarship

#### 1.3.1 Cult and Comitatus

The study of battle in the Old Norse world has been tied to the warrior cult since 1934 with the publication of Otto Höfler's *Kultische Geheimbünde der Germanen*. The central focus of Höfler's work is the death cult—the bands of warrior youths who worship Óðinn and his cognates. The themes of Höfler's work are difficult to unravel from his own promotion of the ideology and involvement in the Nazi party, but the essence of the work is not necessarily in error, even if the motivations were (Price 2002, 80–1; Kershaw 2000, 23). Höfler's Indo-European connections are reinforced by the works of Dumézil, and the link continues into the more recent works of Kris Kershaw, in the 2000 *The One-Eyed God: Odin and the (Indo-)Germanic Männerbünde*. The broad Indo-European scope helps buttress claims made from the Old Norse material, and it situates Óðinn and his cognates in a dynamic tradition from Sanskrit materials up to early modern folk belief.

Activities connected to the hall have been the primary focus in the study of this sub-culture. Warrior identity is often extracted from the Old Norse material without looking directly at the process of battle itself. Jens Peter Schjødt identifies the ritual underpinnings of warrior identity in this period, including methodology to recognize these practices based around features in the sources that are “superfluous to narrative.” This is an attempt to divide ritual practice from literary practice, peeling away layers of narrative to identify early kernels of ritual (Schjødt, 263–4). His 2008 *Initiation Between Two Worlds* lays out many of the examples of these rituals, not only specific to warrior identity.

Andreas Nordberg's 2004 dissertation *Krigarna i Odins Sal: Dödsföreställningar och Krigarkult i Fornnordisk Religion*, looks explicitly at the experience of the warrior in an Odinic cult setting and sees the experiences of the chieftain-warrior relationship as the establishing metaphor for the *einherjar* and *Valhöll* (Nordberg 2004, 65, 83–4), in the tradition of Höfler. He argues for the multidirectional dialogue between myth, belief, and practice taken up here.

One study that moves beyond the hall is Neil Price's *The Viking Way* (2002). With a focus on the practice of *seiðr*, Price reassesses the archaeological and literary

materials relevant to the Viking Age in order to account for the spiritual dimension of Viking Age violence as well as a relationship to shamanism and the practices of the Sámi. Price explores the ‘belief system’ of Viking Age Scandinavia by placing the connection between the numinous and violent aggression at the center of the study and radiating outward to the whole of society, arguing that the magic of seiðr and violence were inseparable.

Other significant studies have approached the topic from a linguistic angle, such as Lindow’s *Comitatus, Individual, and Honor* (1976), which examines the native terminology of the *männerbund* or *comitatus*, establishing the native term *drótt*. From a gendered angle, Enright explores Celtic and Germanic *comitatus* traditions in light of ritualized alcohol consumption and integrates the study of prophecy and female sexuality into the male-dominated hall in *Lady with a Mead Cup* (1996).

### 1.3.2 Military History and Männerbund

Outside the realm of Old Norse studies, war historians have taken on the topic of Viking Age battle as well. These are structured in terms of C3I analysis (command, control, communications, and intelligence) or anthropology. The value of these studies is their ability to contextualize the practice of violence itself in a larger Germanic, Indo-European, or global context. For example, the notorious brutality of the Viking Age can be attributed to other pastoralist, horse-centered societies through time (Keegan 1993, 122–3, 161, 213).<sup>7</sup>

This ‘secular’ approach identifies four different types of warfare in the Viking Age: *Saga warfare*, ranging from duelling to houseburnings as recounted in the *Íslendingasögur*; *Royal household action*, which is initiated by a powerful chieftain (or king) and is based in mobilizing the *hirð*; *Going A-Viking*, the freelance plundering that took place either at home or abroad, and; *Royal Army Campaigning*, the times when the *leiðangr* (naval levy) would be mobilized with decisive victory (usually the death of an opposition leader) as a strategic objective (Griffith 1995, 105–9). These divisions are not used here, though the elite focus naturally overlaps with the royal action categories.

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<sup>7</sup> This field has its own history linked from Clausewitz’s *On War*, through Freud and Lorenz, to subsequent schools of thought including the Cultural Determinists (such as Boas, Mead, and Benedict) as well as Structural Functionalists (Malinowski, Lévi-Strauss), for an overview of the anthropological study of war, see Keegan 1993, 84–94. A similar discussion from a different perspective can be found in Halsall 2003, 6–10.

A more significant distinction is that of ritual, or endemic warfare in opposition to conquest warfare. Ritual war is composed of small scale, regular raids that do not alter the balance of power, while conquest warfare seeks decisive victory (Halsall 1989; Halsall 1998, 32–4). Both will be discussed here, though ritual war is the more relevant, since the scale of conquest warfare often necessitated more than the elite warrior force.

### 1.3.3 Convergence Toward Performance

One of the preoccupations of comitatus-related literature has been to identify concordances between mythology and practice. The idea is no longer to seek a 1:1 correspondence between the two, but rather to understand that ritual “can be apprehended as a formalised act that in itself creates meaning” (Andrén 2005, 107), and that any of the mythology as it is received from the sources in static form was once, “an organic thing, something that has evolved over a long period” (Price 2012, 13). This language approaches that of performance theory: it stresses the feedback between action, narrative, and belief.

Much of this work has been spurred on from Terry Gunnell’s foundational 1995 text, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia*. With a nod to the earlier work of Bertha Philpotts, it is the most exhaustive study of the concepts underlying performance in the North, both before and well after the Viking Age.<sup>8</sup> Gunnell’s work has allowed not just the material culture and the eddic poetry, but all the sources of Old Norse material, to benefit from the language of the discipline of performance.<sup>9</sup> In particular, he has opened the hall up as a multivalent performance space, deepening the understanding of oral-performance in its proper place (Gunnell 2001; Gunnell 2006; Gunnell 2008).

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<sup>8</sup> Philpotts, Dame Bertha. 1920. *The Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>9</sup> The momentum of the works reviewed above, along with the incorporation of memory studies into the discourse of Old Norse material has led to the outright articulation of a ‘performative turn’ in the discipline (Mitchell 2013). In this particular article, Mitchell pulls the discussion of literacy into the erection and experience of runic monuments—the experience of the creation and installation, as well as the continuous and individual experience of the monument by passers-by.

## 1.4 The Sources

### 1.4.1 Introduction

There is no universally satisfying way to establish a coherent picture of battle in the Viking Age. The written sources of the period come down to us with little or no paratext, which might otherwise ease the process of historical–literary untangling. They are the products of a later time and a dynamic culture. Conversely, the catalogs of archaeological excavations from the Viking Age are like picture storybooks that are filled only with endings. Neither of these sources can reconstruct the past entirely on its own, and it is senseless to discard one or the other when creating a narrative of the past. Performance theory allows them to be treated together.

### 1.4.2 Material Sources

From the archaeological side, performance builds out from the post-processualist school initiated in the 1980s by the works of Hodder, Tilley, and others, which allowed a greater breadth to cultural interpretation than the previous paradigm.<sup>10</sup> Human agency is given more attention, and culture is seen as a behavior-shaping force potentially equal to environmental exigency (Renfrew and Bahn 2005, 155–6).

The material sources used in this study range from the Scandinavian Bronze Age to the medieval period. When older material is echoed by later literary sources (as in the discussions of helmet-masks and the berserker), the links on either side of the Viking Age are used to argue for some form of continuity through the period. In the spirit of performance theory, it is acknowledged that any of these material pieces may take part in a number of performances. The identity of an object is never static or fixed, but is contextual.<sup>11</sup> By exploring the processes involved in the execution of battle, the role of many

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<sup>10</sup> See particularly Hodder I. and Hutson S. 2006 [1986]. *Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, and Tilley C. 1994. *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths and Monuments*. Oxford: Berg.

<sup>11</sup> An example of this manner of analyzing objects *as* performance in the Old Norse material is the Oseberg ship burial. The ship predates the burial, and was not built for the express purpose of burial. The decapitated animals present in the burial, as well as the second body, suggest that the funerary performance itself may have resembled something along the lines of Ibn Faḍlān's account of the Rus' funeral. This would have composed an immediate funerary performance of several days (cf. Montgomery 2000). Pollen analysis suggests, however, that the grave mound may have remained only half-constructed for a period of several months, allowing for a performance space that is not related to the singular process of

material objects from the Viking Age may be better illuminated outside of the contexts in which they are found, primarily gravesites.

### 1.4.3 Literary Sources

#### **Old Norse**

The Old Norse prose sources used here are of three types, commonly termed *Íslendingasögur* (*Sagas of Early Icelanders*), *konungasögur* (*Kings' Sagas*), and *for-naldarsögur* (*Legendary Sagas*). Each of these genres enters the historical record at a different point and represents the growth and trajectory of Icelandic literary tastes.<sup>12</sup> None of them are contemporary with the events they describe. Eddic and skaldic poetry are called upon as well, verse typically seen as a reliably older form with metric requirements allowing at least a possibility for conservative transmission over time (Gunnell 2005, 93–5; Whaley 2005, 488–9).<sup>13</sup> The poetry begins to be committed to vellum in the thirteenth century—around same time that prose narratives appear. Whether the prose had a similarly long oral incubation period is difficult to settle, but it will be assumed through this study that some pre-literary form of the tales existed. Mythical material from *Snorra Edda* is likewise acknowledged as a single data point, but one in a tradition: none of these sources are definitive on their own, but they serve to outline idea-complexes that have traveled together through time.

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laying a physical body to rest (Price 2010, 139). Ultimately the grave was covered, and would have served a role in the community as a memorial to an individual, perhaps with other functions (such as sorcerers practicing *útiseti*). Later, in the late tenth century, when the grave was plundered, it may have been coordinated by a rival dynasty to negate the symbolic power of the mound and the grave (Bill and Daly 2012). For centuries, the mound could then pass into a local folklore, until the local farmer elected to excavate it in 1903. The excavation itself became a social performance on a national level, featuring newspaper updates through the process (Holck 2006, 188–90). Now the Oseberg ship is performed as a symbol of national identity—the burial ship of a ninth century pagan ‘Viking queen,’ also present on the 20 kroner coin opposite the reigning king, and housed in the nave of a cruciform museum. In that space, next to a cultural park, it is encountered by visitors who have at least all of these later contextual associations, in order to learn about its earlier associations. At the core of this whole complex is a transformation—the reconstruction of the ship as it appears in the museum (famed for being ‘the most complete’ Viking Age boat grave) is inaccurate. A replica called ‘Dronningen’ sank in 1987, revealing the flaws. The Oseberg ship as it is performed now would not be able to perform its original sailing function; it is the mask of a ship that has performed many roles over time.

<sup>12</sup> A visual reproduction of this timeline, helpful for imagining the periods of oral transmission is reproduced as figure 1 in the appendix from (Faulkes 2007, II: Reader: xxxix).

<sup>13</sup> See Fidjestøl 1999 for a comprehensive review of the discussion surrounding dating eddic poetry.

It is worth noting in this spirit that the highly-stratified social structure of the royal hall was never imported to Iceland, where all the literary sources originate. Likewise in Iceland, there is no evidence of a native Óðinn cult (Gunnell 2009 with refs; Turville-Petre 1972, 6, 14; Svavar Sigmundsson 1992, 244–5). When Óðinn is evident in Icelandic literature, it is in poetry and tales connected to the Scandinavian mainland and the royal courts. This should inspire caution, but not paralysis.

The prevailing school of thought on the ability of the literary material to represent the period of its content (Viking Age) rather than of its construction (medieval) is based on a growing understanding of oral culture. The concepts employed range from immanent sagas, where written products are a synthesis of shorter oral forms (Clover 1986; Foley 1991), to ideas of ‘distributed authorship,’ where story elements are shaped by forces of natural selection more economic than literary (Ranković 2007, 302–4). The language adopted to deal with these materials is that of cultural memory, discussed below.

### **Other**

Other texts are used in this study as well. Some of these are medieval, such as Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum*, written at the turn of the thirteenth century. Others are eyewitness contemporaries to the Viking Age, but they are the eyes of another culture, such as Ibn Faḍlān’s AD 921 *Risāla*. Still others are witnesses from another culture, but also pre-date the Viking Age by many centuries—and did not even use their own eyes—such as Tacitus in *Germania* (first century AD). However, when these earlier textual accounts can serve to illuminate material from the Viking Age, or to surround the Viking Age alongside corroborative literary material from the medieval period, they are allowed to do so.

## 1.5 The Theories

### 1.5.1 Cultural Memory

Memory studies have been incorporated into the toolkit for dealing with Old Norse sources over the past several years. One of these tools, cultural memory, allows for narratives to be transmitted not only as tradition, but as nostalgia for a past time. It allows narratives to bridge a temporal divide, even if actions do not.<sup>14</sup> It also begins to develop a language for how narratives are structured through interaction and social pressures—in essence, how they are performed.

On a practical level for this study, this means that no single saga will be used to provide definitive evidence for practice, but when there is some level of concordance across multiple sources, it will be interpreted as a suggestion that some historical behavior is at the core of the accounts. In this way, the ‘extraordinary’ of remembered narrative will be stripped away to the ‘ordinary’ of earlier practice. This is not without its dangers, but they are measured. There is certainly archaeological evidence for changes in the tools of war during the period between the Viking Age and the recording of the sagas, but it is acknowledged that the “general conditions” of warfare would have changed little between AD 900 and 1200 (Griffith 1995, 31, 177–8). This allows much of the literary material to be at least plausible in the earlier time.<sup>15</sup>

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Cultural memory was first introduced to the field of Old Norse studies by name in 2000 by Jürg Glauser, who used the term as it was described by Egyptologist Jan Assmann in 1997, drawing in turn on the earlier work of Maurice Halbwachs. Speaking specifically of the *Íslendingasögur*, Glauser maintains that it is only because those narratives took on a role in the “semioticization of history” and became the primary vehicles for cultural memory that allowed them to survive in the manuscript tradition” (Glauser 2000, 214). This creation of symbolic history is tied to nostalgia from a perceived rupture with the past, namely the end of the Commonwealth period in 1262/4 (Glauser 2000, 211).

Arguably the more significant cultural rupture in Commonwealth Iceland may have come earlier in the thirteenth century as the stronger centralization of Church structure (Orri Vésteinsson 2000, 238–46) led to the consolidation of power amongst only a few Icelandic families (Helgi Þorláksson 2005, 149–50; Sigurður Nordal 1990, 255–73; Torfi H. Tulinius 2000; Vésteinn Ólason 1998, 21). Either way, the result is nostalgia for the ‘Golden Age.’ For more on Old Norse material as founding narratives, see (Hermann 2009; Hermann 2010).

<sup>15</sup> In the continental sources of the time, one major issue with descriptions of battle is the stereotyping of forms—contemporary battles were described on the model of known Classical forms. To the medieval mind, this gave the accounts greater weight and authority; detail was not a virtue (Halsall 2003, 1–2). The Old Norse sources do not seem to share this archotyping of events.

One demand of cultural memory is a reassessment of how and why narratives, images, and ideas are transmitted up to the point of recording. The static model of literature is insufficient.<sup>16</sup> As societies adopt literary models, *communication* of narratives replaces the *manifestation* of narratives (Schechner 1988, 69; cf. Andr  n 2005, 117), and *content* trumps *context*. In an oral environment, stories are perpetuated because they have cultural currency, not because they exist on material substrates.

The fragmentary nature of Old Norse sources lends itself to this flattening of the hierarchy of forms (Mitchell 2013, 284; Hedeager 2011, 22). A single text is not prioritized, because the single text did not exist. These were stories that existed only in the telling, with all the other sensory cues that attended them (Foley 2002, 60; Bauman 1977, 37–45). Once they are recorded, it may be for altogether different reasons. One need look no further than *Snorra Edda*, the purpose of which is a compositional handbook for poets, but the stories it contains were not developed with that goal in mind, nor are they typically analyzed for that purpose.

Just as the meaning of the utterance “Stop! You’re killing me,” is fiercely contingent on whether or not one is being tickled or stabbed, so too is oral narrative vastly changed by the loss of context. In this way, oral narrative recorded is no different than archaeological material. It is a cognitive product whose meaning came from its human interactions and is now separated from them by centuries—or at any rate, the role that it plays is vastly changed (Price 2002, 27–9; Price 2008, 162).

### 1.5.2 Performance

#### *Introduction*

Memory studies have opened the door to performance in the field, and the subject of battle is inherently dramatic. It is a high-stakes struggle between two or more entities. Historically, technology confined battle to Aristotle’s three dramatic unities of “time,

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<sup>16</sup> While neologisms are often in the position of being more clever than they are useful, the concept of *orature* may be a valuable way of thinking about narrative source material in a predominantly oral society. Coined in the 1960s by Ugandan scholar Pio Zirimu, orature is used to describe the “total aesthetic system” that is involved in the creation, reception, and retransmission of culture and tradition in oral societies (Thiong’o 1998, 117). Orature encompasses any knowledge that is transmitted and possibly transformed through utterance (Thiong’o 1998, 113). The term has failed to gain traction against the more pervasive ‘oral literature,’ but there is a freedom in the term: if oral literature emphasizes the *content* of storytelling, orature emphasizes the *context*.

place and action,” though just as modern playwrights no longer adhere to the first two unities, modern battles may be waged across huge expanses of time and space (Keegan 1976, 14).<sup>17</sup> The application of performance theory, though, is more than the recognition of a set of dramatic features: drama is only one small part of performance.<sup>18</sup> Drama is a specific narrative based around conflict that emerges from the choices of competing characters or entities. Performance, however, is any observed action or event that is ‘framed’ in a way that distinguishes it from other events that take place either around it at the same time, or during it in different places. It is action “highlighted or displayed” (Schechner 2013, 2; Schechner 1988, 15; cf. Goffman 1956, 19).<sup>19</sup> Performance studies as a discipline comes from a convergence of artistic practice and criticism, speech-act theory, and anthropology (Schechner 2013, 15–6).

Performance analysis is not the recasting of everything as a text that can be deconstructed and ‘read,’ though the field owes much to that way of thinking (Conquergood 2002, 151–4; Schechner 2013, 1–2, 15–6, 227; Schechner 1988, 26; cf. Geertz 1973, 449). Rather, “the text, where it exists, is understood as a key to action, not its replacement” (Schechner 1988, 27). This is where performance studies moves beyond post-processualism in archaeology as well as anthropology, and where it reclaims the ‘oral’ from the paradox of oral literature. The goal of performance analysis is not to understand action as text, but to understand materials and texts as action.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Aristotle’s unities are outlined in *Poetics*. Keegan argues that while technology has allowed battle itself to be fought remotely and a single engagement may last longer than in the past when individuals had to face one another on the field, the unity of action is unchanged.

<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of drama vs. performance with an eye to Old Norse material, see Gunnell 1995, 10–4.

<sup>19</sup> These actions exist across a spectrum of ritual, play, sports, pop entertainment, performing arts, everyday performances like the enactment of social, professional, gender, or class roles, healing, media, and the internet (Schechner 2013, 2). The various manifestations of performance can be visualized alternatively as a linear progression from the “effective” (ritual, rites of passage) to the “entertaining” or as an interconnecting web (Schechner 2013, 17–8).

<sup>20</sup> This goal is most clear in contemporary terms, where most of the energy of performance studies is spent. The discipline owes much of its upbringing to the avant-garde theatre of the 1960s and 70s as well as the social activism considered central to much of contemporary theatre. Dwight Conquergood (1949–2004), one of the innovators of performance studies, identifies the discipline as being composed of three aspects: artistry, analysis, and activism (Conquergood 2002, 152). In the catchy fashion of many performance scholars, Conquergood also rearticulates these emphases with several other alliterative sets: “creativity, critique, citizenship,” “imagination...inquiry...[and] intervention,” as well as “accomplishment...analysis...[and] articulation” (Conquergood 2002, 152). It may be prudent to note that this study does not advocate social justice for the late Iron Age elite hall-based warrior subculture, but

### **Key Concepts**

*The following are several key concepts from performance that will be used in this study.*

#### **Is vs As performance**

Every culture has some form of drama, dance, music, or aesthetic endeavor that, in its own language, ‘is’ a performance. But as stated earlier, *any action* that is observed and framed from its surroundings can be analyzed using the same tools: it can be understood ‘as’ performance. (Schechner 2013, 38). This is the guiding principle behind this study: battle in the Old Norse world understood *as* performance.

#### **Restored behavior**

Mircea Eliade says of man that “his life is the ceaseless repetition of gestures initiated by others” (Eliade 1959, 5). In performance terms, Schechner has called this *twice-performed* or *restored* behavior. Any action, when broken down, is analyzable in terms of its relationship to previous actions performed by a self or by others. This is true not only of highly formalized behavior, but of the performances of daily life (Schechner 2013, 28–30, 35, 52). Spoken in a different language, restored behavior is quite similar to the *habitus* of sociologists.<sup>21</sup> It is the same principle at work in the quotes by Price and Andrén above about mythopoesis, and it will be used as a framework for the reinforcement of behavior and belief in the cycle of performance discussed here. It is part of the reason why pagan language can be used to describe Christian warrior-kings. Restored behavior is in high-relief in oral culture. Many elements of saga-style, like traditional epics, focus on an externalized character. In an oral culture, it is difficult, if not impossible to separate the ‘I’ from tradition (Havelock 1963, 199–200).<sup>22</sup>

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there is an important commonality between Conquergood’s cry against the “hegemony of textualism” in service of the enslaved, the colonial, or the repressed, and a ‘blithe assumption’ that texts can give access to a culture whose moment came and went before the spark of literacy had been able to catch, hold, and spread. Both cultures are subject to external forces which manipulate the written record and both benefit from action-based analysis using all the sources, literary and material, available (cf. Hedeager 2011, 22). This is why, while texts are used in this analysis, they are used to support experiential frameworks, not to reconstruct cohesive narratives.

<sup>21</sup> cf. Bourdieu 1977, 78–86.

<sup>22</sup> Havelock goes so far as to claim that “the doctrine of the autonomous psyche is the counterpart of the rejection of the oral culture” (Havelock 1963, 200) .

### **Make believe and make belief**

Building on the idea of restored behavior and the dynamic between actions observed and actions performed, it becomes clear that the “performances of everyday life” have the ability to ““make belief”—create the very social realities they enact” (Schechner 2013, 42–3).<sup>23</sup> Similarly, in his analysis of warfare in the ‘Barbarian West,’ Guy Halsall makes the point to mention that social rules are pulled from a “memory bank” of past interactions—this social structure “governs action, but is itself constituted by action” (Halsall 2003, 8). Essentially, one can play with—as well as by—the rules. This is the principle that allows for elements of play to overlap with elements of ritual, creating areas such as the numinous battlefield and totemic warriors.

### **Status**

While Jefferson might have all people born equal, Dr. Johnson claimed that “no two people can be half an hour together, but one shall acquire an evident superiority over the other” (Keegan 1993, 223; Boswell 2012, 141). From the most alarming examples of physical domination to the most tedious examples of co-workers out-whining each other over salad lunches, status negotiation is the basis of every human interaction.

Status is a concept extensively explored by Keith Johnstone in his 1979 book, *Impro*. Originating from work in improvisational theatre, status and the negotiation of status are tools that can be used to straightforwardly describe relationships between players whether their context *is* performance or is being analyzed *as* performance. The word and concept has been used this way in the anthropological literature as well (Geertz 1973, 433–5). That personal status is unstable on the battlefield is one of the reasons why fate and the supernatural have a role in the discussion.

### **Mask**

Another tool of performance—perhaps the most fundamental—is the mask. On some level mask and character are the same: even embedded in our language, the ‘persona’ is the sounding-through (Latin *per sonare*) of the early theatrical mask. Mask can be as simple as altering one’s gait, like an undercover spy, or as elaborate as the Wizard of Oz.

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<sup>23</sup> Schechner borrows paraphrases ‘performance of everyday life’ from the work of Goffman, who asserts that you cannot strip away the behavior of an individual away to some other sort of social truth: the behavior *is* the identity, and reality *is* interaction (Goffman 1956, esp. 31, 65). Goffman’s work as a whole provides an extensive basis for the idea of restored behavior and how it creates society.

Singing can be a mask, as can a simple change in the pitch of the voice.<sup>24</sup> Whatever their medium, masks are projections of humans transformed. In Schechner's terms, masks make someone into an uncanny 'not self and *not* not self' (Schechner 1985, 6). They are transformation, not representation. Masks are an action, not a meaning.<sup>25</sup> Masks alter the status of the wearer, encouraging permissiveness, and make the unmasked individual feel "distinctly vulnerable" in the presence of the mask (Gunnell 2012, 190). This is a clear advantage in a battle scenario, where intimidation is tactical, but status changes associated with the mask have a place in ceremonial contexts as well.

It is clear from an abundance of archaeological evidence that some form of masking took place in the early North. Beginning with Stone Age rock carvings in Norway and Bronze Age petroglyphs across Scandinavia from the period 1500–500 BC, humans are displayed with horned or beaklike heads. Similar images appeared on the early fifth century Gallehus horns found in Denmark (Gunnell 1995, 37–55). These images are not specific to a battle context, but their presence centuries before the period of our interest establishes a native tradition of mask. The more relevant material evidence will be treated in subsequent sections.

Not only did masks exist, but there was a direct connection between masks and Óðinn. Óðinn is referred to in the existing literature by 204 names. Of these, 27 are related to appearance, altered identity, or shapeshifting (Price 2002, 100–7). In particular, he appears as Grímr and Grímnir, which carry the semantic weight not only of a concealed identity, but of the whole of the outer appearance (Gunnell 1995, 86–7; Gunnell 2012, 189).

A cognitive understanding of masking in the Old Norse world may be recoverable from literature. In the sagas, once a character dons a costume or a disguise, he is referred to exclusively by the name of the disguise in the text until it is removed

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<sup>24</sup> A study of the Kulina in western Amazonia identifies the community as using verbal cues as a primary identifier: many of their rituals take place at night when no visual cues are available: "because verbal performance is the primary conventional medium for indexing identity among Kulina, verbal performance is also, in semiotic terms, the appropriate channel for the indexing of transformed identity" (Pollock 1995, 590–1).

<sup>25</sup> "Mask styles take their point of departure, not from the fish, cassowaries, termites, or whatever entity they are overtly intended to represent, but rather from the human head itself: the mask is not an image of nature, but an elaboration of man" (Gell 1975, 301). Pollock identifies the mask in terms of C. S. Peirce's "indexing." It is a form of identification by metonymy, rather than description, i.e., 'where there's smoke, there's fire' (Pollock 1995, 10).

(Gunnell 1995, 85).<sup>26</sup> This underlines the ability in the Old Norse mindset to see fluidity in personality. The sagas are famously ‘external’ in their descriptions, focusing on behavior rather than thought processes (Vésteinn Ólason 2007, 105–7). That this style allows appearance, behavior, and character to be so unified is typical of oral cultures (Parks 1987, 291; Havelock 1963, 200).<sup>27</sup> Even in today’s post-psychoanalytic world, an individual can act ‘unlike himself.’ In an oral culture, where action is equal to character, behavioral masks are amplified. Not only would an individual not be himself, his altered behavior could make him become someone else. This may be an insight into the belief in shape-shifting found in Old Norse material. Óðinn himself is ascribed the ability to “skipta hq̄mum,” or change shape in *Ynglinga saga* (7). Shape-shifting is encountered amongst the gods more than the human world (Gunnell 1995, 82), which is to be expected on a practical level, yet still it is used particularly to describe those who enter into a rage, such as Egill’s grandfather Kveldúlf, who is described as *hamrammr* (‘shape-powerful’; *Egils saga* 1). This will be taken into consideration in the discussion of animal warriors below.

## Play

Play can be broken down into four categories: **struggle**, **chance**, **mimicry**, and **dizziness** (Caillois 2000, 14–23). It is typically ‘non-productive,’ in that its engagement is not economically determined (Schechner 1988, 9). It is in no way contradictory to think of play and violence in one single breath. At its core, play is “a stepping of our ‘real’ life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own” (Huizinga 1971, 26). Battle is one of these spheres, with corresponding rules. It is contest, or the “idea of *a struggle with fate limited by certain rules*” (Huizinga 1971, 60–1 emphasis added). When players are equally matched, status is most negotiable. When this negotiation of status is accompanied by real risk, it is identified as ‘deep play’ (Geertz 1973, 432–41).

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<sup>26</sup> An example can be found in *Brennu-Njáls saga* when Gunnarr takes the persona of Kaupa-Heðinn (23).

<sup>27</sup> This idea is taken up as well by Bakhtin in *The Dialogic Imagination* in his assessment of the epic chronotope (Bakhtin 1981, 3–40)

On a practical level, this struggle with fate is a struggle for status against the other player—if not for life, then at least for dominance.<sup>28</sup> While actual aggression and play are distinct from one another, battle as a culturally-mediated activity is not expressly and exclusively acts of killing. Elements of play, particularly contest or struggle, and acknowledged rules help to set it apart from simple aggression and create a culturally relevant product. Often, chance becomes part of this play as well. This relationship between play and battle is apparent in the language of the source material, evident in numerous skaldic kennings for battle which use *leikr* as their base-word (cf. Meissner 1921, 199).<sup>29</sup>

This understanding of the aspects of play helps formulate the battle as an experience that may have ritualized elements, but is not ritual in itself. In Turner's terms this makes battle a *liminoid*, rather than a *liminal* experience, in Schechner's terms, a *transportation*, rather than a *transformation* (Schechner 1985, 125–9; Turner 1974a, 65–75). While the experience of battle may change a warrior, that change is a personal one, not a socially-mandated one such as the initiation rites into a warrior-band might be. Battle may alter his status, but reinforce his identity; it does not give him a new one. This broad understanding of play, alongside mask, status, restored behavior, and 'making belief,' is the foundation of the analysis which follows.

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<sup>28</sup> The gender theorist could gloss these status negotiations as attempts to 'earn' masculinity (Ong 1981, 97–8). A valid construct, it is perhaps a way of describing motivations to battle itself, or the events after the fact. Survival and dominance are more likely to be the motivators in the moment of battle.

<sup>29</sup> The semantic breadth of various Germanic language words for *play* is reviewed in Huizinga 1971, 57.

## 1.6 The Method

### 1.6.1 What is included and how

The first task in performance analysis is to identify the performance at hand. Like a piece of art itself, performance analysis relies upon clear boundaries in order to be successful. If performance is a framed action, the frame must be set. There are three main temporal parts of performance: **Proto-performance** (preparation); **Performance** (execution); and **Aftermath** (processing and recovery). Each of these parts can be subdivided into elements such as training, workshoping, and rehearsal (proto-performance); warm-up, public performance, cooldown (performance), and; critical responses, archives, and memories (aftermath; Schechner 2013, 225). To minimize unfamiliar language, proto-performance will be referred to by the metonymic *rehearsal*, though strictly-speaking, rehearsal is only one form of proto-performance.

Through this three-part analysis of battle, the primary focus will be the ways in which the act of battle is framed outside of ordinary experience of the Old Norse world and the tools used to create characters that can sustain themselves in this unstable environment. The emphasis is on the pre-Christian tradition that tied elite warriors to Óðinn, but examples will be taken from Christian armies when appropriate. Moments such as the recitation of *Bjarkamál* at the battle of Stiklastaðir point to a continuity between the two traditions, and as mentioned previously, the Christian hall culture used the language of its history, even as Odinic initiatory rites may have faded away.

### 1.6.2 What is not included and why

Many aspects of Viking Age battle will be minimized or left out, for example, the use of ‘war arrows’ to summon clients in legendary and kings’ sagas.<sup>30</sup> This is part of a larger summoning of forces and is less relevant to the hall-based elite. Premonitions and visions, though abundant, will not be discussed; it is difficult to square more than a vague sense of their role in practice as opposed to literature. Likewise, exploration of specific tactics, (sea vs. land battle, horses, close- and far-range weaponry) will be minimal (cf.

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<sup>30</sup> A representative, but non-exhaustive list of mentions or ‘war-arrows’ to summon troops includes: *Sverris saga*, chapter 24; *Heimskringla*’s *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar*, chapters 17, 59, 65; *Ólafs saga helga*, chapters 39, 94, 112, 120, 121, 138, 148; *Magnúss saga ins góða*, chapter 4; and *Jónsvíkinga saga*, chapter 29.

Griffith 1995, 162–3). These would need to be accounted for in a more complete study of the subject. In the aftermath of battle, the actions surrounding burial and funerary rites are excluded, as they would comprise a topic entirely to themselves. Fate, too, is an expansive concept in Old Norse texts. It plays a central role in battle, but is multivalent enough to demand its own treatment. It is touched upon when necessary, but left alone when possible. Likewise battle magic and supernatural interventions are acknowledged, but not explored as performances or actions in themselves. This is not a study of religion or belief, neither is it a study of literature. It is a conjectural study of battlefied behavior and the language used to describe that behavior.

These elements and others, while they could come under the frame of performance are not included as they are not as integral to the framing of battle and the ways in which it is set apart from the behavior of daily life. Also, this is also not strictly a study of ritual warfare (limited to battles without changes in the balance of power or without acute motivations), though ritualized aspects do compose some of the analysis. Finally, it is worth pointing out that, on the holographic principle, any one of the elements of performance taken up here could be reanalyzed as its own performance, with its own preparation and aftermath.

## 2. ANALYSIS

### 2.1 Program Notes

For the state-level actor, warfare may be about many things. For the individual actor, warfare is inherently about death. It is the primary occupational hazard of the second oldest profession. Yet war is not the exclusive venue for human-to-human killing. Human sacrifice has traditions all throughout history, including ancient Scandinavia.<sup>31</sup> Sacrifice, though, lacks the element of *play* present in battle. The characters involved, sacrificer and sacrificed, have a stable status relationship—one is clearly and consistently dominant over the other. On a physical level, it is a zero-risk activity for the sacrificer (any risk involved would have more to do with a failure of the sacrifice to achieve desired results). It lacks contest.

The battlefield, on the other hand, is a supremely unstable environment for the combatant (Keegan 1976, 46). It *is* contest. Survival is not assured, let alone status, which may be altered by distinction (fame) or dereliction (shame). Beyond the primary binary of life and death, there is a quality of both life and death that is determined by the audience of one's actions on the field. After all, performance is not only a framed action, but one that is observed. In the Old Norse world, the observers were one's adversaries, one's comrades, one's leader, as well as the divine judges and the judges of posterity.

Between the hall and the battlefield, these warriors lived and relived a cyclical performance of preparation, execution, and recovery from battle. Ritual battles of some form were likely an annual event (Halsall 1989).<sup>32</sup> This is not an easy cycle to face from an individual perspective, and tools are developed to protect the individual warrior from the threats of battle. These tools are physical, ideological, and behavioral. On the

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<sup>31</sup> The bog bodies of Iron Age Denmark speak to this local tradition. For a review of these sacrificial victims in context with corresponding literary evidence such as Tacitus and material suggestions, such as the iconography of the Gundestrup cauldron, see (Glob 1977, 147–92). The Aztecs blended the two forms, and regularly waged pitched battles for the sheer purpose of gaining captives. The captives were then subjected to a protracted form of sacrifice where they were first adopted into a family unit and then cut to death in an imbalanced mock duel. This practice was done to maintain a claim of ancestry for the Aztec people (Keegan 1993, 111–3).

<sup>32</sup> Halsall observes this in the Anglo-Saxon experience; the practice of regular, annual warfare is also seen in the Roman republic (Keegan 1993, 266 with refs).

physical level, clothing and tools protect the body of the warrior. For the Viking Age warrior, this could include chain-mail (when it wasn't cast off) and helmets like those discussed below. On the ideological level, death and heroism are glorified and idealized. This is the role of the Óðinn cult. The third aspect is behavioral: these are the actions that a warrior trains in and undertakes in order to prepare for and execute battle in the manner of his culture, as well as protect himself from the trauma of the killing field. Each of these categories can blur into the other: a protective helmet with the image of a protective spirit on it can be put on while reciting a protective chant meant to ease the anxiety of battle. This performance-based analysis of battle could be undertaken using the language of Turner's *social dramas* (Turner 1974b, 37–41), but here the unit of analysis is in these individual actions, not the community.

In these individual actions, it is important to acknowledge the difference between *regimental* identity and *regimented* behavior. The initiation rites of the Old Norse world may have helped establish group identity, which is critical to battle cohesion, but the mentality of the initiates was not one of modern soldiers. Rather than executing uniform drill manoeuvres, the Old Norse warrior was more like the Samurai, for whom “fighting was an act of self-expression by which a man displayed not only his courage but also his individuality” (Keegan 1993, 10).<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> This observation is elaborated upon with the Maring of Papua New Guinea: “at the individual level it must have done much, in a society without aesthetic achievements, to satisfy the human need for self-expression, display and competition, and even, if one accepts that theory, the ‘drive-discharge’ of aggression” (Keegan 1993, 102). It is worth thinking about the parallel aesthetics of battle and poetry that the Old Norse warrior engaged in.

## 2.2 Rehearsal: *Kids in the Hall* or ‘*To the Männer-Bund*’

### 2.2.1 Introduction

The battlefield is home to the “deepest fears” and “most violent passions” of humanity. Modern warrior-training facilities like West Point and Sandhurst address this by trying “to reduce the conduct of war to a set of rules and a system of procedures—and thereby to make orderly and rational what is essentially chaotic and instinctive” (Keegan 1976, 16, 18).<sup>34</sup> This is the goal of all proto-performance, from the rehearsal room to the operating room. It is repetition which “makes the difficult easy, the easy habitual, and the habitual beautiful.”<sup>35</sup> This is not an anachronistic idea of the modern age. It is echoed in Saxo’s description of Harald’s warriors at the legendary battle of Brávellir. He speaks of their “well-trained spirits,” and their “assiduously . . . cultivated mind and body.”<sup>36</sup> It is not just the warriors’ skills, but their spirits—their courage—which is learned behavior.

If the *Jómsvíkingalög*, given in chapter 16 of *Jómsvíkinga saga*, are anything to go by, the youngest warriors of the time were around 18 years old.<sup>37</sup> This rehearsal period is where they would take on their warrior identity and go through their initiation rites, all the while building cohesion amongst the comitatus in the hall. The

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<sup>34</sup> It would be an error to imagine that the twentieth century warrior and the tenth century warrior approached their lives in the same way. And yet, looking at a past warrior culture, it is important not to overestimate the differences in culture and mind-set. Afterall, just because the weapons used by a society are only deadly at close quarters, and some level of violence is executed regularly, it does not mean that there is disregard for one’s own survival. Not all battle in the period was likely waged as conquest warfare, though this became more common after the Migration Age (Nordberg 2004, 92–3), and even then, the ‘decisive’ battle, with all the enemy slaughtered, may not have always been the goal (Keegan 1993, 102–3). Though the literature does provide moments when actions communicate the intention to wage complete battle, such as the burning of one’s own ships in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (27) or the dismounting warriors in the *Battle of Maldon* (Halsall 2003, 181–3).

<sup>35</sup> This is a paraphrase of “Надо трудное сделать привычным, привычное—легким, легкое—красивым.” It is a quote most closely associated with Constantin Stanislavsky, father of modern theatrical training. He adapted it from Sergei Volkonsky, one of his contemporaries.

<sup>36</sup> The complete latin text of this quote and english citation is given below in note 136.

<sup>37</sup> The earliest extant manuscript of *Jómsvíkinga saga* dates from the second half of the thirteenth century. A postulated original is dated to ca. 1230 (Blake 1962, xviii). That a battle took place at Hjörungavágr is likely the only strictly historical element of this particular saga (Blake 1962, vii). Comparative material from post-Roman Europe shows a tendency for induction to warbands somewhere around 15 years of age, with notable changes in burials (addition and variety of weaponry) by age 20 (Halsall 2003, 35).

*Jómsvíkingarlog* can be used to point to norms that may have existed amongst warrior groups, but it is more like the rehearsal room rules than a script. However, a rehearsal room is still a formative place. For the elite Viking Age warrior, the rehearsal room was the hall.

## 2.2.2 Formal and Informal Training

### Initiation Rites

*Völsunga saga* and the poetry around which it is based, along with *Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappá hans* are frequently identified as housing the vestiges of initiatory practices, with theories designed around the symbolic killing of bears and beasts to gain affinity with them, as well as trials of endurance (Schjødt 2008, 320–5; Motz 1993, 83; Schjødt 2007, 145; Kershaw 2000, 57).<sup>38</sup> Some form of initiatory context is a possible interpretation for the seventh century Torslunda A helmet plate matrix from Öland, Sweden (Figure 2), which echoes these stories of killing a beast (Nordberg 2004, 237–8). These initiation rites may have been Odinic in nature and the ‘official’ vehicle for identification with the *einherjar* and with ancestors in death (Schjødt 2008, 353; Kershaw 2000, 25). Here the emphasis will not be on the details of these events, but the intervening actions that structure and restructure the initiation rituals throughout time in a feedback loop of re-stored behavior.

### Training the Body

In addition to rites of passage, which would have composed the formal training of the hall-based warriors, less formalized practices no doubt took place, training both physicality and ‘spirit.’ These practices were predominantly located in the hall, where social bonds were solidified.

A possible example comes from the ninth day of Christmas near the year AD 953. It is recorded at the Byzantine court that the ‘so-called Gothikon’ (*λεγόμενον Γοθικόν*) was performed at a feast. Two teams—the Blues and the Greens—enter the feast from two sides of the room, the Blues with the Commander of the Navy (*δρουγγάριος τοῦ πλοΐμου*), the Greens with the Commander of the Watch (*δρουγγάριος τῆς βίγης*). There are chanters and lute players with other citizens. In each

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<sup>38</sup> *Ynglinga saga* 34 shares in this idea-complex too, but outside of a clear initiatory framework, when Svipdagr (who ruled over Uppsala) gives the weak and timid Ingjaldr, son of Álfr a wolf’s heart to eat, transforming him into “allra manna grimmastr ok verst skaplundaðr,” (*Ynglinga saga* 34); “of all men [the] grimmest and worst tempered” (SDS). This is the same action that Sigurðr fafnisbani and Hǫttr take on, but the resulting power as negative, not heroic. In the spirit of this theoretical approach, the general behavior is accepted as historical memory, without then inferring particular connotations.

group there are two dancers wearing masks and animal skins. They are called ‘Goths.’ The groups carry sticks and shields, and rush toward the emperor’s table, where they begin circle dances, shouting ‘τούλ.’ They dance in concentric circles, then again in two separate circles surrounding the Goths. They shout and bang their sticks and shields. At the end of their dances, they return to two sides of the room and chant to the accompaniment of the lutes, praising the emperor. The argument that these performers included Scandinavians in the Imperial Varangian Guard is not airtight, but it is provocative and persuasive.<sup>39</sup>

If these are tenth century Scandinavians, the Gothikon attaches a potential script to the silent evidence of weapon-dancers in Viking Age Scandinavia. Other images from the Torslunda helmet-plate matrices show masked figures with spears, engaged in some sort of ‘non-productive’ activity, i.e., dance (Figure 3). The Sutton Hoo helmet, from an Anglo-Saxon grave in Suffolk, echoes this as well (Figure 4).<sup>40</sup> These are images from before the Viking Age. A fresco from the north tower of Kiev’s St. Sophia, built around 1037, displays a very similar scene from the end of the Viking Age alongside scenes from the reign of Constantine Porphyrogenitus, who wrote the account of the Gothikon (Figure 5).<sup>41</sup> With material evidence on either side of the period, and a literary description within the period, there is good reason to think that a form of weapon-dancing existed at the time of the Viking Age (Speidel 2004, 101–12; Price 2002, 385–8; Gunnell 1995, 66–76; Kershaw 2000, 85 with refs).<sup>42</sup>

The images on these helmet plates may represent part of a rite of passage proper, but it may also be a more common behavior. The Gothikon itself was presented during

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<sup>39</sup> For a full discussion of its source value with references, see Gunnell 1995, 66–75 and Price 2002, 370–4. For the text of the Gothikon used here, with accompanying French translation, see Constantine VII Porphyrogénète. 1939. *Le Livre des Cérémonies*. Vol 2. Edited and translated by Albert Vogt. Paris: Les Belles Lettres. pp.182–5.

<sup>40</sup> For the extent of the relationship between the Sutton Hoo finds and Uppland, Sweden, see (Bruce-Mitford 1974, 37–47).

<sup>41</sup> Though not the official website of the cathedral-museum, the site: <http://sofiyskiy-sobor.polnaya.info/en/> provides images of the frescoes and mosaics of the cathedral.

<sup>42</sup> Weapon-dancers are accounted for across several Indo-European daughter cultures (Speidel 2004, 101). Tacitus recounts what may have been a similar practice from centuries before when he says of the Germanic tribes, that “their shows are all of one kind, and the same whatever the gathering may be: naked youths, for whom this is a form of professional acting, jump and bound between swords and upturned spears. Practice has made them dexterous and dexterity graceful.” “Genus spectaculorum unum atque in omni coetu idem. nudi iuvenes, quibus id ludicrum est, inter gladios se atque infestas frameas saltu iaciunt. exercitatio artem paravit, ars decorem” (*Germania* 24).

Christmas, and the shouts have been connected to Yule or ‘jól’ (Gunnell 1995, 72–4).<sup>43</sup> Yule is a regular setting for feasts which feature events like the *mannjafnaðr* and the seasonal return of berserkir mentioned below, with their own connections to Odinic warriors. The masked names of Óðinn and the bird-helmeted figure in Torlsunda D and Sutton Hoo helmet plates (ca. AD 625) also provide an Odinic link to the Gothikon and the dancing figures (Kershaw 2000, 33).

The performance of the Gothikon is play: it is non-productive, uses mimicry and dizziness, and mocks contest. As a general rule, play like this is a model for organizing performance (Schechner 1988, 96). This ranges from improvisationally-devised theatre, to children playing adult roles in ‘house.’ The origins of play have been tied to hunting cultures, hunting being an activity that requires cooperation in a “future-and-crisis-oriented” setting (Schechner 1988, 96–101). Play often mimics that setting, allowing participants to practice the explosive energetic release which would be necessary for a successful hunt. Warfare is clearly related to hunting in its patterns of energy use, and highly physical rehearsals allow the performer to be ready for battle when the time demands. Echoing this parallel, the fresco depicting the masked figures at St. Sophia is immediately next to a fresco that depicts a bear hunt.<sup>44</sup>

### Training the Spirit

Physical readiness is only one aspect of training. It was as true then as it is now that mutual reliability is a key virtue among warriors. This was likely the motivation behind feasting events as well as of the boasting culture in the hall (Halsall 2003, 34). One of the literary events in this spirit is the *mannjafnaðr*, or ‘man-leveling.’<sup>45</sup> It is the comparison of the virtues and deeds of men and is a form of entertainment while

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<sup>43</sup> In turn, an Odinic name Jólnir may help connect the ideas of Odinn, masking, the Gothikon dance, and Yule altogether (Kershaw 2000, 34), justifying the seasonal aspect and suggesting ritual association.

<sup>44</sup> This informal, repetitive training may not have always been harmless. The participants of the Gothikon may not have been so far removed from a tradition described by Tacitus where, if battle were not being waged, it would be sought out by the young warrior (*Germania* 14). Physical play modeled on battle, or participating in the battles of others may have composed part of the informal training of the Viking Age warrior. In light of Neil Price’s work on shamanistic influences in seiðr and the Viking Age the relationship to the Saami (*The Viking Way*, chapters 4, 5), the practice of the ritualized bear hunt may not be unrelated to these images. Moving from performance to drama, Schechner identifies the circumpolar, Shamanistic cultures as holding the origins of drama because of the relationship of the hunting narrative to dramatic structure (Schechner 1988, 100).

<sup>45</sup> For a comprehensive catalogue of *mannjafnaðr* in the Old Norse literature, see Swenson 1991, appendix.

drinking. It is referred to as a “skemmtunaræða” (‘entertaining talk’), and a customary drinking activity: “Sá ǫlsiðr hefir opt verit, at menn taka sér jafnaðarmenn” (Magnússona saga 21).<sup>46</sup>

In an example related to Yule (like the Gothikon above), the Norwegian emissary Þóroddr Snorrason and his men are the involuntary guests of two Swedish brothers-in-law. Tensions rise during drink, and the Norwegians and Swedes begin to compare their people, along with their kings, and the history of violence between the two: “Þeir mágar drukkusk á, en Þóroddr ok bóndason, ok var kappdrykkja ok um kveldit kappmæli ok mannjafnaðr með Norðmönnum ok Svíum ok því næst um konunga þeira, bæði þá, er fyrr höfðu verit, ok þessa, er nú váru, ok svá þau skipti, er verit höfðu landa í milli í manndrápum ok ránum, þeim er verit höfðu milli landa” (*Óláfs saga helga* 141).<sup>47</sup> Presumably such a discussion involves accusations of proper and improper conduct, establishing expectations of normative behavior amongst the participants. In an example from *Haralds saga gráfeldar* 9, this adversarial energy of a mannjafnaðr escalates near to violence, but “vitrir” (wiser) characters calm the men involved, suggesting a rule- or custom-bound tendency to manage aggression.

A version of this practice may also be what is suggested in *Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans* when the berserkir enter the hall at the coming of winter and challenge the champions: “Nú líðr á vetrinn ok þar til, sem berserkja Hrólfs konungs er heim ván. Bǫðvarr spyr Hjalta um háttu berserkja. Hann segir, at þat sé vandi þeira at ganga fyrir sérhvern mann, er þeir koma heim til hirðarinnar, ok fyrst fyrir konunginn ok spyrja, ef hann teldist jafnsnjallr þeim. . . . Þá ganga þeir þaðan ok spyrja ins sama hvern mann, sem í hollinni er...” (*Hrólfs saga kraka* 37).<sup>48</sup> This event too, is associated with Yuletide, and repeated in the text. Rather than being a remnant of a rite of passage (Kershaw

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<sup>46</sup> “It has often been the custom for men when drinking to choose someone to compare themselves with” (Hollander 1992, 702)

<sup>47</sup> “The two kinsmen drank to one another, and Thórodd, to the farmer’s son. They held a drinking match, and in the evening a contest arose between the Norwegians and the Swedes, and following that, a matching of their kings, both those of former times and those still living; and then there was a discussion of the hostilities between the two countries and the killings and depredations attending them” (Hollander 1992, 424–5).

<sup>48</sup> “Now winter passes till that time when King Hrolfr’s berserks are expected home. Bǫðvarr asks Hjalta about the custom of the berserks. He says that it would be their habit to go before each man, when they come home to the hirð, and first before the king to ask if he counted himself as valiant as they . . . then they go thence and ask the same of each man in the hall....” (SDS).

2000; Schjødt 2006, 889), this may be more related to seasonal rituals or the presumably regular mannjafnaðir. The word used by Hrolfr's berserks as a challenge, *jafnsnjallr* can carry the meaning both of equal courage and of equal eloquence (Cleasby and Vigfusson 1874). These verbal exchanges are, in addition to a way of establishing values, composed of the same activity that will take place on the battlefield—the negotiation of status. Weapon-dancing exercises the physical tool set for the warrior, while boasting and the mannjafnaðr reinforce the values and the importance of status maintenance.

If these activities helped contribute to the cohesion of the hirð, oathmaking may have provided a similar activity which not only gauged the qualities of men in the hall, but allowed them to be tested. It is a round of oathmaking that prompts the attack on Hákon jarl in *Jómsvíkinga saga*.<sup>49</sup> It is King Sveinn who introduces the idea, saying, “þat veit ek menn göra at veizlum slíkum at hafa fram heitstrengingar til ágætis sér” (*Jómsvíkinga saga* 26).<sup>50</sup> This echoes the language from *Magnússona saga* above. The two practices are certainly related, and both serve to underline common values and create community amongst the warriors, matching language to behavior.

### Imbibing the Spirit

Accompanying all of these activities was alcohol. Drinking was ubiquitous and well-defined. For example in the passage from *Haralds saga gráfeldar* above, the men are engaged in a *brotferðaröl*—the ‘bon voyage beer.’ An account in *Hákonar saga góða* illustrates several ideas associated with pagan drinking (also at Yule), whether or not it is reliable as a ritual itself. It is made explicit that “at veizlu þeiri skyldu allir menn öl eiga” (14).<sup>51</sup> Animals are slaughtered, and blood is smeared and sprinkled about. Men make toasts to Óðinn as well as other gods, to the king, and to “frænda sinna, þeira er heygðir hqfðu verit, ok váru þat minni kǫlluð” (14).<sup>52</sup> The *minnisöl* (‘memory-drink’) is also connected to valkyrjur in literature, and is likely related to the complex of gaining knowledge of the mysteries of death (Nordberg 2004, 190–1). Other contemporary ritu-

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<sup>49</sup> cf. *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, ch. 35.

<sup>50</sup> “I know it is the custom at such banquets to make oaths to enhance one’s reputation” (Blake 1962, 28).

<sup>51</sup> “At this feast all were to take part in the drinking of ale” (Hollander 1992, 107).

<sup>52</sup> “their kinsmen, those who had been buried [in mounds], and that was called a memorial [toast]” (SDS).

als were less bloody, such as the inheritance of property or the manumission of a slave, but the centrality of alcohol cannot be overlooked.<sup>53</sup>

Some sources make the distinction between 'viking drinking' and typical drinking.<sup>54</sup> Though *víkinga lög* (*Ynglinga saga* 37) is a curious term, it does suggest that drinking amongst raiders, or those engaged in violence, had a special characteristic. It was defined by continuous, communal drinking in rounds (*sveitardrykkja*), rather than the more intimate social event between two individuals, typically a man and a woman (*tvímenning*). This is not to say that women were not present in the violence-associated drinking rites. On the contrary, in the hierarchy of the hall, the wife of the lord likely held a very central place in the formalized ritual of distributing alcohol (Enright 1996, 2–16). This connection was likely instrumental in contracting the fictive kinship ties that bound the warrior society together (Enright 1996, 74–96), an alcoholic communion that also extended to the gods and to the already dead (Nordberg 2004, 90). The image of women bearing horns (encountered in literature as well as iconography) is significant in terms of how it may have influenced the development of valkyrjur as horn bearers in Valhöll (Nordberg 2004, 213).

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<sup>53</sup> From *Gulapingslög*: “Nu vill leyfingi raða kaupum sínum. oc kvánfongum. þa fcal hann gera frælfif ol fitt. þríggiá fállda ol hit mínzta...” (*Gulapingslög* 62). “If a freedman wishes [full freedom] to control his marriage and his business affairs, he shall give a freedom ale brewed from at least three sáld of malt...” The passage continues to describe a process involving the offer of a ransom fee to the master’s highseat. A similar process is described in *Frostapingslög* 9.12: “If a thrall takes up land or lets up a home, he shall give his freedom ale, [serving the brew of] nine measures [of malt]...” A similar process then follows (Larson 2008, 82, 335).

<sup>54</sup> “þá var þat siðvenja konunga, þeira er at lönðum sátu eða veizlum, er þeir létu gera, at drekka skyldi á kveldum tvímenning, hvárr sér, karlmaðr ok kona, svá sem ynnisk, en þeir sér, er fleiri væri saman. En þat váru víkinga lög, þótt þeir væri at veizlum, at drekka sveitardrykkju” (*Ynglinga saga* 37); “It was the custom of those kings who resided in their own lands or sat at the banquets they had arranged, that in the evening, when beakers were passed around, two and two were to drink together, in couples, one man and one woman, as far as possible, and those left over were to drink [together] by themselves. Otherwise it was viking law that at banquets all were to drink together” (Hollander 1992, 40).

### 2.2.3 Character Creation

Hierarchy in the hall was established by where one sat.<sup>55</sup> This seating arrangement would be made dynamic by the results of the mannjafnaðr or seasonal challenges. This performed status could also be mediated through the exchange of ornate objects, such as ring swords (Halsall 2003, 66). Any of these objects, regardless of how they came into someone's possession, had a story of their creation, and would have been stored in their own particular ways when not in use.

For steel objects, the story of their creation may have involved worlds beyond that of the warriors. Often in the Iron Age, bone was used as a source of carbon. If the bones were human, the warrior could carry his ancestry into battle. If animal bone were used in the forging process, the spirit of animal aggression would be captured in the object (Gansum 2004, 45, 51–2; Hedeager 2011, 140). These latent relationships would later become manifest on the battlefield.

With an eye to masking, the possibility of animals physically (or at least chemically) present in the weaponry makes some of the other artifacts of the warrior more interesting. Helmet styles from the periods and the areas surrounding the Vikings demonstrate a number of animal associations. The Torslunda matrices show images of warriors with boars on their helmets—an image reflected in practice by the boar-topped Benty Grange helmet from Derbyshire (Figure 7), and in literature by *Beowulf* (lines 1451–4).<sup>56</sup> This particular animal imagery is associated with a Freyr cult (Hedeager 2011, 89–90 with refs.). A warrior's helmet, along with the bone-carbon of his steel, may have reflected his *fylgja*, a sometimes female, but often theriomorphic aspect of the individual's self alluded to in several texts. Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi, for example, is identified with a bear fylgja (*Njáls saga* 23).<sup>57</sup> These images and ideas would have been

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<sup>55</sup> *Fagrskinna*, chapter 79, describes this in great detail, referring to the hall of Christian King Óláfr Haraldsson. The idea is echoed in *Hávamál* verse 2; *Hrólfs saga kraka*, chapters 18, 34, 37, 40; and even in *Lokasenna*, verses 11–2, when Viðarr must rise to give Loki a seat, and Loki is still resentful of Bragi who “innar sitr bekkjum á [sits further in on the bench.]” Presumably hierarchy was also established by language and designations in the hall, a question taken up in (Morris 1998).

<sup>56</sup> Details of the Benty Grange helmet without a discussion of their ideology can be found in Bruce-Mitford 1974, 223–32. From *Beowulf*: “swa hine fyrndagum/ worhte wæpna smið, wundrum teode,/ besette swinlicum, þæt hine syðþan no/ brond ne beadomecas bitan ne meahton.”

<sup>57</sup> Hǫskuldr wakes his household with a dream, “ek þóttumk sjá bjarndýri mikít ganga út ór húsunum . . . þetta er engi manns fylgja nema Gunnars frá Hlíðarenda;” “I thought I saw a great bear go out of the

latent in the hall itself, but still present enough to craft an individual identity for each warrior—and a language for how he fought.

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house . . . this is no man's *fylgja* but Gunnar of Hlíðarendi's" (SDS). This dream and this *fylgja* betray a disguise that Gunnarr has used to dupe Höskuldr.

For an extensive study of *fylgjur* delineating the difference between the family-associated female *fylgja* and the individual's animal *fylgja*, see (Mundal 1974). Briefer descriptions are offered in (Glosecki 1989, 190ff; Hedeager 2011, 89; Price 2002, 59).

### 2.2.4 Outlining a Script

Less individualized ideas were shared in the hall as well. Poetry was a major vehicle for these ideas and images. Many of the poems that would have been performed in the hall also take place in a hall, suggesting that the space itself could be seen metaphorically (Lönnroth 1978, 29–52; Gunnell 2008; Gunnell 2013; Gunnell 2001). Through poetry, initiates would be introduced to the heroes, such as Helgi Hundingsbani, Bǫðvarr Bjarki, and Sigurðr Fáfnisbani—the archetypes of their own initiation. They would also be introduced to ideologies, like the Odinic afterlife recounted in *Grímnismál*, where the shape of Valhøll with its spears in the rafters and five hundred forty doors is laid out (9, 24), and warriors wade their way to the hall (21). They would compare their own food to the “flęska bazi” (‘best bacon’) that was the food in Odin’s hall, and doubtless some wise-ass had a comment for the room by the time the *eleventh* celestial abode was named and described (11). There is no reason to think that a roomful of drunk warriors took their poetry silently.

Likewise, it is here in poetry they meet the idea of the first and the last battles—of the Æsir–Vanir war and of Ragnarøk. The Æsir–Vanir war of *Vǫluspá*, *Ynglingasaga* and *Skáldskarmál* may have been seen as the prototype which laid out the rationale for ritual wars thereafter (the plunder of gold), and the means for restoring relations after battle including the exchange of hostages and symbolic alliance in the creation of Kvasir (Nordberg 2004, 118–9). War is not negative in these tellings. Rather, it offers these men the ability to strengthen the gods in life and join them in death (Nordberg 2004, 99). And while they are thinking about death, the warriors are reminded that every battle they fight between now and their last, lies somewhere between those two cosmic events—the first war and Ragnarøk.

### 2.2.5 Conclusion: Hearing the Story of the Eternal Battle

These tools of rehearsal in the Old Norse world are all analogous to the training of the modern warrior, designed around group cohesion and reactivity in a high-stress, unstable environment. They provide physical, behavioral, and ideological training. In rehearsal, the identity of the warrior is reinforced and the acknowledgement of the tie to death is made in the toasts that accompany ritualized drinking and the ideas contained in the poetry. Perhaps there is a seasonality to the performances in the hall, focused around Yule. But before he has even taken to the battlefield, alcohol and the feast have solidified the warrior's bond with his fellows and with the dead heroes before him, projecting him toward his own death. Perhaps the warrior had an affinity with a particular animal, one that was present in his sword or shield hanging on the wall. This hall was a central space in the warrior's life, but as he feasted, he was reminded by every story he heard of one thing. The thing his initiation into the comitatus had made true:

“For the soldier death *is* the future, the future his profession assigns him. Yet the idea of men's having death for a future is abhorrent to nature. Once the experience of war makes visible the possibility of death that lies locked up in each moment, our thoughts cannot travel from one day to the next without meeting death's face.”<sup>58</sup>

If the hall is where this relationship was accepted, it is on the battlefield that it was tested. As he ate his bacon, drank his mead, and listened to a tale, he always had one eye turned to the inevitable.

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<sup>58</sup> Simone Weil. *The Iliad or the Poem of Force*. Reprinted in the Chicago Review 18:2 (1965). pp. 5–30. The quote is found on page 19.

**2.3 Performance: *Neither flesh, nor fleshless***

Now the story turns to the performance of battle itself. Here is where one particular tool of performance comes to the forefront: the mask. The idea of a transformation is critical to battle in the Old Norse world. The battlefield itself is masked off from the area surrounding it, the participants in battle take on masks of new characters, and the language that will be used to discuss the battle will be masked as well. Throughout this process, Óðinn—*Grímr*—is palpably present.

### 2.3.1 Masking the Space

Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until  
Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill  
Shall come against him (4.1.92–4).

With these words, the usurper is assured of his security by the witches' apparitions. And yet it is not long before a messenger tells Macbeth that the woods themselves are on the move. This battlefield ruse is rooted in Holinshed's *Chronicles* for AD 1057, and a similar ambush is reported 450 years earlier by the Neustrians (Halsall 2003, 34–5). Macbeth's adversaries have masked themselves with the battlefield. But the Viking Age warrior masked his battlefield with a difference.

Once it is known that battle will take place, the frames are set. The temporal frame lasts from when the warriors gather in the same space to when they leave that space (Schechner 1988, 151, 161–2), but the space itself is also delineated from the surrounding area. This 'second space' is typical of play (Goffman 2001, 27), but here it is also a creation of a sacred space.

An acknowledgment of sacred space is an acknowledgement that space is non-homogenous, and that particular spaces orient individuals, both shaping and shaped by their beliefs (Eliade 1965, 25–62; Eliade 1958, 367ff). In the case of the elite warrior, rehearsal has oriented him toward the mysteries of death, and his *point fixe* is the battlefield. The space of the battlefield is a medium for negotiating status with adversaries, comrades, posterity, and the divine (cf. Tilley 1994, 10–1). Defining this space can be thought of as 'masking the space,' temporarily making a field not itself and *not* not itself, in this case for both a secular and a sacred audience.

### The Hólmganga

The practice of delineating boundaries for combat is best described in the Old Norse sources at the level of individual combat—the duel—called either *hólmganga* ('island-going') or *einvígi* ('single-combat').<sup>59</sup> The *hólmganga* is discussed here as it appears in

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<sup>59</sup> Olav Bø points out that the Old Icelandic term "hólmganga," which carried the connotation of a defined space is not present in Old Danish or Old Swedish, suggesting that *einvígi* is the older form of the concept. He also points out, though, that Iceland seems to have been more 'rule-bound' than the rest of Scandinavia (Bø 1969, 142–3). The Swedish *Hednalagen* provides for the fight to take place at a space

the Íslendingasögur not because it has explicit connections to the elite hall-based warriors, but because the descriptions of the use of space are similar to the practice on the larger battlefield, which is less richly described in the sources.

The best description of the hólmganga is given in *Kormáks saga*. It is worth quoting at length what the saga calls the *hólmgöngulög*:

“Þat vāru hólmgöngulög, at feldr skal vera fimm alna í skaut ok lykkjur í hornum; skyldi þar setja niðr hæla þā, er höfuð var á qðrum enda; þat hétu tjösnur; sá er um bjó, skyldi ganga at tjösnunum, svā at sæi himin milli fōta sér ok heldi í eyrasnepla með þeim förmala, sem síðan er eptir hafðr í blóti því, at kallat er tjösnublót. Þrír reitar skulu umhverfis feldinn, fets breiðir; út frá reitum skulu vera strengir fjórir, ok heita þat hqslur; þat er vqlr haslaðr, er svā er gort. Maðr skal hafa þrjá skjöldu, en er þeir eru farnir, þā skal ganga á feld, þó at aðr hafi af hqrfat; þā skal hlífask með vāpnum þaðan frá. Sá skal hqggva, er á er skorat. Ef annarr verðr sárr, svā at blóð komi á feld, er eigi skylt at berjask lengr. Ef maðr stígr qðrum fæti útum hqslur, ‘fer hann á hæl’, en ‘rennr’, ef báðum stígr. Sinn maðr skal halda skildi fyrir hvarum þeim, er bersk. Sá skal gjalda hólmlausn, er meir verðr sárr, þrjár merkr silfrs í hólmlausn”<sup>60</sup> (*Kormáks saga* 10).

The significant elements of the laws are: 1) the use of a cloak to define the second space, 2) the association with sacrifice (*blót*), 3) the use of hazel twigs, 4) the use of multiple shields and the emphasis that bloodshed ends the duel, and 5) the forfeits (*‘fara á hæl,’ ‘renna’*) associated with leaving the space.

The duel that follows between Kormákr and Bersi ends when a splinter of Bersi’s sword cuts Kormákr’s thumb and blood is spilled. This emphasizes the ritualized-play aspect of the hólmganga. It is an agreed upon set of rules with normative power. Between the allowance of multiple shields (to prolong the fight and exhaust the partici-

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where three roads meet (Bø 1969, 146). Bø concludes that the two terms represent the same older concept, with origins unrecoverable from an earlier past (Bø 1969, 147–8).

<sup>60</sup> “The duelling laws had it that the cloak was to be five ells square, with lops at the corners, and pegs had to be put down there of the kind that had a head at one end. They were called targes, and he who made the preparations was to approach the targes in such a way that he could see the sky between his legs while grasping his ear lobes with the invocation that has since been used again in the sacrifice known as the targe-sacrifice. There were to be three spaces marked out all round the cloak, each a foot in breadth, and outside the marked spaces there should be four strings, named hazel poles; what you had was a hazel-poled stretch of ground when that was done. You were supposed to have three shields, but when they were used up, you were to go onto the cloak, even if you had withdrawn from it before, and from then on you were supposed to protect yourself with weapons. He who was challenged had to strike. If one of the two was wounded in such a way that blood fell onto the cloak, there was no obligation to continue fighting. If someone stepped with just one foot outside the hazel poles, he was said to be retreating, or to be running if he did so with both. There would be a man to hold the shield for each one of the two fighting. He who was the more wounded of the two was to release himself by paying duel ransom, to the tune of three marks of silver” (McTurk 1997, 194–5).

pants) and the injunction against spilling blood, it is clear that the goal is not mortal combat (Griffith 1995, 167; Bø 1969, 143). This ‘effective’ play space—meaning that an enduring status change can result—is defined by its spatial boundaries.

These elements reappear in various permutations throughout the sagas. Some duels feature only a cloak on the ground and a recitation of the laws.<sup>61</sup> Others express the second space in the literal sense of an island, such as *Egils saga skallagrímsonar*, which also features a stone circle (64), and *Gunnlaugs saga ormstunga*, which claims to recount the last duel to be fought in Iceland (14).<sup>62</sup> The idea is even present in Saxo, when Uffi and Vermund duel on a battlefield that “was encircled by the waters of the river Eider in such a way that access was barred to it except by boat” (Fisher and Davidson 1979, 108).<sup>63</sup>

The second space is never made explicitly ‘sacred,’ and there is no textual concordance to back up Snorri’s claim that Ullr was a god to call on (*at heita*) in the duel (Gylfaginning 31);<sup>64</sup> the religious aspects of the duel may have already been non-productive by the Viking Age (Ciklamini 1963, 182, 189). But it is worth noting that *hólmganga* was banned early on in Christianized Iceland, suggesting that the ritual involved was connected to a sort of supernatural unacceptable to a Christian ethos

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<sup>61</sup> In *Kjalnesinga saga*, the laws are recited before the duel begins: “Þat var þá siðr at kasta feldi undir fætr sér; þat váru lög þeira, at sá þeira, er af feldi hopaði, skyldi leysa sik þrim mörkum silfrs; sá þeira var óvigr, er fyrri lét sitt blóð á jörð.” “Eptir þat váru sǫgð upp hólmgongulög milli þeira” (*Kjalnesinga saga* 9). “It was the custom then to throw a cloak under one’s feet. These were the laws: that the one who retreated off the cloak should lose three marks of silver, [and] the one was defeated, who first let his blood [fall] to the ground” (SDS).

<sup>62</sup> In *Egils saga Skallagrímsonar*, the details of the hazel twigs, the *tjǫsnublót*, and the hide or cloak are lacking, but the idea of second space is maintained, this time in the literal use of an island for the *hólmganga*, but also in the creation of a circle of stones around the combatants (chapter 64). It is not specified who lays the stone circle, or if it was a standing feature of the area. The structure of the *hólmganga* is in multiple rounds, evident when Ljótr steps outside the stone circle and forfeits the first round. Ljótr is also allowed a rest by Egill. This, as the examples in *Kormáks saga* do, suggests that the structure of the *hólmganga* is not centered around simple killing, though Ljótr is not destined to survive and the law has provisions for the property of those who do not live to duel again.

<sup>63</sup> “Igitur ex pacto pugne locus expetitur. Hunc fluuius Eidorus it aquarum ambitu uallat, ut earum interstitio repugnante nauigiis dumtaxat aditus pateat” (*Gesta Danorum* 4.4.8). The text in 3.5.6 relates a duel between the combatants Rørik and Ubbi who “made an arena [Nec mora cicitur campus]” with observers nearby (Fisher and Davidson 1979, 81).

<sup>64</sup> “Ullr heitir einn, sonr Sifjar, stjúpsonr Þórs. Hann er bogmaðr svá góðr ok skíðfærr svá at engi má við hann keppask. Hann er ok fagr álitum ok hefir hermanns atgervi. Á hann er ok gott at heita í einvígi” (Gylfaginning 31). “One is called Ullr, the son of Sif, stepson of Þórr. He is such a good archer and skier that no man can beat him. He is also fair in appearance and has a warrior’s ability. It is also good to call on him in duels [einvígi]” (SDS).

(Gunnell 1995, 32).<sup>65</sup> Likewise, the connection to sacrifice, discussed below, cannot be underrated.

In the dueling contest, the tools of play are used to create a practice elevated above the practice of everyday life. This is an example of the membrane between making believe and making belief. A broad enough section of society adopts and adheres to the arbitrary rules, making them normative for the group.

### The Battlefield

It is in the accounts of the hólmganga that the practice of hazelling is described in most detail, but a similar practice is seen in battle contests both in *Egils saga* as well as several of the konungasögur. Unlike the explicit hólmgöngulög, the descriptions of these second spaces are almost incidental to the texts. In *Egils saga*, it is in a battle between the Scottish king Óláfr and the English Aðalsteinn, where Aðalsteinn's ambassadors go to Óláfr:

“ok finna þat til ørenda, at Aðalsteinn konungr vill hasla honum völl ok bjóða orrostustað á Vinheiði við Vínuskóga, ok hann vill, at þeir heri eigi á land hans, en sá þeira ráði ríki á Englandi, er sigr fær í orrostu, lagði til viku stef um fund þeira, en sá biðr annars viku, er fyrr kemr. En þat var þá siðr, þegar konungi var völlr haslaðr, at hann skyldi eigi herja at skammlausu, fyrr en orrostu væri lokit...”

The passage continues on to say that:

“þá váru þar settar upp heslistengr allt til ummerkja...”

These chosen battlefields are described for their qualities:

“Þurfti þann stað at vanda, at hann væri slétt, er miklum her skyldi fylkja; var þar ok svá, er orrostustaðrinn skyldi vera, at þar var heiðr slétt, en annan veg frá fell á ein, en á annan veg frá var skógr mikill” (*Egils saga* 52).<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> The adoption of Christianity in Scandinavia led to the practice of dueling being outlawed, while in the southern Germanic (and broadly continental) tradition, it transformed into the divinely-sanctioned ordeal (Bø 1969, 137).

<sup>66</sup> “saying that King Athelstan challenged him to a battle and proposed Wen Heath by Wen Forest as a site; he wanted them to stop raiding his realm, and the victor of the battle should rule England. He proposed meeting in battle after one week, and that the first to arrive should wait one week for the other. It was a custom then that a king who had been challenged to a pitched battle incurred dishonor if he went raiding before it had been fought. . . . hazel rods had already been put up to mark where it would be fought. The site had to be chosen carefully, since it had to be level and big enough for large armies to gather. At the site of the battlefield there was a level moor with a river on one side and a large forest on the other” (Scudder 1997, 94).

The idea of the pitched battle with hazelled boundaries appears outside of *Egils saga* as well, in the context of several king's sagas, namely *Hákonar saga góða* (24) and *Óláfs saga tryggvasonar* (18). *Hákonar saga góða* shares the description of a particularly large, flat field, similar to *Egils saga*.<sup>67</sup> A large, flat field is also simply pragmatic for battle. Indeed, in a larger literary and historical tradition, where pitched warfare is common, there was often a practicality to the choice and preparation of the battlefield.<sup>68</sup> Many of these pitched battles, when they appear in the historical record, involve the hurling of insults and play out as a series of duels between characters, not unlike the Old Norse sources (Keegan 1993, 98–9).

Not all pitched battles are described as hazelled, and certainly not all attacks were pitched—including a battle immediately preceeding the one between Óláfr and Aðalsteinn. The practice of hazelling the field has been rejected as a literary convention on logistical grounds for large bodies of warriors (Griffith 1995, 185). This is worth considering in light of a possible shared authorship of *Heimskringla* and *Egils saga* (cf. West 1980), but is unlikely. Even if the usage of hazelling is metonymic, it alludes to a practice with supernatural connotations. Somewhere in the collective memory was a sense of setting aside sacred spaces and a matching of the pitched battle and the hazelled field.<sup>69</sup> Hazel rods appear in the archaeological record as early as the Bronze Age

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<sup>67</sup> “From *Hákonar saga góða*: “Hákon konungr sendi þeim boð ok bað þá á land ganga, segir, at hann hafði þeim völl haslat á Rastarkálf. Þar eru sléttir vellir ok miklir, en fyrir ofan gengr brekka löng ok heldr lág” (*Hákonar saga góða* 24); “King Hákon sent a messenger to them, asking them to disembark and [saying] that he had marked off a battlefield for them on Rastarkálf. At that place there is a level plain of large extent, and above it, a long and rather low hill” (Hollander 1992, 115). From *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*: “Lagði jarl skipum sínum at landi ok haslaði völl Ragnfróði konungi ok tók orrostustað” (18). “The earl moved his ships to the land and marked out [*lit.*, hazeled out] a battlefield for King Ragnfróth, choosing his ground” (Hollander 1992, 158).

<sup>68</sup> Examples range from the battle at Gaugamela between Alexander and Darius in 331 BC to centuries and a world away in China during the earlier Spring and Autumn period where chariot tracks were prepared through the battlefields—a tradition carried through even into the modern age (Keegan 1993, 173–4).

<sup>69</sup> It is important to point out that not all battles in the period were fought on land. Sea battles are a prominent feature of the kings' sagas, in particular. There is no suggestion that there was any aqueous equivalent of hazeling the field, but these battles were no doubt arranged on some level, to allow for favorable weather and other conditions (Griffith 1995, 196). For example, in *Jómsvíkinga saga* 13 Sveinn and Haraldr meet in their ships, but it is too dark to begin battle. No doubt these periods of unanticipated anticipation would have been full of emergent performances both within the warrior groups and between them, if they held themselves within earshot. Sea battles will be key examples in the later text when supernatural figures enter into the fray, even without the space clearly delineated.

in Denmark, with strong suggestions of magical associations (Glob 1970, 93–4, 114).<sup>70</sup> Bodies themselves were sacrificed in Danish bogs accompanied by hazel twigs, reinforcing a connection with deadly spaces (Glob 1977, 68).

### Other Sacred Spaces

The substance to this supernatural claim is found in the creation of second spaces beyond battle in the Viking Age, such as chapter 56 of *Egils saga*, where a court space is described:

“En þar er dómrinn var settr, var völlr slétt ok settar niðr heslistengr í völlinn í hring, en lögð um útan snæri umhverfis; váru þat kǫlluð vébǫnd; en fyrir innan í hringinum sátu dómendr . . . Síðan hljóp Askmaðr ok þeir sveitungar til dómsins, skáru í sunr vébǫndin ok brutu niðr stengrnar, en hleypðu á braut dómǫndunum; þá gerðisk þyss mikill á þinginu, en menn váru þar allir vǫpnlausir” (*Egils saga* 56).<sup>71</sup>

In this passage, the court is hazelled and surrounded with ropes, called *vébǫnd* (sanctuary-bands). The first element of which, *vé*, is the term for a sacred space or sanctuary (Cleasby and Vigfusson 1874). Askmaðr breaks the *vébǫnd* and in doing so, breaks off the action that was taking place, spilling the court back into the secular space. This sort of sacred space is also alluded to in the *dómhringr* mentioned in *Eyrbyggja saga*, a ring surrounding a rock where men were sacrificed to Þórr. It was “inn mesti helgistaðr” (‘the most holy place,’ *Eyrbyggja saga* 10). The authenticity of the practice is irrelevant; the idea of holy, bounded spaces is corroborative.

The *vébǫnd* can even be tied to the faint memory of a tradition alive in the *Íslendingasögur* of *jarðarmen*—the transformation of earth itself to denote a change of status. The second element, *men* (‘necklace’), is suggestive of a ring. An example from *Gísla saga súrssonar* notably also includes a spear in the process, an Odinic element connected to consecration and sacrifice, discussed below (*Gísla saga* 6).<sup>72</sup> Outside of a

<sup>70</sup> The primary sarcophagus in the Guldhøj graves (Vamdrup, DK) features 6 split and cut hazel rods, while a grave at Gardehøj (Jægersborg, DK) contained a hazel twig wrapped in skins amongst other ‘non-productive,’ numinous items. Glob identifies the hazel with symbolic ‘life,’ in the later Viking Age and medieval period, suggesting this earlier origin, p. 94.

<sup>71</sup> “The court was held on a flat plain, marked out by hazel poles with a rope around them. This was known as staking out a sanctuary. Inside the circle sat the court . . . Askmann and his men ran to the court and cut the ropes where the sanctuary had been staked out, broke the hazel poles and drove the court away. Commotion broke out at the assembly; no one carried arms there” (Scudder 1997, 107).

<sup>72</sup> From *Gísla saga súrssonar*: “Ganga nú út í Eyrarhvalsodda ok rísta þar upp ór jörðu jarðarmen, svá at báðir endar váru fastir í jörðu, ok settu þar undir málaspjót, þat er maðr mátti taka hendi sinni til

judicial context, but still in the realm of irrevocable acts is a moment when King Harald elects to share his wealth with King Magnús. To do so, he spreads a hide underneath the soon-to-be-divided gold: “Síðan lét Haraldr breiða niðr nautshúð mikla ok steypa þar á gullinu ór tǫskunum” (*Haralds saga sigurðarsonar* 24).<sup>73</sup> Again, there is a practicality to confining the gold to a cloak, but there is a larger context of spatially framed significant action.

### Divination and Chance

That there is a relationship between the duel, the larger battle, and supernatural space can also be inferred from an earlier observation by Tacitus of the ability of a duel to augur the outcome of battle for the Germanic tribes. He writes: “they have another method of taking divinations, by means of which they probe the issue of serious wars. A member of the tribe at war with them is somehow or other captured and pitted against a selected champion of their own countrymen, each in his tribal armour. The victory of one or the other is taken as a presage” (*Germania* 10).<sup>74</sup> Here the duel is not only a microcosm of the greater battle, it is given divinatory power.

The other method of divination that Tacitus describes is even more interesting, not for its performers, but for its props. Discussing the casting of lots, he says that “a bough is cut from a nut-bearing tree and divided into slips: these are distinguished by certain runes and spread casually and at random over white cloth” (*Germania* 10).<sup>75</sup> The

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geirnagla. Þeir skyldu þar fjórir undir ganga, Þorgrímr, Gísli, Þorkell ok Vésteinn. Ok nú vekja þeir sér blóð ok láta renna saman dreyra sinn í þeiri moldu, er upp var skorin undan jarðarmeninu, ok hrœra saman allt, moldina ok blóði; en síðan fellu þeir allir á kné ok sverja þann eið, at hverr skal annars hefna sem bróður sins, ok nefna öll goðin í vitni” (6); “They walked out to Eyrarhvalsoddi and scored out a long strip of turf, making sure that both ends were still attached to the ground. Then they propped up the arch of raised turf with a damascened spear so long-shafted that a man could stretch out his arm and touch the rivets. All four of them had to go under it. Thorgrim, Gisli, Thorkel and Vestein. Then they drew blood and let it drip down on to the soil beneath the turf strip and stirred it together – the soil and the blood. Then they fell to their knees and swore an oath that each would avenge the other as if they were brothers, and they called on all the gods as their witnesses” (Regal 2000, 506–7).

Other examples include: *Vatnsdæla saga* 33, *Laxdæla saga* 18, and *Fóstbræðra saga* 2.

<sup>73</sup> “Thereupon Harald had a large ox-hide spread and poured the gold from the bags out on it” (Hollander 1992, 596).

<sup>74</sup> “est et alia observatio auspiorum, qua gravium bellorum eventus explorant. eius gentis, cum qua bellum est, captivum quoquo modo interceptum cum electo popularium suorum, patriis quemque armis, committunt: victoria huius vel illius pro praeiudicio accipitur” (*Germania* 10).

<sup>75</sup> “virgam frugiferae arbori decism in surculos amputant eosque notis quibusdam discretos super candidam vestem temere ac fortuito spargunt” (*Germania* 10).

twigs are spread not on the ground, but on a cloth, just as was King Harald's gold, and Kormákr's blood. That twigs are used at all is a historical echo of the hazel boughs that also become associated with dueling and battlefields. This ties together not just the *idea* of the duel and divination, but the *structure* of the duel and divination. Both of these early instances of Germanic divination are tied to elements seen in later battle accounts. Divination itself is a part of the Old Norse preparation for battle, along with magical attempts to affect the outcome. For example, in a passage from *Brennu-Njáls saga*, a character attempts divination prior to battle: "Reyndi Bróðir til með forneskju, hversu ganga mundi orrostan," (*Njáls saga* 157).<sup>76</sup> The acts of battle and divination are linked in the Old Norse world. Two of the elements of play: struggle and chance, are present in the very lay of the land.

### Sacrifices

If the masking of the space has opened a doorway between two worlds, sacrifice is a first form of communication across the threshold.<sup>77</sup> The Bronze Age bog depositions are early examples of the association of ritualized destruction with warfare in early Scandinavia. The idea of war-related sacrifice is found in the Old Norse literature as well. *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (*Heimskringla*) tells how Hákon jarl makes a divinatory sacrifice to Óðinn before battle, soon after a forced baptism:

"En er hann kom austr fyrir Gautasker, þá lagði hann at landi. Gerði hann þá blót mikit. Þá kómu þar fljúgandi hrafnar tveir ok gullu hátt. Þá þykkist jarl vita, at Óðinn hefir þegit blótit ok þá mun jarl hafa dagráð til at berjask" (27).<sup>78</sup>

This tells us that sacrifice took place, but not what form it took. It was likely conceived of as having been similar to the rather bloody one described in *Hákonar saga góða*, above. Looking back to *Kormáks saga*, the establishment of the hazelled field is

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<sup>76</sup> "Brodir tried through sorcery to find out how the battle would go" (Cook 1997, 213).

<sup>77</sup> Doorways have a place in the Viking Age imagery of death and sorcery, present in both literary and material forms (Eriksen 2013 with refs). Conceptually, the hazelled space or the space underneath the spear throw may have operated as a doorway between the worlds, perhaps even as *valgrind*—a 'gate of the slain, from *Grimnismál* 22, much as the hall might become so when a poem blurs the boundary of life and afterlife (see below).

<sup>78</sup> "And when he arrived at the Gauta Skerries in the east, he anchored and made a great sacrifice. Then two ravens came flying, croaking loudly. Then the earl believed that Óthin had accepted the sacrifice and that it was a propitious time to fight" (Hollander 1992, 167)

associated with a sacrifice called the *tjǫsnuþlót*, though it is never described.<sup>79</sup> The saga does, however, associate other sacrifices with the duel. In one of the many duels, Kormákr is protected by a spákona's magic beforehand, which involves the sacrifice of geese for invulnerability (*Kormáks saga* 22); he will later be inhibited by her magic. After the duel, he sacrifices a bull, a sacrifice that is then bought by his adversary and consecrated to álfar to aid in healing (*Kormáks saga* 22).<sup>80</sup>

In *Kormáks saga*, the recipients of sacrifice (álfar) are tied to the land itself, which implies that the dueling ground has affected a numinous space. Typically on the larger scale, the recipient of the sacrifice is identified as Óðinn, but it is worth remembering that the early Icelanders did not have a robust relationship with the All-father (see p. 18). This could be an example of memory recrafted, or a different belief system altogether. Either way, the sense of sacrifice is consistent, and there is an acknowledgement of a link between violence and the numinous.

An episode in *Sverris saga* completes the connection between the pitched battle on the large scale and the sacrifice. In it, King Magnús responds to an invitation by Sverrir to pitched battle by calling the space Sverrir's *blótvöllr* (*Sverris saga* 60).<sup>81</sup> The accusation is one of pagan magic amongst Christians, but it shows a currency between the ideas of sacrifice to the divine and the pitched battlefield.

### Consecration

The requisite destruction of sacrifice need not have been separate from the destruction of battle itself. One tradition that can be extracted from the literature is the act of conse-

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<sup>79</sup> The *tjǫsnuþlót* has been suggested to be either a phallic rite (from the description of the begs) or a ritual to prevent the blunting of the sword (arguably a different sort of phallic rite), see (Ciklamini 1963, 183–5 with refs).

<sup>80</sup> “Hóll einn er heðan skammt í brott, er álfar búa í; graðung þann, er Kormákr drap, skaltu fá ok rjóða blóð graðungsins á hólinn útan, en gera álfum veizlu af slátrinu, ok mun þér batna” (*Kormáks* 22). “There’s a certain hillock a short way from here, in which elves live. You are to take the bull that Kormak killed, redden the surface of the hillock with the bull’s blood, and make the elves a feast of the meat. Then you’ll recover” (McTurk 1997, 217).

<sup>81</sup> Sverrir proposes: “Gakk upp á Íluvöllu ok bú þik til orrostu ok lið þitt, en ek skal ganga út af borginni með öllu mínu liði...” Magnús responds: “Eigi munum vér nú oftarr ganga upp á blótvöllinn þinn.” Magnús suggests a duel (*einvígi*) but Sverrir considers it “allókonungligt” (‘very unkingly’) to duel like those without followers. They settle on a “turniment” (joust), which manifests as a battle, anyhow (*Sverris saga* 60). “Go up to the fields of Ila, prepare yourself and your force for battle, and I will come forth from the castle with all my force...” “We will go no more to your betwitched field” (Sephton 1994, 79).

crating the opponent's dead to Óðinn. Considering that most of the warfare that took place during the Viking Age was between Scandinavians (Griffith 1995, 28), there is—just as with the very idea of arranging a pitched battle—a certain complicity in each side consecrating the other to the same god. The image is provided by the poet of *Völuspá* in verse 24, when:

24. Flægðei Óðinn  
ok i folk of skaut;  
þat vas enn folkvíg  
fyrst í heimi;”

24. Odin shot a spear, hurled it over the host:  
that was still the first war in the world  
(Larrington 1996, 7).

Óðinn has a personal connection to the spear Gungnir (*Skáldskaparmál* 35). Spears also feature prominently in the description of Valhøll in *Grímnismál* 9, as well as the Óðinn-associated figures of the weapon-dancers, cited above. In *Ynglinga saga*, a euhemerized Óðinn consecrates himself with the spear prior to his death, also claiming all the battle-dead to be his (9).<sup>82</sup> Njǫrðr follows suit in the following chapter. The marking of the spear, because of its frequent recurrence, may be tied to the idea of Valhøll and some form of ritual initiation (Schjødtt 2006, 891). But it is not an activity that takes place only in the hall; it is an activity on the battlefield, as in *Völuspá*. Likewise, in *Eyrbyggja saga* it says “þá skaut Steinþórr spjóti at fornum sið til heilla sér yfir flokk Snorra” (*Eyrbyggja saga* 44).<sup>83</sup> As with the sacrifice to the álfar, this is Icelandic instance is not associated with Óðinn, but only an ‘ancient custom.’ An explicitly Odinic instance of the custom comes from a tale of mainland Scandinavia, *Styrbjarnar þáttur Svíakappa*.

In this example, Eiríkr jarl sacrifices to Óðinn, and then when he is before Styrbjörn and his army, an Odinic figure appears and hands him a reed (*reyrsproti*), telling him to cast it over his adversaries, saying “Óðinn á yðr alla” (‘Óðinn possesses you all’). A blindness comes over the armies, and Eiríkr’s opposition is wiped out by a landslide (*Flateyjarbók* 2.61). In addition to sacrificing the army, Eiríkr has sacrificed himself to Óðinn. The cost of his victory will be his own death in ten years time. This

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<sup>82</sup> This is inconsistent with *Hárbarðsljóð* 24, where Óðinn is said to receive only earls who die in battle and *Grímnismál* 14, where Freyja is said to take half of the battle-dead. It is also inconsistent that Óðinn himself, a resident of Valhøll, would die of old age and not weaponry. This is a level of concordance that cannot be expected by source material recorded for different reasons, but likewise cannot discount that certain ideas traveled together in the orature of the period.

<sup>83</sup> “Steinþor shot a spear over them [Snorri’s men] for good luck, according to ancient custom” (Quinn 1997, 188).

can be compared in turn to a sequence in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, where the initial context is a sacrifice of a noble son to alleviate famine, but the result is war and the conquest of one king's land by another. The dead from the battle are explicitly consecrated to Óðinn, though the method is not described. This particular sacrifice is initiated by the result of divinatory lot-casting (*Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* 7).

Other examples of casting weapons over the ground can be recovered in the texts, removed from the context of battle as well as Odinic connections (and even spears), but the persistence of the image may speak to the fact that it is easier to recall actions than the reasons behind them. Notably, these examples have to do with claiming land or relinquishing property, which still ties this form of sacrifice together with the idea of setting aside a special or somehow sacred space.<sup>84</sup> The idea of Odinic consecration may also lay behind the deposition of some weapons, found in graves (Nordberg 2004, 283), where the grave itself a well-defined space.

## Conclusion

The battlefield was marked off as a sacred space in the Old Norse world, as were other spaces that carried social or sacred significance in Old Norse culture.<sup>85</sup> All of these events are outside the daily course—they are events with irreparable consequences. There is no distinction between the marking off of play space and the marking off of sacred space; they serve the same function (Huizinga 1971, 38–9). The space was activated using hazel twigs, stones, or natural boundaries. The process may have become metaphoric over time. By associating a form of conflict with fate and divination

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<sup>84</sup> These include examples from *Landnámabók* and *Hrafnkels saga freysgoða*: Of the settler Vekell Shape-changer, “hann skaut milli hauganna ok hvarf þaðan aptr” (*Landnámabók* 196); “he shot between the mounds and from there turned back” (SDS) and of Onundr, “ok varð þá Qnundr skjótari ok skaut yfir ána með tundrøru ok helgaði sér svá landið fyrir vestan ok bjó milli á” (*Landnámabók* 198); “and Qnundr was swifter and shot over the river with a tinder-arrow and thus consecrated to himself the land to the west and settled between” (SDS).

From *Hrafnkels saga freysgoða*: “Eða hvárt viltu, Þorkell, nú gera: at sitja hér hjá Hrafnkeli ok gæta þeira, eða viltu fara með Sámi ór garði á brott í qrskotshelgi við bæinn ok heyja fêransdóm á grjóthól nqkkurum, þar sem hvárki er akr né eng?” (*Hrafnkels saga* 5); “What do you want to do now, Þorkell: sit here by Hrafnkell and keep watch, or do you want to come with Samr to a safe place an arrow's shot away [qrskotshelgi] and hold the confiscation court on a stony hill where there is neither field nor meadow” (SDS). The sensitivity to landscape is suggestive of meaningful practice.

<sup>85</sup> Neil Price finds a connection in shamanistic cultures as well, where bounded structures which exist *only* in the spirit world may be built for defence (Price 2002, 308).

(struggle and chance), the masked battlefield is an attempt to create a “perfect situation” outside of normal experience that can then be used to stabilize a status relationship (Caillois 2000, 19). The players agree that what happens within the battlefield will be far more important than what happens outside of it.

In addition to setting boundaries to the field, the combatants may have been consecrated to Óðinn by the cast of a spear. If the image of Óðinn himself casting the spear over the Æsir-Vanir war was a widespread one, this practice of the consecration of the enemy ties each warrior back to the first war. Attached to every consecrating spear is a thread that knits each battle and battlefield into the archetypal war and from there into the final war of Ragnarøk, as the consecrated dead join the einherjar. The battlefield is now a link between two worlds: one of human behavior, the other of gods’ decisions, fylgjur, and fate. And the warrior will approach the battle with one eye on the human plane, and one eye on the divine.

### 2.3.2 Masking the Self

The masked battlefield now spans two worlds: it is *not here* and *not not here*. It is a place within time when warriors meet, and a place beyond time when fates are woven. The warriors themselves must span these two spaces, and tie themselves to these times. They must become *not self* and *not not self*: part of the current battle, and part of the eternal battle. To do this, they will mask themselves both physically and behaviorally. It begins when they don their helmets.

It is a commonplace that particularly ornate objects can indicate social status or power, but the warrior's status is based on immediate intimidation (Halsall 2003, 176). Egill speaks of Eiríkr blóðøx at York ruling from “und ýgs hjalmi”—‘under a helmet of terror’ (*Egils saga* 78). The helmet-mask of the Vendel 1 grave (Figure 8), and the Sutton Hoo helmet (Figure 9) are unsettling for viewer even in peacetime and are no doubt similar to the helmet of terror Egill speaks of (cf. Price and Mortimer, 531). Figure 9 shows two ‘performances’ of the Sutton Hoo helmet, emphasizing the difference between a *textual* understanding of an artifact and an *embodied* understanding. When worn, the eyes in such a helmet-mask will be shadowed and may not even be visible, removing the social touch-point that eyes typically provide. This loss of identity is matched with a fixed expression, one of overemphasized features, like the brows. That the lowered brow was a symbol of rage or intimidation is seen in the Old Norse literature when Þórr becomes angry, or when Egill is sullen before King Athelstan.<sup>86</sup> It can also be seen in the mirror. Yet there is another aspect many of these masks as well. They do not simply overemphasize human features, they adopt animal features, like the boar helmets mentioned previously. These two aspects may be blended, as they are on the Sutton Hoo helmet which takes overdetermined human features and incorporates them into the form of an animal in flight over the bridge of the nose (Price and Mortimer, 519–20). Animal warriors are a familiar indo-european phenomenon (Speidel

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<sup>86</sup> Of Þórr in *Gylfaginning*: “vita megu þat allir, hversu hræddr búandinn mundi vera, er hann sá at Þórr lét síga brýnnar ofan fyrir augun (45);” “Everyone can see how afraid the farmer would have been, when he saw Þórr make his brow sink down over his eye” (SDS); Of Egill: “en er hann sat, sem fyrr var ritat, þá hleypði hann annarri brúninni ofan á kinnina, en annarri upp í hárrötr . . . ekki vildi hann drekka, þó at honum væri borit, en ýmsum hleypði brúnunum ofan eða upp” (*Egils saga* 55); “When he was sitting in this particular scene, he wrinkled one eyebrow right down onto his cheek and raised the other up to the roots of his hair . . . He refused to drink even when served, but just raised and lowered his eyebrows in turn” (Scudder 1997, 100).

2004, 10–3), and the boars of Beowulf, Benty Grange, and the Torslunda plates are likely part of that complex. The flying facial features may be tied to Óðinn’s ravens, Huginn and Muninn. Birds can be associated with fylgjur as well, as in *Gunnlaugs saga ormstunga* (2).<sup>87</sup> The animal warrior complex as a whole in the Old Norse world may have been tied to ancestor worship (Kershaw 2000, 25–7). There are numerous avenues for justifying the practice. But there are other animal warriors in the Old Norse material who have particularly Odinic associations. Naturally, this makes them a trickier topic.

For some, the *berserkir* and *úlfheðnar* are simply synonymous with the elite warrior of the Viking Age (Nordberg 2004, 89). The topic is a monstrous one, and is discussed here in only terms of implications for performance in battle. Part of the problem in pinning down these butterflies-of-battle is linguistic: while the *úlfheðnar* are fairly straight-forward (‘wolf-hides’), the *berserkir* have an identity crisis. It is not possible to reconstitute definitively whether these individuals were ‘bare-sarks’ or ‘bear-sarks,’ though the current tide is in favor of the former (Price 2002, 366).

The literary evidence is not of great help in unraveling the issue. The earliest acknowledged use of the terms comes from the skald Þorbjörn hornklofi’s *Haraldskvæði* (also called *Hrafnsmál*), associated with the Battle of Hafrsfjörðr and preserved in *Fagrskinna* and in *Heimskringla*. Fittingly enough, the praise-poem is structured as a dialogue between a raven and a valkyrja, two of battle’s typical non-human actors. Here Þorbjörn introduces the *berserkir* and *úlfheðnar* by the sounds they fill the battle with:

<p>“Grenjuðu berserkir; guðr vas þeim á sinnum; emjuðu ulfheðnarok ísörn dúðu.</p>	<p>“Berserks bellowed; battle was under way for them; wolfskins [berserks] howled and brandished iron spears” (SKALD 1.1.102).</p>
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As the poem continues, it conflates the two types of warrior, as does the editor of the translation.<sup>88</sup> Other references are no less ambiguous. The *berserkir* of the *Íslendinga-*

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<sup>87</sup> After Þorsteinn relates his prophetic dream of eagles fighting for a swan, Austmaðr responds: “Fuglar þeir munu vera manna fylgjur;” “Those birds will be men’s fylgjur” (SDS). The saga has narrative features that place it later in the tradition, but set against the physical evidence of birds associated with protection of an individual, and with violence, it should not be disregarded.

<sup>88</sup> The poem continues, here in prose order: ‘Ek vil spyrja þik at reiðu berserkja, bergir hræsævar: hversu es fengit vígdjörfum verum, þeim es í folk vaða?’ ‘Þeir heita ulfheðnar, es bera blóðgar randir í orrostu; rjóða vigrar, es koma til vígs; þar es þeim sist saman. Þar, hygg ek, felisk sá inn skilvísi skyli undir einum áræðismönnum, þeim es höggva í skjöld.’

sögur are stereotyped baddies, possibly just a memory of out of work soldiers outside of the Icelandic social system (Lieberman 2004, 101). Even where they appear differently, such as in *Egils saga*, there is ambiguity. When Egill's grandfather, Kveldúlfur rages in battle on board a ship, it is said that he "hamaðisk" ('changed-shape,' ch 27). Kveldúlfur is described early on as *hamrammr* (shape-strong) and as a *berserkr* (1). Yet his name also contains a wolf element. The saga later describes the younger generation of *hamrammr* men in battle, that "hvárgi þeira hafði brynju" (53).<sup>89</sup> Likewise, the kings' sagas have many characters who cast off their armor, but they also feature enchanted animal skins.<sup>90</sup>

The legendary sagas can help confirm an Odinic connection between animals, and the case of Bǫðvarr Bjarki seems to part of a complete Odinic, totemic, and shamanistic complex (Schjødtt 2007, 145–6). But the question remains whether or not the conflation of these ideas of animals and fierce warriors is very early or very late. Outside of the warrior context, the development of the Old Norse word *vargr* gives a close-to-home example of how metaphor can be mapped onto language, rather than form a basis for language. The original meaning of *vargr*, exclusive to 'outlaw,' from proto-Germanic *\*wargaz*, changed shape over time to become the wolf of the modern Scandinavian languages—a creature outside of and threatening to society (Kershaw 2000, 178 with refs). The berserkr may have run this same linguistic trajectory. There is a good chance that the language used to describe these warriors was purely comparative i.e., they were fierce *like* bears (and fought bare), and over time, the concept itself *hamaðisk* (Schjødtt 2006, 891–2; Griffith 1995, 136).<sup>91</sup>

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"I want to ask you about the equipment of berserks, taster of the corpse-sea: what provision is made for war-daring men, those who surge into battle?" "They are called wolf-skins, who bear bloody shields in combat; they redden spears when they come to war; there [at Haraldr's court] they are seated together. There, I believe, he, the sovereign wise in understanding, may entrust himself to men of courage alone, those who hew into a shield" (SKALD 1.1.113–4).

<sup>89</sup> "neither of them wore a coat of mail" (Scudder 1997, 96).

<sup>90</sup> Examples of casting off mail from the king's sagas include: *Hákonar saga góða* 30; *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* 40; *Magnúss saga ins góða* 28. For impenetrable reindeer cloaks, see *Óláfs saga helga* 193.

<sup>91</sup> Schjødtt regularly ties this to Levi-Strauss's observation that animals are 'good to think with,' and sees a parallel in the naming of sports teams and metaphorical understanding of aggressive behavior (Schjødtt 2006, 888; Schjødtt 2007, 146).

The possibility of animal skins worn by warriors is not excluded by the evidence, as witnessed by the weapon-dancers and the Gothikon.<sup>92</sup> But even if animal skins are involved, it is not reconstructible whether skins were worn in battle or if it is just an image that carries over from an initiation rite (Schjødt 2006, 888). Objections appealing to reason about the impracticality of fighting while wearing a full bearskin lack imagination. If a whole person can be metonymically referred to as a ‘bear-shirt,’ then certainly a ‘bear-shirt’ could be indicated by something less than an entire pelt. The analogy is the traditional domino half-mask of the masquerade, which signals the disguise of identity—or the intent to disguise—without necessarily doing so (Pollock 1995, 584).

From a performance perspective, though, either mask of the berserkir would achieve the same goal. Whether or not he has layered on the animal or stripped away to the animal, it is the behavior that is then permitted that makes the difference in battle. Taking on the animal and stripping away to the animal are both impractical and not motivated by a rational drive toward protection or self-preservation, but both provide a link to engage in behavior outside the normal. But for this to take full effect, the performer must ‘raise the stakes’ of the scene.

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<sup>92</sup> Comparative evidence from the earlier Migration Age suggests that it was a practice in battle, and there is little reason to think that it faded out during the period in question: Speidel finds (not entirely convincing) evidence for both bear and wolf warriors in scene 36 of Trajan’s Column (Speidel 2004, 7). Similarly, Kershaw suggests a qualitative difference between the two types of animal warrior (Kershaw 2000, 61). The earlier evidence may not support this narrow of a delineation, but does allow for animal skins in battle.

### 2.3.3 Raising the Stakes

The moments prior to engagement—the *warm-ups*—can have a greater effect on the outcome of battle than anything else (Halsall 2003, 192). This includes a well-rested, well-fed force that is highly unified and has cultivated a certain amount of “mental aggression” (Griffith 1995, 183). The first three qualities can be cultivated in the hall, but mental aggression is built on the field. The Old Norse warrior had several tools on hand to build this mental aggression, raising the stakes of the contest in the moments before battle.

#### Stakeholders

To achieve a heightened state, the warriors may have carried idols from temples or sacred groves into battle, as Tacitus reported centuries earlier (*Germania* 7).<sup>93</sup> If this were still true at the later time, the presence of precious objects on the field would increase the warrior’s defensiveness. This would also be the case if, as was true for Tacitus, families were near the battle.<sup>94</sup> In addition to their presence as objects and loved ones to be defended, the presence of families and idols would be a reminder that—physically present or not—they were an audience for one’s actions in battle, and had an investment in not only one’s life, but his increased or decreased status.

While it does not include families beyond male kin, this idea is echoed in the Old Norse sources. When Óláfr arranges his troops before Stiklastaðir, he states: “Vil ek, at menn skiptisk í sveitir ok heimtisk saman frændr ok kunnmenn, því at þá mun hverr

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<sup>93</sup> “effigiesque et signa quaedam detracta lucis in proelium ferunt” (*Germania* 7).

<sup>94</sup> “quodque praecipuum fortitudinis incitamentum est, non casus nec fortuita conglobatio turmam aut cuneum facit, sed familiae et propinquitates; et in proximopignora, undefeminarum ululatus audiri, unde vagitus infantium. hi cuique sanctissimi testes, hi maximi laudatores: ad matres, ad coniuges vulnera ferunt: nec illae numerare aut exigere plagas pavent, cibosque et hortamina pugnantibus gestant. Memoriae proditur quasdam acies inclinitas iam et labantes a feminis restitutas constantia precum et obiectu pectorum” (*Germania* 7–8).

“The strongest incentive to courage lies in this, that neither chance nor casual grouping makes the squadron or the wedge, but family and kinship: close at hand, too, are their dearest, whence is heard the wailing voice of woman and the child’s cry: here are the witnesses who are in each man’s eyes most precious; here the praise he covets most: they take their wounds to mother and wife, who do not shrink from counting the hurts and demanding a sight of them: they minister to the combatants food and exhortation. Tradition related that some lost or losing battles have been restored by the women, by the incessance of their prayers and by the baring of their breasts” (*Germania* 7–8).

annarsbezt gæta ok hverr annan kenna” (*Óláfs saga helga* 205).<sup>95</sup> This tool may have been most useful in those times when the warrior-pool expanded beyond the hall-based elite, but the sentiment must certainly be universal. Even today, “small group cohesion” is central to battle, not larger scale tactics (Griffith 1995, 195; Keegan 1976, 51). It is so central to battle, that the need for it can be self-defeating. In the early moments at Stiklastaðir, this drive to link into a group overrides reason and the inexperienced warrior-farmers misidentify themselves, shouting the enemy’s war cry, with fatal consequence (*Óláfs saga helga* 226).<sup>96</sup>

### Language

Just as language could be used in the hall to build relationships and solidify the group identity, so too could language be used on the battlefield, though here there is an additional audience of adversaries.

### Incitement

The incitement of an army to battle by a speech is a literary commonplace in the Old Norse sources just as much as in other literary traditions.<sup>97</sup> King Sverrir gives several in the saga account of his career, including the particularly insightful account of a father and a son discussing battle:

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<sup>95</sup> “I shall request all men to arrange themselves in groups so that kinsmen and acquaintances stand together, because then everyone will best shield his comrade if they know one another” (Hollander 1992, 494).

<sup>96</sup> Here a narrator’s agenda must be taken into account as well, and the farmers are certainly outside of the trained elite. Humorous as the idea is, for the underprepared it is no stretch of the imagination. The text reads: “Konungsmenn æpðu þá heróp, en er því var lokit, þá eggjuðusk þeir, svá sem þeim var áðr kennt, mæltu svá: ‘Fram, fram, Kristsmenn, krossmenn, konungsmenn!’ En er þetta heyrðu bændr, þeir er út stóðu í arminn, þá mæltu þeir slíkt sama sem þeir heyrðu þá mæla. en er aðrir bændr heyrðu þat, þá hugðu þeir þat vera konungsmenn ok báru vápn á þá, ok bõrðusk þeir þá sjálfir, ok fell mart, áðr þeir kannaðisk við” (*Óláfs saga helga* 226); “Thereupon the king’s men raised their battle cry and urged eachother on with the rallying cry they had been taught: “Forward, forward, Christ’s men, cross men, king’s men!” Now when the farmers who were stationed outermost in the wing heard this, they called out the same as they heard others call out. But when the farmers heard that, they thought they were king’s men and attacked them, thus fighting their own men, and many fell before they recognized each other” (Hollander 1992, 511).

<sup>97</sup> An example comes from Harald gráfeldr: “En áðr fylkingar gengi saman, þá eggjar Haraldr gráfeldr hart lið sitt ok bað þá bregða sverðum” (*Óláfs saga tryggvasonar* 14). “But before the armies would come together, then Harald grey-cloak eggs hard his troop and bade them draw their swords” (SDS). Other examples are in *Óláfs saga helga* 48, 211; *Sverris saga* 35, 53.

“Svá sagði einn búandi er hann fylgði syni sínum til herskipa ok réð honum ráð, bað hann vera hraustan ok harðan í mannraunum, ‘ok lifi orð lengst eftir hvern,’ sagði hann. ‘Eða hvernig myndir þú hátta ef þú kœmir í orrostu, ok vissir þú þat áðr at þar skyldir þú falla?’ Hann svarar: ‘Hvat væri þá við at sparask at hoggga á tvær hendr?’ Karl mælti: ‘Nú kynni nokkurr maðr þat at segja þér með sannleik at þú skyldir eigi þar falla?’ Hann svarar: ‘Hvat væri þá at hlífask við at ganga fram sem bezt?’ Karl mælti: ‘Í hverri orrostu sem þú ert staddr þá mun vera annathvært at þú munt falla eða braut komask, ok ver þú fyrir því djarfr, því at allt er áðr skapat. Ekki kœmr ófeigum í hel ok ekki má feigum forða. Í flóttu er fall verst’ (Sverris saga 47).<sup>98</sup>

This example lays out a relation to fate—granted in a Christian context—but there is little explicitly Christian about it. And as will be seen in the next example, the world of war holds tightly to its past.

More interesting than the account of a leader rallying his men is the moment before the battle of Stiklastaðir in *Ólafs saga helga*, where a poet, Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld, recites a poem called *Bjarkamál* to the troops. Two verses of the poem are given, beginning with the words “dagr es upp kominn,” and an entreaty to awaken to battle, after which:

“Þá vaknaði liðit. En er lokit var kvæðinu, þá þokkuðu menn honum kvæðit, ok fannsk mǫnnum mikit um ok þótti vel til fundit ok kǫlluðu kvæðit Húskarlakvǫt” (*Ólafs saga helga* 208).<sup>99</sup>

The poem is about Bǫðvarr bjarki, the legendary Odinic hero with shape-shifting and shamanistic associations. Yet the audience is a Christian one, King Óláfr Haraldsson’s hirð. This is where the power of battle’s blurred time can be seen. The pagan poem is given a new name—*húskarlakvǫt* (‘House-Carls’ Exhortation’)—letting the soon-to-be heroes of Stiklastaðir make their mark on heroic tradition. But as the poem is recited in the early hours before battle, the words “dagr es upp kominn” echo from the past and transform the plains of Stiklastaðir into part of the eternal battlefield.

<sup>98</sup> “Hear what a yeoman said who went with his son to the warships and gave him advice, bidding him be bold and hardy in perils. ‘Renown lives longest after one,’ he said. ‘If you were engaged in a battle an knew beforehand that you were bound to fall, how would you act?’ And the son answered, ‘What good would it be to forbear smiting right and left?’ ‘And now,’ said the yeoman, ‘if some one knew and told you of a truth that you would not fall in battle?’ The son answered, ‘What good would it be to refrain from pressing forward to the utmost?’ ‘One of two things will happen’ said the father: ‘in every battle where you are present, either you will fall or you will come forth alive. Be valiant, therefore, since all is determined beforehand. Nought may send a man to his grave if his time is not come; and if he is doomed to die, nought may save him. To die in flight is the worst death of all’ (Sephton 1994, 58–9).

<sup>99</sup> “The troops awoke. And when he had finished the men thanked him for it and were exceedingly pleased with it. They thought it well-chosen and called the poem the “Housecarl’s Exhortation” (Hollander 1992, 499).

## Insult

One's own comrades are not the only audience present for words on a battlefield. Another tool seen in the Old Norse material for taking on the fighting spirit is in the exchange of insults prior to physical combat. This is the *senna*.<sup>100</sup> Etymologically, the word is related to *sannr* ('true'), and may have carried some of the semantic weight of a judicial undertaking before being fossilized in the literary sources (Clover 1980, 444).<sup>101</sup> Taunting prior to combat has nearly universal analogues, evident throughout literature and history from the *Iliad* to modern warfare—even the 'trash talking' of Mohammed Ali in his own form of *hólmanga* (Ong 1981, 108; Keegan 1993, 42–3). If a *mannjafnaðr* risked escalating into violence in the hall, it is easy to see how the *senna* can be used to facilitate violence on the field.

There are many instances of *sennur* in Old Norse literature, but few that are explicitly set on the battlefield. In *Sverris saga*, Sverrir gives his men the instruction to taunt their adversaries, without other detail (18). Likewise, the Battle of Stiklastaðir begins with a brief verbal exchange, though it is not as colorful as many of the other examples (225). One particularly colorful example is in a section of *Helgakviða Hundingsbana 1* (32–46). Here Sinfjötli and Guðmundr toss insults about each others' behavior, from Sinfjötli's time spent as a wolf and his slaughter of his brothers (cf. *Völsunga saga*) to accusations that Guðmundr has been fucked by Sinfjötli and borne wolf-children. Articulating shameful behavior of the other (true or not) is an attempt at status negotiation, as well as a way of manifesting the rationale for violence. It is also a way of pushing your adversary to make the first physical strike, absolving yourself of the

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<sup>100</sup> There is disagreement from a literary perspective whether or not the *senna* and *mannjafnaðr* constitute two generically different entities. For a review of the two terms, see (Gunnell 1995, 341–3) Arguing for a single phenomenon (described by the single word *flyting*) is: Clover, Carol. 1980. "The Germanic Context of the *Unferþ* Episode." *Speculum* 55(3), pp 444–68. For two generically distinct aspects, see Harris, Joseph. The *Senna*: From Description to Literary Theory. *Mich Ger Stud.* 5:1. 1979 and Swenson, Karen. 1991. *Performing Definitions: Two Genres of Insult in Old Norse Literature*. Columbia, SC: Camden House. From a practical level, the difference is context: some verbal altercations take place in the context of feasts and may or may not lead to hostilities, others are clearly placed when hostilities are building and either help to diffuse or to ensure physical violence (Swenson 1991, 41). The generic aspect is a function of literature, not performance, since there is no standard resolution.

<sup>101</sup> The origin is suggested as an attempt to assign guilt in wrongdoing. Similarly the *mannjafnaðr* is seen as an attempt to value the compensation after a killing. The Inuit use a similar process for in a judicial manner (Gunnell 1995, 348–9 with refs.) A judicial aspect is still evident in the Old Norse material in passages such as *Njáls saga* 119, *Qlkofra þáttur* 3, and *Bandamanna saga* 10.

breach of peace. While Sinfjötli and Guðmunðr end in combat, however, not all sennur do.

Just as the hólmganga was not designed as a fight-to-the-death, so to the practice of the senna may diffuse the entire altercation.<sup>102</sup> This exchange is one where the physical escalation of violence is still avoidable, comparable to the posturing of aggressive animals (Bax and Padmos 1983, 170–1). This verbal altercation before the sensory blast of battle will also be one of the last clearly memorable parts, and much of the ensuing narratives will hinge on what is said or done here. This makes its smooth execution that much more important for those who wish to shape the narrative.

While the prose sources often have observers for the exchanges, poetic sennur are frequently between individual characters, without clear audiences. Many are tied to supernatural characters, either as one party or as both. This may be because the practice skims so close to the battlefield boundary between two worlds: a speech-act against an adversary becomes a dramatized fight against fate (cf. Harris 1979, 71). Just as the combat itself will be referred to as *vápna senna* or *senna malma*, conflating the oral and physical status negotiations, the senna form itself can take on the idea of the individual testing chance. In *Helgakviða Hjörvarðarsonar* 15,<sup>103</sup> Atli says he is “gífrum gramastr” (‘most hateful to hags,’ *LH*) referring to his troll-woman adversary, Hríngerðr. If an axe in battle may be referred to as “gífr sóknar” (‘troll-woman of battle’),<sup>104</sup> a warrior may be “gífrum gramastr” both on the battlefield and off. The forms of play come to the forefront: physical *contest* has blurred in the senna narrative with *chance*, and the axe has taken the form of a supernatural female power, in *mimicry*. This is only the first instance of this sort of blurring.

## Invocation

The words spoken before battle can have a third audience: the divine. Chanting before battle has a broader Germanic context, not least with the early literary accounts of the

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<sup>102</sup> This is typical of the sennur which feature supernatural characters, such as *Helgakviða Hjörvarðarsonar*, 12–30 and *Hárbarðsljóð*, which also feature a physical barrier between the combatants. In the *Íslendingasögur*, examples include the ‘judicial’ sennur mentioned in note 101.

<sup>103</sup> Finnur Jónsson designates this verse *Hríngerðamál* 4.

<sup>104</sup> From Sturla Þórðarson’s *Hrynhenda* 8. Obviously a model of linear, literary borrowings is not being suggested; it would be inverted. Rather, the suggestion is that the idea-complex of monstrous women, fate, verbal, and physical arguments travel together and influence the movement from speech-act to narrative product.

*baritus* but also in early medieval writings (Speidel 2004, 97). *Hávamál* gives the example of a rune, presumably a chant, which brings to battle and preserves one's comrades:

156. Þat kank elliþta,  
ef skalk til orostu  
leiða langvini,  
und randir galk,  
en þeir með ríki fara,  
heilir hildar til,  
heilir hildi frá,  
koma þeir heilir hvaðan.

156. I know an eleventh if I have to lead  
loyal friends into battle;  
under the shields I chant, and they journey inviolate,  
safely to battle,  
safely from battle,  
safely they come everywhere”  
(Larrington 1996, 36).

The purpose of such a verse should not be analyzed solely from a place of magical belief. The very act of repeating speech such as this, like a mantra, will help build the warrior's psyche independent of supernaturally-mediated help. The goal is not just what the text describes, the goal is the state that the speaker attains through the recitation.

Seiðr may have been part of this practice of personal words spoken on the field. Certainly the reversals in fortune and changes in weather were caused by *something*. Neil Price describes four different violent roles for seiðr, including attacks in spirit form and the removal of 'luck' from an adversary and an ability to drive insane on the battlefield (Price 2002, 329). These improvisations are comprehensively reviewed in *The Viking Way*, which also stresses the dual nature of the battlefield. Whether or not the chant is effective on the supernatural level, its recitation gives the warrior a focus point in the tense moments before battle. But once the cloud of battle has descended, language may not be able to penetrate the mist.

## Beyond Language

### Banging and Blowing

In the kings' sagas, trumpets play a significant role in signalling battle. King Sverrir even has a named trumpet, *andvaka* ('soul-waker'; *Sverris saga* 49).<sup>105</sup> Hornlike instruments were present in Scandinavia since the Bronze Age *lurer*, but specialized

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<sup>105</sup> Trumpets as a summons to battle or assembly are found in: *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* 103; *Óláfs saga helga* 109, 150, 151, 178; *Magnúss saga ins góða* 26, 28; *Sverris saga* 16, 36, 49 [Andvaka], 51, 52, 62.

soundmaking equipment was not the only tool at hand. As is abundantly clear from the poetry, crashing weapons—*vápnþruma*—could make quite a sound.<sup>106</sup>

A horn is a signal, but weapons-crashing is also a tool. Crashing weapons together not only creates sound, but builds the warrior's physicality, moving him further from the intellectual-emotional realm. The *vápnatak*, encountered early as a form of acclamation in Tacitus (*Germania* 11),<sup>107</sup> is also present in other times of violence. Ibn Faḍlān reports from the burial of a Rus' chieftain around AD 921 that, at the moment when a female slave is being both strangled and stabbed, "the men began to bang their shields with the sticks (Montgomery 2000, 19).<sup>108</sup> These "mood displays," either with voices or objects, can serve the purpose of deindividualizing the warriors, rebuilding or maintaining a sense of shared identity in the midst of individual peril.<sup>109</sup>

### **Howl, Howl, Howl, Howl!**

"Howl, Howl, Howl, Howl!" says King Lear over the body of his beloved Cordelia (5.3.302). In the moment of his greatest grief, language has failed him, and he is left with the most primal sound. There is a place at the edge of reason where language fails and the body has nothing but habit to guide it. The experience of the battlefield begins to drain further down from the head's intellect into the body's knowledge. In Lacan's terms, perhaps the warrior is being confronted with the terror of the Real, and the symbolic world has left his grasp. In Shakespeare's other terms: "Tongue nor heart cannot conceive nor name thee . . . Confusion hath now made his masterpiece."<sup>110</sup> Yelling is not only a physical release, but an energizing act. It can inspire the friend and demoralize the opponent (Griffith 1995, 196). Soldiers of the American South had the 'rebel yell.' Tacitus describes the howls of the early Germans, the *baritus*, with voices resonating through shields:

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<sup>106</sup> *Vápnþruma: Noregs konungatal* 39.

<sup>107</sup> "si diplicuit sententia, fremitu aspernantur; sin placuit, frameas concutiunt: honoratissimum adsensus genus est armis laudare" (*Germania* 11); "if the advice tendered be displeasing, they reject it with groans; if it please them, they clash their spears: the most complimentary expression of assent is this martial approbation."

<sup>108</sup> On the place of the Rus' in terms of a study of the Old Norse world, see the introduction to Montgomery's edition (works cited) as well (Warminde 1995).

<sup>109</sup> "Mood display" is a term borrowed from Schechner: "when mood displays are ritualized into mass action, individual expression is discouraged or prohibited and replaced by exaggerated, rhythmically coordinated, repetitive actions and utterances (Schechner 2013, 64).

<sup>110</sup> *Macbeth* 2.3.68, 71.

“they have also those cries by the utterance of which—‘baritus’ is the name they use—they inspire courage; and they divine the fortunes of the coming battle from the circumstances of the cry. Intimidation or timidity depends on the concert of the warriors, it seems to them to mean not so much unison of voices as union of hearts; the object they specifically seek is a certain volume of hoarseness, a crashing roar, their shields being brought up to their lips, that the voice may swell to a fuller and deeper note by means of the echo” (*Germania* 3).<sup>111</sup>

Like the act of banging weapons, the unformed vocalization is a tool of intimidation and group cohesion, but also a tool for the individual to mask himself into a more primal state, allowing for and enhancing the violent acts that follow. If Tacitus still had currency, these howls also held a premonition of the course of battle, another way of linking into the world of the gods.

### Alcohol

Mediating this whole escalation is an abundance of alcohol. Alcohol has a place in battle preparations nearly the whole world over (Keegan 1993, 248–9). Certainly this was no different in a culture where ceremonial drink held a central place even outside of wartime (Nordberg 2004, 64).<sup>112</sup> The consumption of alcohol is part of the idea-complex that relates the warriors to Óðinn. Óðinn’s very name is derived from *óðr* or ecstasy, trance, and developed from an earlier Germanic *Wut*, or ‘furor’ (Lieberman 2004, 101). It is said of Óðinn in *Gylfaginning* 38, that “vín er honum bæði drykkir ok matr,”<sup>113</sup> a daily habit which must produced some sort of altered state.

There is a clue to the possible scale of alcohol consumption in the violence surrounding the death of the Rus’ chieftain. Here, Ibn Faḍlān observes that upon the death of a rich man, his possessions are divided into thirds, “one third with which they purchase alcohol which they drink on the day when his slave-girl kills herself . . . They are addicted to alcohol, which they drink night and day. Sometimes one of them dies with the cup still in his hand” (Montgomery 2000, 14). If the goal was to achieve an altered state, it seems some individuals did so irrevocably. Later in the text, the slave girl, her-

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<sup>111</sup> “sunt illis haec quoque carmina, quorum relatu, quembaritum vocant, accendunt animos futuraeque pugnae fortunam ipso cantu augurantur; terrent enim trepidantve, prout sonuit acies, nec tam vocis ille quam virtutis concentus videtur. aadfectatur praecipue asperitas soni et fractum murmur, obiectis ad os scutis, quo plenior et gravior vox repercussu intumescat” (*Germania* 3).

<sup>112</sup> A recording from the Annals of St. Bertin in 865 has a Viking army sending 200 troops to Paris to buy wine (Halsall 2003, 37), a practice of procuring alcohol which, over time, has been refined and regularized to a set of bus routes from Norway to Sweden and ferry service to Denmark.

<sup>113</sup> “wine is both food and drink to him” (SDS).

self drunk, seems to enter a visionary reverie, prior to being executed (Montgomery 2000, 17–9). The alcohol facilitated a great deal of violence at the funeral, and a similar practice could be expected on the field. Alcohol, the tool that served to make a communion between the lord, his warriors, and the dead, will be used in battle to build up to the emotional state necessary for violence. Granted, in battle there is a limit to the effectiveness of the warrior after too much consumption—even before he drinks himself to death.

### 2.3.4 Flowing and Blurring

Even before the first strike, drunken senses have begun to blur. Maybe the slanders and shouts spin straight into the strikes of swords. Or maybe there is a moment of silence before the first arrow flies. On the legendary field of Brávellir, it happened like this:

“The trumpets blared and each side joined battle with utmost violence. You might well have imagined that the heavens were suddenly rushing down at the earth, woods and fields subsiding, that the whole of creation was in turmoil and had returned to ancient chaos, all things human and divine convulsed by a raging tempest and everything tumbling simultaneously into destruction. When it came to the hurling of spears, the intolerable hiss of weapons filled the entire air with a din quite unbelievable. The steam from men’s wounds drew an unexpected mist across the sky and the daylight was concealed under a hailstorm of missiles. In that engagement the activity of the slingers counted for much. After the shafts had been flung from hands and catapults, the troops fought it out at close quarters with swords and iron-clad maces. It was then indeed that most blood was spilt. Sweat streamed from their weary bodies, while the clash of blades could be heard miles away” (Fisher and Davidson 1979, 241–2).

Sounds and smells that were not there before have flooded the senses of the warriors. Sights too, will follow suit. Objects will change and new characters appear.

#### Flowing

This is the time when the metaphors become activated, when the man with the name of the wolf becomes the wolf. There is a rhythmic, metallic pounding underneath animal roaring. The masks and the flesh of individuals blend into one another. The rhythm. The animal. The herd. Even the language of tactics reflects this moment, when a horde of howling men with boars on their helmets become a *svínfylking*—a wedge-shaped herd of boars.<sup>114</sup> It is in this state when “shape-shifting was dangerous and it was real” (Hedeager 2011, 84).

This is the place that the warrior’s rehearsal has prepared him for. It is a state that can only be achieved with adequate preparation.<sup>115</sup> It requires a centering and a

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<sup>114</sup> The formation is familiar from Roman tactics, where it is called the *cuneus* (wedge), as well as *caput porci* (boar’s head) (Davidson 1988, 50). Whether the name is native or not, it could clearly carry a different meaning to warriors who identify with a boar.

<sup>115</sup> This is echoed in Keegan’s comments on modern officer training: “For by teaching the young officer to organize his intake of sensations . . . one is helping him to avert the onset of fear or, worse, of panic and to perceive a face of battle which, if not familiar, and certainly not friendly, need not, in the event, prove wholly petrifying” (Keegan, 1976, p. 19). The ability to modulate sensory input is trainable and necessary for success.

narrowing of focus. It is the “merging of action and awareness.” It is *flow*.<sup>116</sup> Articulated by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, flow is when “action follows upon action according to an internal logic that needs no conscious intervention by the actor.” It is when the being becomes the action: “the doing is the thing.” It is a state where the ego is transcended and self merges with surroundings. It is the state of all animal activity (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 35–43; Csikszentmihalyi 2008, 227–8). Regardless of his costume, the warrior has entered a categorically different state of being from the everyday. As action and awareness blend, the weapon in his hand becomes an extension of himself. If it is forged from the bones of an ancestor, he has become one with the past heroes; if it is forged from the bones of a totemic boar, it is his own filed tusk. As dental evidence has shown, it was indeed a practice for men in the Viking Age to file their own tusks (Arcini 2005). The adversaries of these men were now faced with enormous masked, drunk, howling animals with toothaches and swords.

This is when the stories of invulnerability begin. This is the trance state, when, clad in skins of animals or only the skins of themselves, warriors will not feel the bite of steel. This is the same trance as the Balinese Rangda-Barong dance, where dancers press daggers into the breasts so hard that they bend, yet do not draw blood (Schechner 2013, 105; Schechner 1985, 74–5). Reduced to the animal in the herd, this is a moment of spontaneous *communitas par excellence* (Turner 1969, 96–7). But perhaps this flow state is the flow of *Þrundr*, the river that warriors must wade through to come to Valhøll (*Grímnismál* 21). The poem says it is difficult to stay in it: “þykkir ofmikill/ valglaumi at vaða.”<sup>117</sup> The flow state may be more delicate for some warriors than others, for whom confusion will take over.

## Blurring

### Who is who?

The battlefield is confusing. Those who are new to battle are less prepared with their training: the fatal experience of the farmers at Stiklastaðir was given earlier. Likewise,

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<sup>116</sup>Flow is connected to the study of *autotelic* experiences, activities which require energy but have only an ‘intrinsic’ reward (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 10–1). *Flow* as a term allows for activities which, like battle, may have some form of conventional reward (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 36).

<sup>117</sup> “It seems too great for the swarm-of-the-slain to wade” (SDS).

if a banner falls, the identity of the warriors may be unknown.<sup>118</sup> In *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, there is confusion over the identity of the king himself (111). At times you cannot see, and in the crush of bodies, perhaps you cannot move. The *reductio ad absurdum* of this confused blur is in the moments such as in *Eyrbyggja saga*—removed from the battlefield—when violence stops altogether because women throw clothes over the weapons.<sup>119</sup> In those moments, the blur is incapacitating; swords and limbs tangle. Or perhaps in the blurring of time, this image is a domesticized descendant of the carving on the side of the Oseberg Wagon, where a supernatural female figure holds back the sword of a warrior (figure 10). A fylgja or a *dís* explains a momentary hesitation on the field, and through time becomes a literary tool for female peacemaking.

### What is what?

In the instability of the battle-state, anything may be ascribed meaning: just as in play, objects will take on significance that is not inherent to the object, but to its context (Schechner 1988, 8–9). Haraldr Harðráði, for example, had a banner *landeyðan* (‘land-waster’), which was his most prized property (*Haralds saga sigurdarsonar* 22).<sup>120</sup> It always carried him to victory. But when the confusion of the battle has a supernatural component, these objects will begin to absorb it. The example of this idea activated comes from the two accounts of the Battle of Clontarf in *Orkneyinga saga* and *Brennu-Njáls saga*. In *Orkneyinga saga*, it is a banner crafted and cursed with “kunnátta” (‘[magical] knowledge’) for Sigurðr jarl, and when it is raised in battle, the raven seems to fly (11).<sup>121</sup> In the ensuing battle, three bannermen fall, though Sigurðr is victorious.

<sup>118</sup> “Aðils jarl hafði niðr drepit merki sínu, ok vissi þá engi, hvárt hann fór eða aðrir menn” (*Egils saga* 53); “Jarl Aðils had struck down his banner, and no one could tell, whether he went or [it was] other men” (SDS).

<sup>119</sup> “Auðr húsfreyja hét á konur at skilja þá, ok kǫstuðu þær klæðum á vápn þeira” (*Eyrbyggja saga* 18). Similar scenes appear in *Hallfreðar saga* 8, and *Vápnfirðinga saga* 18.

<sup>120</sup> “Spurði Sveinn, hverja gripi Haraldr hefði, þá er honum væri virkð mest á. Hann svarar svá, at þat var merki hans, Landeyðan. Þá spurði Sveinn, hvat merkinu fylgði þess, er þat var svá mikil gǫrsimi. Haraldr segir, at þat var mælt, at sá myndi hafa sigr, er merkit er fyrir borit, segir, at svá hafði orðit, síðan er hann fekk þat” (*Haralds saga Sigurdarsonar* 22); “Svein asked harald what possessions of his he valued most highly. He answered that it was his banner “Land-Destroyer.” Thereupon Svein asked what virtue it had to be accounted so valuable. Harald replied that it was prophesied that victory would be his before whom this banner was borne; and added that this had been the case ever since he had obtained it” (Hollander 1992, 593).

<sup>121</sup> “Tak þú hér við merki því, er ek hefi gort þér af allri minni kunnáttu, ok vænti ek, at sigrsælt myni verða þeim, er fyrir er borit, en banvænt þeim, er berr.” Merkit var gort af miklum hannyrðum ok

In the *Njáls saga* account, there is no numinous aspect to the banner, but the deaths of the three bannermen are described. These two traditions come from two different blur-rings of the events. In another tradition, perhaps the sound of a rippling banner becomes the sound of wings: perhaps a raven, perhaps a valkyrja.

This is the moment that named weapons are named for. Looking outside the literature to an earlier time, there are many weapons which feature runes in the Older Futhark (McKinnell, Simek, and Düwel 2004, 40–4). A spear from Mos (Gotland), inscribed is in Gothic runes with *gaois*—‘screamer.’ There is discussion whether many weapon inscription refer to the names of objects or their owners: while many are ambiguous, some examples are clearly male names (MacLeod and Mees 2006, 78, 80). But if the warrior is still in flow, there is no difference between the owner and the spear. And both are screaming. When the individual is in the flow state, and his weapon is an extension of his own physicality, the spear named Screamer is both the *gnýr geirs* and the scream of the warrior himself.<sup>122</sup>

### What was that?

In the blur of battle, not everyone will see every character in the play. The battle of Hjørungavágr is recounted in both *Jómsvíkinga saga* as well as *Heimskringla*. In the *Jómsvíkinga saga* account, Hákon jarl is prompted by bad fortune in battle to sacrifice his young son to his “fulltrúi,” Þorgerðr Hølgabrúðr. He returns to his men, saying ““ek hefí heitit til sigrs oss á þær báðar systir, Þorgerði ok Irpu.”<sup>123</sup> And in the ensuing battle, those men who were “ófreskr” (‘second-sighted’) could see Þorgerðr and Irpa in the hailstorm (33). In *Heimskringla*, the battle is recounted saying only, “þá gerði illviðri ok él svá mikit, at hagleikornit eitt vá eyri,” and relates only the acts of the human combatants (*Óláfs saga tryggvasonar* 41).<sup>124</sup> This battle takes place at sea and thus lacks the hazelled space. But the experience of the “ófreskr” men, just as the two accounts of the

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ágætligum hagleik; þat var gort í hrafns mynd, ok þá er vindr blæss í merkit, þá var sem hrafn beindi fluginn” (*Orkneyinga saga* 11); “‘Take this banner, which I have made for you from all my knowledge, and I expect that victorious will be those before whom it is born, but dead the one who bears it.’ The banner was made with great skill and excellent craft. I was made in the image of a raven, and then when wind blows the banner, then was it as though the raven spread its wings for flight” (SDS).

<sup>122</sup> Gnýr geirs: Þjóðólfr Arnórsson, *Magnússflokkur* 8.

<sup>123</sup> “I have called upon the two sisters, Þorgerðr and Irpa, for our victory” (SDS).

<sup>124</sup> “Then a storm sprang up, with a hail shower so violent that every hailstone weighed an ounce” (Hollander 1992, 181)

Battle of Clontarf, speaks to two battlefields, one of humans and another parallel, supernatural one.

Not all of the women on the battlefield are summoned by improvisation: some are at home there. The Viking Age image of the valkyrjur is likely best described in the gruesome imagery of *Darraðarljóð*, recorded in *Njáls saga* (Price 2002, 334).<sup>125</sup> The idea of the horn-bearing valkyrjur of Valhöll has been touched upon in rehearsal and they will be revisited in the aftermath. The role of the valkyrjur in the battle itself, however, is one that is speculative, but significant. Even if women were not present on the battlefield as they were in Tacitus's time, or as they would be centuries later, picnicking in Manassass at the Battle of Bull Run, women could not be completely absent from the field. That there were women's bodies and women's voices heard as the sounds of battle died is not unlikely if they came to minister to the wounded and dead, or administer death to the dying. Perhaps in the blur a female shape tore birdlike at the body of a warrior, pilfering anything of value.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> The poem accompanies the description of the Battle of Clontarf in *Njáls saga*, but is likely misrepresented and dates from an earlier period (Poole 1991, 120–4).

<sup>126</sup> The valkyrjur have been given an updated assessment in a 2013 MA thesis by Luke John Murphy (University of Iceland). Amidst the larger study, he encourages the performers behind the valkyrjur to peek through the veil for a brief, footnoted moment. Murphy's text is reproduced here: "One manner in which the myth of the valkyrjur may have been spread and maintained throughout Iron-Age warrior culture may have been through genuine 'real world' liminal encounters following a battle. If an Iron-Age warrior were brought up on tales of the valkyrjur (and similar battlefield spirits) as psychopompic beings that took certain warriors from the battlefield to a glorious afterlife, then such myths may have shaped his experiences of any genuine near-death experience he underwent. If such a warrior were wounded in battle – particularly if he became weak or disoriented from physical shock, blood loss, or psychological trauma – then he may have been predisposed to see valkyrjur (just as Christians might see Angels) in the aftermath of a fight. (In twenty-first century culture, soldiers are traditionally depicted as crying for their mothers and wives in such circumstances.) What is more, it is also possible that real women were the subject of such delusions: local women or camp followers may have been present in the aftermath of a battle, looking for loved ones, friends or relatives, picking over the bodies of the dead and wounded for valuables and abandoned weapons, or even – most valkyric of all – taking the wounded away for medical care or the dead away for funerary rites (or perhaps delivering the coup de grace). (While women may not have been present at every battle in the Iron Age, it is equally ridiculous to assert they were entirely absent for all of them.) It is easy to imagine that a wounded warrior – especially one in a foreign country, where the women may have spoken a different language and worn different clothes – perceived such strange female figures through the lens of his trauma as supernatural apparitions, the experience playing off the myths and legends he had been told. Similarly, should the warrior have survived, his retelling of his own experience would have added to the corpus of 'valkyrjur stories', creating a feedback loop that helped propagate valkyrja phenomena" (Murphy 2013, 145 fn. 558).

Battlefield appearances are not limited to women, either. Óðinn himself can be seen on the field in *Völsunga saga*. Clad in a black cloak and with a large hat, he appears with a spear and turns the tide of the war (11). It is worth reflecting on this in light of the consecration of the battlefield mentioned earlier: here the images conflate so that consecration and fortune in battle become one.

### **Flight from Fight**

The outcome of these battles might not have always been quite so broadly bloody and fatal as is imagined—or as is suggested by the poetic imagery. With heavy weaponry and extended periods of exertion—as with the three shield provision of the *hólmga*—there would have been much exhaustion on the field, and cleaving would come to shoving (Griffith 1995, 194–5). But that said, the true slaughter is reserved for those who try to fly the field. The undated Anglo-Saxon graves excavated at Eccles show two clear categories of dead: Graves I, V, and VI contain bodies with a single, anterior skull wound. Those in Graves II, III, IV have a cut to the rear of the skull in addition to hacking and stabbing wounds over the rest of the body—something absent from those wounded in the front. Gratuitous mutilations were only inflicted on those who were fleeing (Halsall 2003, 210–2). After all, “*‘tis sport to maul a runner.*”<sup>127</sup> Thinking back to the words of Sverrir’s farmer to his son, it may not be only because of dishonor that *í flóttu er fall verst*.

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<sup>127</sup> *Antony and Cleopatra* 4.7.17.

### 2.3.5 Conclusion: Experiencing the Eternal Battle

The battle began with the meeting of two groups of warriors on the field. If the battle was not one that sought a decisive victory, it probably looked more like gang warfare than a cinematic epic moment. Some men masked themselves in armor, a practical choice. Some of that armor carried images of creatures meant to protect them. Some warriors took to the field wearing furs or only flesh to demonstrate their ferocity. Everyone was drinking; some were already drunk. They cast words to one another in the ranks, and across the gap between them, taunting one another. Some held hope that the taunts would be enough. Sometimes they were. Then there was sound of warriors beating their own weapons together. Then there was howling. At some point the weapon clashing became warriors clashing. The wind changed unexpectedly. Banners fell, and friend and foe were indistinguishable.

In the mist of the steam from warriors' wounds, your trained body began to move with its own knowledge of the task at hand, and even if you stopped howling, you could not articulate where your hand ended and the sword hilt began. Your focus narrowed and all the senses blended. You hacked left and right, felling everything in your path. You never felt more alive. Then you felt a sting in your leg. You stumble for a moment; your breath feels different. You are reminded of the audience: your comrades, your foes, the divine watchers, and the future generations who will hear your story. You know it was Óðinn who "sá/ hvar valr of lá," and it is a given that "orðstírr/ dęyr aldrigi/ hvęims sér góðan getr."<sup>128</sup> Doubt has crept in, so has exhaustion, and the flow of Þrúndr is more difficult to wade through. Now the sounds have died, as have many men, unmasked by a blow. Some of them by your own hand; some of them from your own side. One of them may well be you. You are covered in blood. You are exhausted. Your weapons fall. Your body falls. And someone calls your name.

This is the heart of the process: until you are observed at the end of the battle, you are in a marked off, sacred space, both alive and dead at the same time. You left the hall an initiate to death. Now you are at the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh

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<sup>128</sup> "saw/ where lay the slain" (SDS) Egill skallagrímsson, *Hqfuðlausn* 3; "fame/ never dies/ for the one who earns it" (SDS) *Hávamál* 75 (FJ).

nor fleshless.<sup>129</sup> You are a warrior on two fields. To be able to act in this space at all was the goal of all the preparation in rehearsal, just as to deal with its effects will be the goal of all of the aftermath. With one eye on the human battlefield and one eye on the supernatural, what happens between the first strike and the final fall will be inexpressible in the language of classical physics. It will also be inexpressible in the language of prose. Had it lived a thousand years before, Schrödinger's cat might have been a raven. Or better yet—*svanr sveita*—a swan of blood.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> T.S. Eliot. *Burnt Norton II. Four Quartets*.

<sup>130</sup> Þjóðolfr Arnórson, *Sexstefja* 29.

## 2.4 Aftermath: *Bruises, Periphrasis, One-Eyed Faces*

### 2.4.1 Introduction

By battle's end, it has touched upon all four forms of play identified by Caillois. At its core was struggle. In its relation to fate and divination, it was chance. In the behavior of its performers, there was the mimicry, the mask of animals. There was the dizziness of intoxication and the intoxication of the flow state. It was also fundamentally deep play, with high risk to the actors. Now play has ended, and the frames begin to fade away. The reviewers have gone home to their keyboards, and for a short time, it is a time without words. But before the presses run, and those narratives begin to form back in the hall, there is still activity on the field.

Reminding us that hand-to-hand battle is an exhausting affair, a saga tells that that: "höfðu þeir fallit fyrir vápnaburð ok mœði" (*Óláfs saga helga* 231).<sup>131</sup> Some of those that fell from exhaustion and seemed dead could arise after the struggle (Price 2002, 363). Vigil is held over those who are neither fully alive nor lifeless: "Váru sárir menn fluttir heim á bæinn, svá at hvert hús var fullt af þeim, en tjaldat úti yfir sumum" (*Óláfs saga helga* 231).<sup>132</sup> The field is filled with corpses, weapons, and the tented wounded. Bodies were certainly pilfered—and this would be another vector for the transfer of status items (Griffith 1995, 173–4).

The very image of Valhøll itself may have developed from images of the detritus of war. Shields, weapons, and corpses successively covered over by natural processes would feed the idea of an eternal battle in mounds and ultimately the idea of an elevation of this space to the celestial realm (Kuhn 1954, 427ff.; in Nordberg 2004, 17–8). Burying the dead comprises a performance all to itself, from mass graves (*Hákonar saga góða* 27) to the burials of great chieftains and kings—even false funerals, such as St. Óláfs mock burial at sea (*Óláfs saga helga* 238). Men will continue to die for days.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> "They had fallen because of the shower of missiles and from sheer exhaustion" (Hollander 1992, 517).

<sup>132</sup> "The wounded men were brought in to the farms, so that every house was full of them; but over some, tents were erected outside" (Hollander 1992, 517).

<sup>133</sup> Still a day later on the field at Stiklastaðir: "var þá enn rofinn valrinn. Fluttu menn brot lík frænda sinna ok vina ok veittu hjálp sárum mǫnnum, þeim er menn vildu græða. En fjöldi manns hafði þá andazk, síðan er lokit var bardaga" (*Óláfs saga helga* 237); "At that time the battlefield was still being

Destruction of objects was associated with death and battle in early Scandinavia, evident in the much earlier bog depositions. In the ritualized battle, hall burnings played a role as well (Nordberg 2004, 116).<sup>134</sup> So as they make their way off the field, some warriors have no hall to return to, some warriors return back to the hall of their lord, and some warriors return to a new hall altogether.

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cleared. Men were moving the bodies of their friends and kinsmen and gave help to those whom they wanted to restore to health. But a great number had died since the battle had ended” (Hollander 1992, 523).

<sup>134</sup> *Hrolfs saga kraka ok kappa hans*, for example, begins (ch. 4) with a hall burning. It is evident in the archaeological record as well (Niles 2007, 194–6).

### 2.4.2 Formal Reincorporation

The funerary rites are a performance all to themselves, one which has been explored as such by Neil Price.<sup>135</sup> Aside from the funerary rites themselves, there is a tradition of poetry eulogizing the dead in *erfíkvæði*. Alongside this elegiac tradition are two poems, *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál*, which do not quite fit the mold, because they are dialogic in style and written in typically eddic meters. These have been treated by Terry Gunnell (2013) and are made more compelling in light of a recent study by Neil Price and Paul Mortimer on the qualities of the Sutton Hoo helmet discussed above. In addition to its animal features, the Sutton Hoo helmet is notable in that, while both imposing eyebrows are lined with garnets, only the right eyebrow is backed with gold foil. This means that the two eyes will catch light differently (Price and Mortimer, 520–2). A difference illuminated in performance.

*Eiríksmál* was commissioned by Queen Gunnhildr for Eiríkr blóðøx—the same king who ruled from York under his *yígs hjalmr*. The poem begins with a voice speaking as Óðinn. He invokes the *einherjar* and *valkyrjur* to prepare Valhøll for the fallen Eiríkr, who is ultimately welcomed with the words:

8. ‘Heill þú nú, Eiríkr;  
vel skalt þú hér kominn,  
ok gakk í holl horskr.’

8. ‘Good fortune to you now, Eiríkr;  
You will be welcome here,  
and go, wise into the hall’  
(SKALD 1.2.1012).

‘Here’ is Valhøll itself, and the verses leading up to this moment have involved other supernatural speakers, including Bragi, the deified poet, and Sigmundr, the legendary hero. The hall space is transformed, but so is the very concept of life and death. Before the arrival, Bragi speaks in the third verse, saying:

3. ‘Hvat þrymr þar,  
sem þúsund bifisk  
eða mengi til mikit?  
Braka qll bekkþili,  
sem myni Baldr koma  
Eptir í Óðins sali.’

3. ‘What is making a din there,  
as if a thousand were in motion, or an  
exceedingly great throng? All the  
bench-planks creak, as if Baldr were  
coming back into Óðinn’s residence.’  
(SKALD 1.2.1008)

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<sup>135</sup> This topic—with a strong emphasis on performance has been taken on by Neil Price in several articles, including: (Price 2010; Price 2012; Price 2008; Price 2011).

The arrival of a beloved king to death is mixed with the arrival of a beloved son from death: humanity, divinity, life, and death have all become not themselves, yet *not* not themselves.

The poem alone crafts a scene. But what if the speaker of the poem were wearing a helmet similar to the Sutton Hoo helmet? The experience becomes multisensory. Both Gunnell and Price and Mortimer paint the image: In the hall, light can be controlled and attention directed. The altered sound of the voice behind metal will have the same quality as a voice chanting behind the shield in the baritus—a sound of the battlefield echoed in the hall. And here, in the glimmer of firelight with garnets flashing around a single eye, a helmeted figure, who was not Óðinn—but also *not* not Óðinn—would become present in the hall both in body and text. Women who before battle served horns and egged men on and incited them off to war now bear wine like the valkyrjur of the poem and welcome their men into death (Nordberg 2004, 195–7). The men themselves have strewn the benches they sit upon, just like the einherjar.

The hall space is transformed, just as the battlefield was (Gunnell 2001, 22–5). As the alcohol is passed around by living warriors and the images of the poem fall upon the porches of their ears, the chieftain's hall and the celestial hall line up along an axis with the battlefield. In this moment the living are on the threshold of *valgrind*, the gate to the gods (*Grímnismál* 22). Where the battlefield blurred into the eternal battle, here the hall blurs into Valhöll, a new warrior welcomed, and all the the attendants are reminded that they too, will be welcomed in this way one day.

### 2.4.3 Masking the Memory

#### *War Reporters and Spin Doctors*

There was more to Harald's warriors at Brávellir than their well-trained bodies and spirits: "These sailed to Leire, their bodies equipped for war, excelling in strength of intellect and matching their tall stature with well-trained spirits; they were versed in shooting missiles from bows or ballistas, would commonly take on the enemy man-to-man and could dexterously weave poems in their native speech" (*Gesta Danorum* 8.2.2).<sup>136</sup> Their bodies were trained, their spirits were trained, but so were their tongues. The association of skaldic diction with violence is unmistakeable. And as the stinging of wounds subsides and the hangover fades away, a new process begins in the hall—the one that leaves us with the literary materials we have today. If mask is the transformation of an object into not itself and *not* not itself, skaldic diction is a mask for language, a way to make a word not itself and *not* not itself.

Back on the battlefield at Stiklastaðir, poets were placed in a position near the king, with the instruction that: 'Skuluð þér . . . hér vera ok sjá þau tíðendi, er hér gerask. Er yðr þá eigi segjandi saga til, því at þér skuluð frá segja ok yrkja um síðan' (*Óláfs saga helga* 206).<sup>137</sup> They are war reporters and spin doctors, and like Carol Clover says of the 'art of the boast,' their art lay "in creating, within the limitations of the facts, the best possible version of the event" (Clover 1980, 459). Court poets could have a great political utility for a ruler, such as Hákon jarl after the battle of Hjörungavágr (Ström 1981). In this capacity, the poets create the mask that future generations (including ours) will see when they try to look back at the events of the battle.

This is also the times when the partners in a senna become supernatural, battlefield reversals become magical, and different narratives evolve: When an ófreskr man tells the Battle of Hjörungavágr, it sounds like *Jómsvíkinga saga*, when another man tells it, it becomes the *Heimskringla* account. When one man tells of Sigurðr jarl's

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<sup>136</sup> "Qui quidem nauigio Lethram aduecti instructis ad bella corporibus ingenii quoque uirtute pollebant, proceritatis habitum animorum exercitiis emulantes. Quippe spicula arcuum ballistarumque tormentis excutere ac plerunque uiritim cum hoste decernere, poeses quoque patrio sermone contexere promptissime calluerunt" (*Gesta Danorum* 8.2.2).

<sup>137</sup> "'You are to be here,' he said, 'and witness all that will happen here. Then you will not need to be told, but can tell of it yourselves and compose verses about it later on'" (Hollander 1992, 496).

raven banner, it is cursed and flaps its wings, another man simply sees it fall three times (cf. Price 2002, 363). After an age of pagan animal-warrior initiations has ended, this is where a young warrior hears for the first time the action of another still described like an animal. The next time he is on the battlefield, it is how he imagines himself.

### ***Spurred Bleech***

#### **Skaldic Imagery**

Skaldic language has a rich sensory palette. These sensory aspects become clearer in the context of the battlefield experience. *Hildar leikr*, encountered in *Bjarkamál*, sets the tone of play—rules are being set for struggle and chance. *Yggs él* is transparent enough as an allusion to the blur of battle and its tie to ‘the terrible one,’ Óðinn, but when a twelfth century arrow assault is called *brodda hagli*, it ties the image of the hailstorm at the tenth century Battle of Hjörungavágr.<sup>138</sup> In that battle, there was not only an assault of arrows to deal with, but ounce-heavy hail. On top of that, there was the assault of arrows from the fingers of Þorgerðr—or was that the hail itself? Or the arrows flying back at the shooters from the strength of the headwind? The physical and supernatural battlefields, already blurred together in experience, now blur again across time to a battle account centuries later. Battle as a *dómr vápna* speaks to the *dómhringr* and the *véþond*, the sense that the use of weapons—even when not in a decisive battle—carries the same weight of judgement that makes a court or a sacrificial space sacred.<sup>139</sup> The poetic use of *vé* (sanctuary) to refer to the battle standard also stresses this connection. When the field itself becomes *vébraut*, it is a reference to the sacred space that the battle occupies.<sup>140</sup>

*Senna vápna* is a kenning encountered several times in the skaldic literature, and it speaks to the moments at the beginning of battle when men bandied words at each other.<sup>141</sup> At some point in the flow state, the voices of men became the voices of the

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<sup>138</sup> *Yggs élstærir*, ‘the enlarger of Ygg’s storm’: Ármóðr, *Lausavísur* 1 (SKALD 2.2.620); *Brodda hagli*, ‘hail of shafts’: *Lausavísur* 4 from *Sverris saga* (SKALD 2.2.845).

<sup>139</sup> *Dómr vápna*, ‘judgement of weapons’: Ingjaldr Geirmindarson, *Atlóguflökk* 2.

<sup>140</sup> *Vébraut*, ‘standard [banner] way’: Þorbjörn hornklofi, *Glymdrápa* 1 (SKALD 1.1.75)

<sup>141</sup> *Senna vápna*, ‘senna of weapons’: *Lausavísur* 4 from *Sverris saga* (SKALD 2.2.845); Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld Óttarson, *Erfidrápa Óláfs Tryggvasonar* 3 (SKALD 1.1.405).

swords, *rǫdd hjörva*, and the sensory experience became blurred.<sup>142</sup> And in that state of flow, where the warrior's weapons become an extension of his physicality, *svípr sverða* is not just the movement of the sword, but the warrior's own body as he sweeps through the field.<sup>143</sup> *Sverða seiðr* and *galdr vǫpna* blur the sounds of swords to the chanting of the men and the magical world of violence—maybe even to some version of the baritus itself.<sup>144</sup> The custom could even be honor'd in the breach: if there was notable silence before battle, its absence was felt and commented on when “endisk rauðra randa rǫdd.”<sup>145</sup>

Memories of rehearsal in the hall are present on the battlefield as well, when Haraldr harðráði, the leader in battle (and in the hall) prepared a yule-feast not for his men, but for the retinue of one of Óðinn's ravens: *hirð hykk hilmi gerðu Hugins jól*.<sup>146</sup> Held in that Yule image is not just the ravens feasting, but dancing and shouting as in the Gothikon, or pecking at and competing with one another in a *hrafnjafnaðr*. Likewise a warrior may fight against *gífr sóknar* (‘troll-woman of battle,’ an axe), but when action becomes narrative, the *senna vǫpna* is recast as simply a *senna*. The axe has become the troll-woman, his partner in the exchange. His physical struggle against the foe has become a verbal struggle against fate.

The language is experiential. The skaldic poets—themselves participants in battle—make no attempt to hide their presence as the speakers of their work. Contrary to eddic poetry, skaldic verse is emphatically personal (Clover 1978, 63–5). The masks of setting and character are embedded in the masked language of the initiates. Many kennings rely upon knowledge of the heroic material. Bǫðvarr bjarki may be invoked at dawn on the field of Stiklastaðir, and the knowledge of Hrolf kraki's story is necessary to unravel “Qrð Yrsu burðar” (‘Grain of the offspring of Yrsa,’ meaning gold).<sup>147</sup> This

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<sup>142</sup> Rǫdd hjörva, ‘voice of swords’: Gopþormr sindri *Hákonardrápa* 8 (SKALD 1.1.168).

<sup>143</sup> Svípr sverða, ‘sweep of swords’: Haraldr harðráði Sigurðarson, *Gamanvísur* 5 (SKALD 2.1.40).

<sup>144</sup> Sverða seiðr ‘seiðr of swords’: Sturla Þorðarson *Hákonarkviða* 10 (SKALD 2.2.707); Galdr vǫpna, ‘chant of weapons’: Einarr Skúlason *Geisli* 43 (7.1.42). Note that Sturla comes quite late in the tradition; *Geisli* is explicitly Christian.

<sup>145</sup> Endisk rauðra randa rǫdd, ‘the voice of the red shields sufficed’: Þorbjörn hornklofi, *Glymdrápa* 4 (SKALD 1.1.83).

<sup>146</sup> Hirð hykk hilmi gerðu hugins jól ‘I think the prince made Yule for Huginn's *hirð*’: Grani skáld, *Poem about Haraldr harðráði* 2 (SKALD 2.1.298).

<sup>147</sup> Qrð Yrsu burðar, ‘Grain of the offspring of Yrsa’: Þjóðólfr Arnórsson *Sexteffa* 27 (SKALD 2.1.40).

is a ‘class knowledge,’ but additional language requires the knowledge of experience, what has been called *flesh-witnessing*. This form of elite knowledge is based around the principle that ‘you had to be there’ to fully understand an experience (Harari 2008, 7–8). And the ‘there’ that these poets and warriors had just come from was gruesome.

If the base metaphor of poetry is mead, the eddic poetry often emphasizes the ingestion of poetic knowledge (Quinn 2010), while the skaldic verses emphasize its egestion (Clover 1978, 71–5, 79). It is easy to make the experiential connection between a heavily-intoxicated hall where men are spewing forth not only words, but ‘flęska bazt,’ but this puke of poetry is more associated with an overcharged emotional state than over-drinking (Clover 1978, 71–5). Battle has followed Aristotle’s three unities, and now the composition and sharing of poetry will serve Aristotle’s role of purgation—*catharsis*. These warriors and poets back in the hall have just come down from an unworldly experience. Battle, after all, has exposed their ‘deepest fears and most violent passions.’ And just as these warriors approached battle as ‘an act of self-expression,’ they approach its aftermath with the same aesthetic.

### **Catharsis — Þórarinn svarti and Egill Skallagrímsson**

Two characters provide insight into the cathartic role that this masked language may have had, not for the leaders, but for the individuals in the warrior complex. The first is Þórarinn svarti, who was by no means a warrior. *Eyrbyggja saga* says that: “hann var kallaðr mannsættir,” and “svá var hann maðr óhlutdeilinn, at óvinir hans mæltu, at hann hefði eigi síðr kvenna skap en karla” (15).<sup>148</sup> During a judicial proceeding in his home, he is prompted to unaccustomed violence. He follows his adversaries out of the house and attacks them again after discovering them laughing at him (18). The violence described is gruesome, whether or not it is realistic, and for a time from this point on, the previously cowardly Þórarinn speaks only in skaldic verse. In response to Geirríðr after the killing:

3. Varðak mik, þars myrðir  
morðfárs vega þordi,  
hlaut orn af ná neyta  
nýjum, kvenna frýju;  
barkak vægð at vígi

3. I—murderous wielder of the death-edge—  
defended myself against women’s  
taunts when I dared to fight;  
the eagle was fed fresh corpses.  
I didn’t spare the sword there

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<sup>148</sup> “he had a reputation as a peace-maker. . . . Thorarin was so impartial that his enemies said his disposition was as much a woman’s as a man’s” (Quinn 1997, 142).

valnaðrs í styr þaðra,	In the stir of slay-adders.
mælik hól fyr hœli	I seldom boast of this
hjaldrsgoðs af því sjaldan.	In front of the war-god's worshippers.

He is asked if he has acquitted himself of the accusation of womanliness, and responds:

16. Hétu hirðinjótar	16. Those who enjoy the snow-drift
haukaness til þessa	of the hawks' spur
heptandi vask heiptar,	accused me of easy living
hóglífan mik drífu;	--until now I have frustrated feuds.
opt kóm, alnar leiptra,	A cloudburst, furious torrent,
ævifúrs ór dúri,	Often comes in still weather.
núkná jörð til orða.	Now the land of the wrist's lightning
	Will learn of my words.

It is then said that Þórarinn “helt inum sǫmum skapshöfnum ok var löngum hljóðr. Arnkell . . . ræddi opt um við Þórarin, at han skyldi vera kátr ok ókviðinn” (*Eyrbyggja saga* 19).<sup>149</sup> Speaking to the trauma of the event:

17. Skalat ǫldrukkin ekkja,	17. The fine-dancing widow,
ek veit at gat beitu	Ale-drunk, won't deride me
hrafn at hræva efni,	--I know the raven feasted on
hoppfögr af því skoppa,	pieces of corpse flesh—
at hjörðoggvar hyggjak, hér es fjón	because I shudder at the thought
komin ljóna,	of sword dew; the hawk of corpses
haukr unír hǫrðum leiki	enjoys the hard play of grief;
hræva stríðs, á kviðu.	hatred has come among men.

O'Donoghue identifies Þórarinn as distancing himself from the violent acts (O'Donoghue 2005, 98–9).<sup>150</sup> On the contrary, he is immensely present in his language. Yet his verse is compulsive—there is no other avenue of expression for his shock. His normal language must be altered, just as his behavior—and hence his identity—has been. This is the same fluidity of behavior and identity that allowed a warrior to shape-shift into an animal. Þórarinn is at a point of high status—a novel experience—but one mixed with fear. The language of the poetry is a way of processing the agency of the violence and normalizing his state. His action, speech, and identity are linked. He has

<sup>149</sup> “remained in his usual mood and was quiet for long periods of time. Arnkell . . . often mentioned to Thorarin that he should cheer up and not be concerned about the future” (Quinn 1997, 152).

<sup>150</sup> For an analysis of the role of these verses in the surrounding prose, see (O'Donoghue 2005, 93–111).

acted uncharacteristically, and his language must reflect this until he has eased back to his normal behavior.

This must be placed against that other example of poetry-from-trauma, Egill's *Sonatorrek*. After his son Bǫðvarr's death, Egill, by contrast a warrior and a great poet, is told by his daughter to compose a poem in his grief, but his response is "at þat var þá óvænt, at hann myndi þá yrkja mega, þótt hann leitaði við, -- "en freista má ek þess." He doesn't believe he can compose, but recognizes that he must (*Egils saga* 79).<sup>151</sup> When he begins to compose, it is not easy:

1. "Mjök erum tregt tungu at hræra eða loptvætt ljóðpundara; esa nú vænligt of Viðurs þýfi né høgdrægt ór hugar fylgsni.	1. My tongue is sluggish For me to move, My poem's scales Ponderous to raise. The god's prize [poetry] Is beyond my grasp, Tough to drag out From my mind's haunts.
2. Esa auðþeystr því ekki veldr høfugligr, ór huggju stað fagnafundr Friggjar niðja, ár borinn ór Jötunheimum.	2. Since heavy sobbing Is the cause— How hard to pour forth From the mind's root The prize that Frigg's Progeny found [poetry], Borne of old From the world of giants.

When he is finished:

"Egill tók at hressask, svá sem fram leið at yrkja kvæðit, ok er lokit var kvæðinu, þá færði hann þat Ásgerði ok Þorgerði ok hjónum sínum; reis hann þá upp ór rekku ok settisk í öndvegi . . . Síðan lét Egill erfa sonu sína eptir fornri siðvenju" (*Egils saga* 79).<sup>152</sup>

Egill's experience is grief. He is a victim—at a low status point. For him the verses are not compulsive. The composition is difficult, but therapeutic, and by the end of it, Egill

<sup>151</sup> "Egil said it was unlikely that he would be able to compose a poem even if he attempted to. 'But I shall try,' he said" (Scudder 1997, 151).

<sup>152</sup> "Egil began to recover his spirits as he proceeded to compose the poem, and when it was finished, he delivered it to Asgerd and Thorgerd and his farmhands, left his bed and sat down in the high seat. . . After that, Egil held a funeral feast according to the ancient custom" (Scudder 1997, 156).

has regained his accustomed status.<sup>153</sup> He takes to his high-seat, reminiscent of a lord in the hall, and he feasts his household, that echo of the comitatus. Like the warrior in battle, the poet in composition has entered a flow, where language comes more easily, and the task at hand is natural. In the Old Norse world, these two virtuositities came together in the word of Hrólfr kraki's berserker: *snjallr*.

Both men process the events through the performance of poetry. One has been propelled to a high status, and must spill out verse to come back to a resting state. The other has sunk to unaccustomed low status, and uses poetry to build himself back. This speaks to its function; it is homeostatic. Both men used masked language to renegotiate their status. Seen sideways through one eye, these scenes can help make a leap to a place where poetry purges both the warrior's exhilaration and trauma in the aftermath of battle. The poetic act can increase the social status of the performer by pleasing his lord audience, but it also serves a purpose of restoring the individual to his accustomed personal status.

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<sup>153</sup> John McKinnell has identified a similar 'therapeutic' possibility in the construction of an eddic poem, *Þrymskviða*, dealing with sexual anxiety (McKinnell 2000).

#### 2.4.4 Menbako: Where the Masks are Stored

*In Japanese Noh theatre, the wooden box that carries the masks is called menbako. If a mask is particularly valuable—or if it is infused with a spirit—the menbako can be very ornate.*

When the battlefield was chosen, it was transformed to be not only itself, but part of the eternal battlefield, marked off and consecrated with a spear shot. When the warriors went to the battle, they masked their bodies and behavior, creating characters for survival that could negotiate both a human and a non-human battlefield. In the aftermath, the men mask their language when they speak of battle. When they are not in use, these masks are all stored in the same place: the idea of Óðinn.

Like the warrior on the battlefield whose thoughts “cannot travel from one day to the next without meeting death’s face,” Óðinn has a knowledge of his end and the end of the æsir at ragnarøk, and a good deal of anxiety about its inevitability. This is manifest when Óðinn asks the giant Vafþrúðnir what details he knows about ragnarøk, including his own end:

52. Fjölð ek för  
fjölð fręistaðak,  
fjölð of reyndak regin,  
hvat verðr Óðni  
at aldragi,  
þás rjúfask regin?

52. Much have I travelled, much have I tried out,  
much have I tested the Powers;  
what will Odin’s life’s end be,  
when the powers are torn apart?

53. Ulfr glęypa  
mun Aldaföðr,  
þess mun Víðarr vreaka;  
kalda kjapta  
hann klyfja mun  
vitnis vígi at.

53. The wolf will swallow the Father of Men,  
Vidar will avenge this;  
the cold jaws of the beast he will sunder  
in battle.” (Larrington 1996, 48)

Óðinn is quick to turn the competition to his favor by asserting the secret knowledge that he does have, the secret he whispered to a dead son. Giants are not the only sources of knowledge for Óðinn—he spends a great deal of time trying to learn from beyond the grave as well. He carries with him the embalmed head of Mimir and speaks with the

dead.<sup>154</sup> Likewise, in the poem *Baldrs draumar* (AM 748 I 4to), Óðinn rides to Hel and interrogates a dead vǫlva. Not unlike a warrior dedicated to death and drinking the *minnispl* to his ancestors, he seeks to know death's mysteries.

The knowledge Óðinn seeks is associated with the dead. The knowledge Óðinn gains is gained through physical mutilation and suffering. First, when he exchanges his eye for a drink from Mimir's well, and second when he hangs, screaming, to pick up the runes.<sup>155</sup> So too, an experienced warrior gains knowledge on the battlefield by means of his scars. He learns the ability to anticipate strikes while also minimizing his own effort. He is more likely to survive with every battle (Halsall 2003, 36).

When Odinn speaks, he speaks only in poetry (*Ynglinga saga* 6).<sup>156</sup> This was also a quality of Óláfr Haraldsson's *stallari* ('marshal'), the poet-warrior Sigvatr. He was "ekki hraðmæltr maðr í sundrlausum orðum, en skáldskapr var honum svá tiltækr, at hann kvað af tungu fram, svá sem hann mælti annat mál" (*Óláfs saga helga* 160).<sup>157</sup> It was Óðinn who stole the mead of poetry and brought it to the hall (*Skáldskaparmál* G58). When he first appears in Snorri's story of the theft, he takes non-warriors, whets their scythes, and watches them slaughter each other. Then he transforms into an *ormr* ('worm, snake') and into an *ørn* ('eagle'). Both of these are animals that feature in the imagery of warriors (Hedeager 2011, 80–1). Like the warrior-hero Sigurðr fafnisbani, he then stays three nights with a supernatural woman. The result is access to poetic mead. Both of these aspects, poetry and mead pour through the hall and are used as tools for preparing and reintegrating the warrior.

Óðinn himself is rarely described as a warrior, though by *Heimskringla*'s account, the euhemerized Óðinn is 'handsome to look upon' but shows enemies 'grim

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<sup>154</sup> "Óðinn hafði með sér hǫfuð Mímis, ok sagði þat honum mǫrg tíðendi í ǫðrum heimum, en stundum vakði hann upp dauða menn ór jörðu eða settisk undir hanga" (*Ynglinga saga* 7); "Óðinn had with him Mimir's head, and it told him much news of the other world(s), and sometimes he woke dead men from the earth or sat under the hanged" (SDS).

<sup>155</sup> The allusion to Mimir's well is in *Völuspá* 28 (with reference in *Gylfaginning* 15); hanging for the runes is found in *Hávamál* 138–9.

<sup>156</sup> "mælti hann allt hendigum, svá sem nú er þat kveðit, er skáldskapr heitir" (*Ynglinga saga* 6); "all he spoke was in rimes, as is now the case in what is called skaldship" (Hollander 1992, 10). The Gylfaginning quote is given above.

<sup>157</sup> "Sigvat was not ready of speech in prose, but skaldship was so easy for him that he spoke verse as readily as though it were ordinary speech" (Hollander 1992, 450).

aspect.’ He is transformed in the context of battle (*Ynglinga saga* 6).<sup>158</sup> Later in *Heimskringla*, Óláfr Haraldsson is described in nearly the same language. He is “eygðr forkunnar vel, fagreygr ok snareygr, svá at ótti var at sjá í augu honum, ef hann var reiðr” (*Óláfs saga helga* 3).<sup>159</sup> The quintessential Christian warrior and the patron of pagan war share the same capacity for a *grímr* transformed by the rage of war. And whether or not they could express it with their own eyes, or a helmet like Sutton Hoo, any helmet in battle could have been *ygs hjalmr*, sharing a name with Óðinn, *yggr*, the terrible one.

Between his trickery and unreliability, Óðinn’s ethos is not a heroic one.<sup>160</sup> Granted not all battle was waged in the most heroic fashion, and the many instances of ruses and surprises would constitute a particularly Odinic form of warfare (Griffith 1995, 109). With this in mind, even one of Óðinn’s names, *herblindi*, could be connected less to numinous practices than to the propensity for armies to attack at morning in order to blind their opponents with the rising sun.<sup>161</sup> And yet, in the telling of the story in the hall, when the firelight flashes off the helmet of the poet, blinding is exactly what it is. If we imagine Óðinn’s presence on the field didn’t end with the Viking Age, then perhaps his incarnation as *herfjoturr* (‘army-fetter’) was at the Battle of Borodino when the Ostermann-Tolstoi regiment stood still under point blank artillery fire for two hours—the only movement the falling of bodies (Keegan 1993, 9). Shock could certainly have held men frozen on the field a thousand years before as well.

Óðinn held a primary position in the hall, but his position was not without struggle. “His primacy and power constantly had to be negotiated and performed: it was embedded in social practice” (Hedeager 2011, 11). Óðinn’s essence, like his warriors, is in

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<sup>158</sup> “En þat er at segja, fyrir hverja sök hann var svá mjök tignaðr, þá báru þessir hlutir til: Hann var svá fagr ok gøfugligr álitum, þá er hann sat með sínum vinum, at qlum hló hugr við. En þá er hann var í her, þá sýndisk hann grimligr sínum óvinum” (*Ynglinga saga* 6); “Now as to why he was honoered so greatly—the reasons for that are these: he was handsome and noble to look at when he sat among his friends that it gladdened the hearts of all. But when he was engaged in warfare he showed his enemies a grim aspect” (Hollander 1992, 10).

<sup>159</sup> “His eyes were unusually fine, bright and piercing, so that it inspired terror to look into them when he was furious” (Hollander 1992, 245).

<sup>160</sup> Though much is made of the ‘duplicity’ of Óðinn referred to in *Eiríksmál* for taking warriors that he loves into Valhöll, the language is no different than what is heard today on the death of a child: ‘God needed another angel.’ This rarely comes with an accusation of trickery. It is little more than justification given for chance.

<sup>161</sup> An example of this is *Óláfs saga helga*, chapter 113. An attempt to avoid this situation is seen in *Sverris saga*, chapter 46.

the negotiation of status. This negotiation of status involves contests that contain elements of play. A second element of play—chance—the one that makes the warriors invoke the supernatural, may be an integral part of Óðinn's own experience as well. Aside from all his transformed appearances, Óðinn's primary mask is his one-eyedness. He has names associated with blindness, but is never portrayed as blind or weak-sighted (Kershaw 2000, 4–5). If a form of Óðinn can be traced all the way back to the vedas, this one-eyedness may be fundamentally about chance. The ancient *vraatya* warrior brotherhoods used a dice-game to elect their leaders. The worst throw, the single nut—the one eye—revealed the leader (Kershaw 2000, 248–53). Contest and chance are the essence of Óðinn's mask.

Eventually, like one his warriors, Óðinn the deity left the hall and did not return, but his personality was still present. Every new initiate to the hall became one who was alive, yet consecrated to death. Óðinn's various elements continued to be called upon in the performance of the warrior identity, and the complex of ideas which surrounds him captures both the anxiety of the warrior in the Viking Age, as well as the tools to manage that anxiety. Those who dedicate themselves to Óðinn, emulate Óðinn. They transform their battlefields into his battlefield, they transform their identities as he does, and they look to the future with one eye on an inevitable fate.

### 2.4.5 Conclusion: Telling the Story of the Eternal Battle

The stories of the recent battle are told in the hall, and events are set into verse. Well-loved comrades are given heroic moments. Personalities that are suddenly absent, like the drily humorous Þormóðr kólbrúnarskáld are propped up for a time with the stories of their final verses and final prose. Looking at the arrow he has torn from his breast, he says of St. Óláfr: “vel hefir konungrinn alit oss. Feitt er mér enn um hjartarætr” (*Óláfs saga helga* 234).<sup>162</sup> While Þormóðr was probably not anticipating an afterlife in Valhøll, he and others who knew their heroic histories could still have had Óðinn’s ‘best bacon’ in mind with a smile. And there are still more performances to be played. The battlefield will become a stage where the character of Kálfr Árnason is tested (*Magnús saga ins góða* 14), and long from now a great central hall space will become a tourist attraction at Lejre, with Skjöldungar whispering ‘*hwæt*’ in the walls.

But as days shorten and Yule approaches, a new group of initiates is brought in—ones who only know the recent dead through the stories about them. The rhythms of the hall pick back up and the aftermath of one battle blurs into the rehearsal for another. The link to the eternal battle is broken, and the living who briefly touched the benches of Valhøll are now jockeying to move closer to the high-seat of their earthly lord. Some of the practices in the hall will not survive the Conversion, but the images and idea will, as the desire to link with the past competes with a new religion.

The literary forms that compose the source material of Old Norse have their origins in an oral world—a world of actions. The *mannjafnaðr* and the *sennur* of the sources had their origins and their purpose in speech acts which established hierarchies, solidified norms, and either facilitated or diffused violence. The eddic poetry was not recited to record ideology, it was an experience of ideology, it blurred the boundary between this hall and Valhøll, between these heroes and past heroes. The sources of the Viking Age are products of its aftermath. Just like the sword, the story had to be forged. The ashes of past heroes helped make the steel. And battle was its furnace.

In time, the stories of those who strip their sleeves and show their scars, remembering with advantages their feats, will fade. Only a very few narratives survive both the axe of battle and the chisel of time. The ordinary becomes extraordinary. From the Old

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<sup>162</sup> “The king has fed us well. There is still fat on my heartstrings” (SDS).

Norse world, the stories that do survive are those of a few poets, like those mentioned earlier by Saxo who could “dexterously weave poems in their native speech.” And while he performs one of those poems of a long dead hero, a *snjallr* warrior-poet casts a look around the firelit hall, his own recent battle fading into memory. For now, grim-visaged war hath smoothed his wrinkled front.<sup>163</sup> He hears men boast in a corner and sees women carry horns of mead about while he speaks. His story is flowing. But out of the corner of one eye, he sees the next battle approach.

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<sup>163</sup> *Richard III* 1.1.9.

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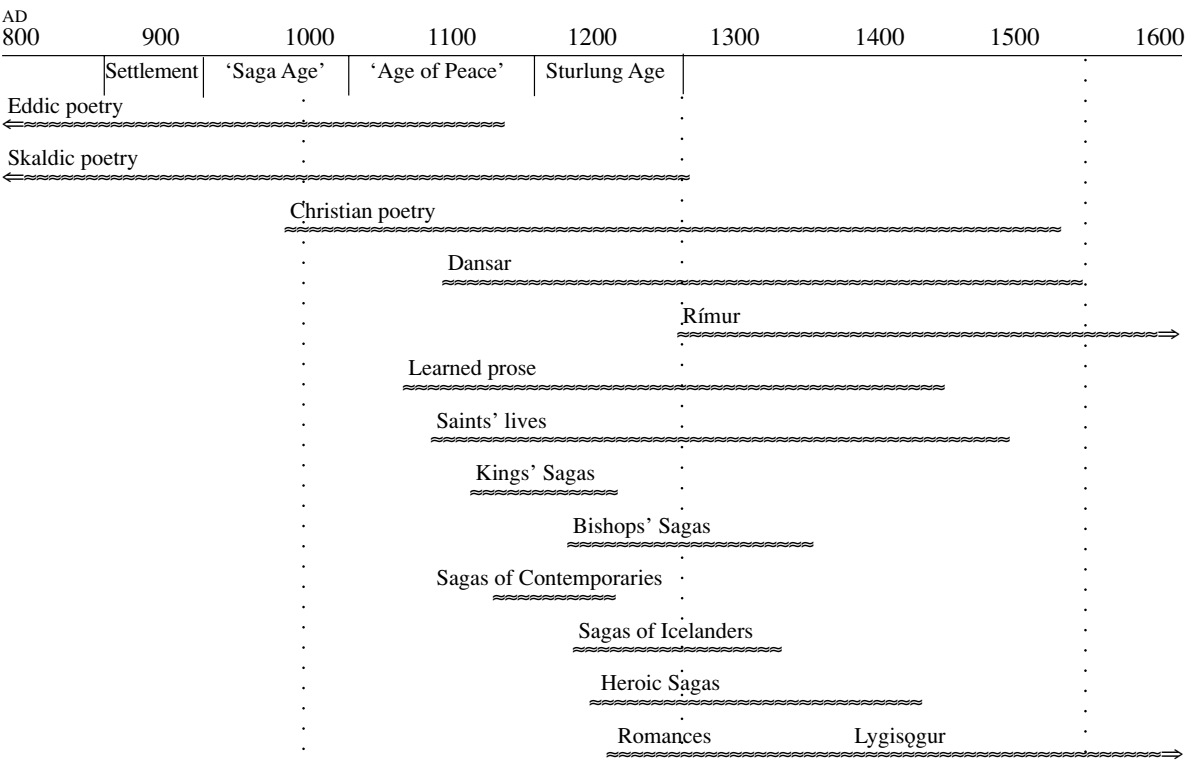
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4. APPENDIX



The diagram shows the approximate periods during which the various medieval Icelandic literary genres were cultivated. The dotted lines mark the time of the conversion to Christianity (1000), the end of the Commonwealth (1262) and the Reformation (1550).

**Figure 1.** Timeline of relationships between content of narratives and recording of narratives.



**Figure 2.** Torslunda helmet matrix A, depicting individual with upturned foot piercing bear-like animal (Vendel, Öland, Sweden).



**Figure 3.** Torslunda helmet matrix D, depicting dancing figure with weapons and masked companion (Vendel, Öland, Sweden).



**Figure 4.** Weapon-dancers from the Sutton Hoo helmet (Anglo-Saxon, Suffolk, England).



**Figure 5.** Masked figure in mock(?) combat with second individual, from the North Tower of St. Sophia, Kiev, c. 1037.



**Figure 6.** Torslunda helmet matrix C, depicting warriors with boar helmets (Vendel, Öland, Sweden).



**Figure 7.** The Benty Grange Helmet with boar figure on top, (Anglo-Saxon, Derbyshire, England).



**Figure 8.** Vendel 1 helmet, with overemphasized features with animal motif (Vendel, Uppland, Sweden).



**Figure 9.** Two ‘performances’ of the Sutton Hoo helmet: as a museum artifact (left), and as a reconstruction in context (right).



**Figure 10.** Female figure restraining warrior's hand, Oseberg wagon (Ninth century, Vestfold, Norway)

**Figure 1** is reproduced from (Faulkes 2007)

**Figures 2–4, 6–9(l)** are reproduced from (Bruce-Mitford 1974).

**Figure 5** is reproduced from <http://sofiyskiy-sobor.polnaya.info/en/> (accessed 31 August 2014)

**Figure 9(r)** is reproduced from (Price and Mortimer)

**Figure 10** is from Wikimedia Commons

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