

Háskóli Íslands
Hugvísindasvið
Fornleifafræði

Medieval swords in Iceland

13 swords from 1100-1600

Ritgerð til BA-prófs í fornleifafræði

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Abstract

Medieval Icelandic swords have received relatively little attention. The period 1100-1600 is the main focus of this research. Surviving swords from this period along with a variety of other resources were used to try to determine whether the swords preserved can indicate anything about how common swords in Iceland actually were. Many might dismiss this as a result of Icelandic society never needing any weapons. The aim of this thesis is to try to cast some light on the preserved swords provenance while providing some long overdue data and information on the swords from 1100-1600.

Íslensk sverð hafa fengið tiltölulega litla athygli. Megináhersan er lögð á tímabiðið frá 1100 til 1600 í þessari rannsókn. Sverð frá þessu tímabili ásamt ýmsum öðrum heimildum voru notuð til að reyna að ákveða og skýra alengi og umfang sverða á Íslandi. Markmiðið er að reyna að gefa skýrari hugmynd um hvar sverðin eru niðurkomin ásamt því að safna saman upplýsingum um þau sverð sem eru varðveitt á Íslandi frá árunum 1100 til 1600.

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1 Introduction

Swords have fascinated people for centuries. The reason for that is perhaps the romantic light that has been cast on them by authors through the years or perhaps by the power associated with them. Swords have been a symbol of power and strength throughout the world from ancient times and this did not change until swords became militarily redundant with the advent of more advanced firearms.

When one thinks of Iceland, swords are probably not the first thing that comes to mind. However there are a number of swords that have remained to this day. The aim of this work is to date and analyze the thirteen known swords which date to the period 1100-1600.

The role and use of the medieval sword in Iceland is still largely unstudied. The few swords that have been found are mostly undocumented and only roughly dated. The aim of this thesis is to document and study those swords and cast some light on their use based on the swords themselves, at least where the preservation of the swords allows it. It may seem normal that swords are rare in Iceland if we consider the structure of Icelandic society, but are they really?

To what extent does the number of surviving swords reflect the actual rarity or frequency of swords in medieval Iceland? Why does it appear that there are so few swords preserved in Iceland? To answer this question both physical and written evidence must be examined. The swords that remain must be examined and dated to provide data that can assist in determining the apparent lack of swords. Written evidence is the main factor in examining the swords as the swords can only provide a limited amount of information.

2 Methods and dating

Thirteen swords were documented for this research. All thirteen of the swords can be loosely dated to the period 1100- 1600. Four of those are on display in the National Museum of Iceland and therefore could not be measured and examined as closely as the other swords. In these cases, previous measurements and data available at Sarpur was used. The remaining nine swords were measured and photographed to assist analysis and dating. Due to the poor preservation of some of the swords the measurements are not as reliable as they preferably would be. Some of the swords were too fragile to lift,

so in some cases this restricts the amount of measurements.

All signs of original decoration and surface finish were noted along with remains of grips. Surface finish in this context meaning any surface that has not rusted or tarnished to such a degree that the metal is no longer clearly visible. Any clues of use, such as sharpening or repairs were also noted. Although there were few remains of decoration or surface finish there was enough left on some swords to give vague clues about the original finish of the sword.

Sharpening and repairs, such as re-hilting can give clues to the duration over which the sword was in use. For the blade to show clear deformities from sharpening, the sword has to have had extended use. If there are any such signs it may indicate that the sword saw heavy use through its life. Although many of the swords have nicks or deformed blades, the swords are generally too corroded for it to be possible to determine if the nicks and deformities are the result of use or merely the result of corrosion.

Where applicable the swords were sorted into types according to Oakeshott's typology (Oakeshott 1997). The typology is based on numerous European medieval swords that Ewart Oakeshott examined and then classified into typologies. This was accomplished by comparing swords that through some methods, for example from graves, were already dated and swords from contemporary art with other swords. Then the swords were described and classified into typologies. This typology was updated frequently after it was originally published and soon became the approved typologies for medieval European swords. The typology is in three main parts. Pommels, guards and blades. The three parts are used simultaneously to classify the swords. This can be especially beneficial as many blade types and pommel or cross-guard types saw prolonged use. Therefore it is often possible to narrow down the date when the three parts are considered. The strongest factor in the typology is not necessarily dating swords but also describing them. The typology covers mostly swords from the years 1050 to 1550. (Norman 1990, Oakeshott and Mansfield 1991)

Most of the swords however fall outside Oakeshott's typology, as his typology does not cover messers, as they mostly fall outside of his time frame (Oakeshott 1997). Messers are single edged swords. Their biggest characteristics are the grips and guard. The grip is made from scales that are riveted to the tang. The guard has what is called a nagel, a small protrusion that is meant to protect the hand (Fajfar, Medved et al. 2013). This created certain problems as the messers are the largest group of swords, namely

five or six out of thirteen. The uncertain number of messers comes from difficulties in identifying one of the swords, sword number A-1030. Along with the messers some of the other swords also fall out of Oakeshott's typology due to their young age. In those cases the swords were compared with swords of the same style and type from Europe. Although in some cases the sword was too corroded to do any analysis, in those cases very little is to be done. Although it is possible to draw some weak conclusions from the remains they can never be relied upon as there is too much missing from the sword to do complete analysis of the sword.

As swords were prestigious objects they often had a prolonged use. The hilt furniture might be replaced as it got out of fashion and the grip had to be replaced when it wore out. This is evident in swords of type X with hilt furniture of much later make (Oakeshott 1997). This means that dating swords can be problematic. The blade can be a hundred years older than the hilt for example. Many European swords are associated with certain individuals or come from contexts that can easily be dated, such as graves (Drachmann 1969). There is no evidence for any replacement or repairs on the swords except on sword number A-790. The grip on that sword is probably a replacement due to the fact that it does not look to be the same age as the rest of the sword. The grip also clashes with grips of similar swords, especially when the width is considered along with the lack of taper. The rest of the swords do not show any signs of modification or repairs, but again this could be the result of bad preservation.

Dating objects that are stray finds can be difficult, especially if there are no other objects or cultural deposits to associate with the objects. Most of the swords that are preserved are either stray finds or gifts to the National Museum of Iceland. Therefore it is necessary to find alternative ways of dating the swords. When the swords are preserved in such a way that all their components are present it is possible to date the swords by using the shape and style of the blade, pommel and cross-guard. Those three main components have been extensively classified into typologies by Ewart Oakeshott (Oakeshott 1997) and other people who specialize in the research of arms and armour.

But when the preservation of pommels, cross-guards and blades is insufficient to use as a dating method or those components simply fall out of the typology, other ways to date the swords must be found. As has been said before, most of the swords are stray finds and therefore have no contexts that they can be associated with. In some cases it is possible to compare the swords with other swords that have already been dated to find similarities in form and decoration. This can assist in dating the swords but cannot give

very accurate results. In other cases the swords are so badly preserved that there is no way of dating them at all to any time period.

Sword manufacture also varied from region to region. In Europe there were many regions that produced swords continually for centuries for example the Solingen area in Germany has been producing swords and knives among many other iron products for centuries (Stalsberg 2008 , Lloyd 1908) . This led to the development of local styles that can then be used to document the manufacturing place of a sword. But sword manufacture was a specialized business, the blade might be made by a blade-smith then sent off to a polisher and finally the blade was hilted by a cutler. This means that blades sometimes traveled some distance during their manufacture and thus it is not possible to narrow the manufacturing place down precisely (Bazelon, n.d.). So the most reliable dating method for swords that have no documents or any context associated with them is typology. Although it is not an exact science it can give an idea of the swords age and thus possibly shed some light on its intended purpose and use.

3 Data on swords

This chapter contains the inventory of the swords from 1100-1600. Each sword is discussed in terms of its current condition, type associated data. Each sword has a unique identifier based on an alpha-numeric code as registered in Sarpur, the database of the National Museum of Iceland.

Swords A-5185, A-120, A-2982, A-790 are currently on display at the National Museum of Iceland and could therefore not be examined as closely as the other swords. All measurements mentioned in context with those swords are the measurements recorded in Sarpur and the accuracy of those measurements are therefore not to be taken too seriously as some were made a long time ago and many of the swords have deteriorated somewhat since they were originally cataloged, according to descriptions.

3.1 A-5185

This messer was found by a farmer named Einar Einarsson in Fnjóskadalur in North-western Iceland. The sword is 84,5 cm long and 4 cm wide at the base of the blade. The sword is whole although the grip scales are not preserved. The crossguard has come loose and sits crooked on the tang. The pommel is either riveted onto the tang or made from the same piece as the rest of the tang. The messer has a straight spine except it seems to curve slightly backwards close to the tip. The edge is parallel to the spine for most of the blade length but curves to meet the spine at the tip (Sarpur <http://www.sarpur.is/Adfang.aspx?AdfangID=330084>)

3.2 A-120

This messer was found by Vigfús Ófeigsson in the fall of the year 1863 close to Bergólfstaðir in Þjórsárdalur in the South-west of Iceland. This sword was whole when it was found, but since then the tip has broken off and is now lost. The blade is 75 cm long and around 5,5 cm wide at the base of the blade. The sword is around 89,5 cm long from tip to pommel. Very little remains of the grip scales but what remains seems to be

made of wood. Two of three tube rivets still remain and they are made of copper or some other copper alloy, most likely bronze. The messer has a relatively straight spine and the edges run parallel to the spine but then curve up to meet the spine and form a point (Sarpur <http://www.sarpur.is/Adfang.aspx?AdfangID=333070>).

3.3 A-2982

This messer was found in 1886 by Vernharður Guðmundsson in Hagi in Grímsnes. With the sword came a scabbard chape (A-2904), a mouth piece from the scabbard (A-2904) and a dagger that has been given the number (A-2903). The chape and mouthpiece are made from a copper alloy, most likely bronze, and were both pushed up to the base of the blade. Like other messers this one had slab scales riveted to the tang with three tubular rivets as is common on other swords of the same type. One of the rivets still remains. The blade is 65,5 cm long and 3,6 cm wide at the base of the blade. The blade is slightly curved with a straight spine except at the very point where it dips slightly, perhaps forming a false edge. The sword weighs 0,636 kilograms and supposedly is still surprisingly springy (Sarpur <http://www.sarpur.is/Adfang.aspx?AdfangID=320105>).

3.4 A-11324

The sword is single edged and the spine seems to taper acutely to a thin line at the tip. Although the blade seems to have an acute distal taper it is hard to say for sure since the tip of the blade is missing and the blade is rather corroded. One possibility is that the blade possibly had a false edge close to the tip and the thin spine is the result of a false edge. This is probably the more likely option as the spine thickness decreases suddenly about forty centimeters from the base of the blade. Originally two fragments followed the blade but those seem to have been lost.

The grip cannot have accommodated more than one hand as the tang is just under ten centimeters long. Nothing remains of the original grip so it is impossible to determine what the grip might have been made of originally.

The pommel is ovoid in form and has a rounded top. There is a clear distinction

between the rounded top and the main body of the pommel.

The pommel does not fit into any of the pommel groups in Oakeshott's typology. This might indicate that the sword is too young to fall within Oakeshott's typology.

The cross guard probably falls into group 12 according to Oakeshott's typology. This type of cross guard was most popular in the 15th and 16th centuries. It has a slight S-shape to it and the flat cross-guard widens slightly to the ends. In the middle the guard thickens and forms an oval in the middle of the cross-guard (Oakeshott 1997).

All measurements are inmm.		Comments
Number	A-11324	
Total length	618	
Blade length	492	
Grip length	91,99	
Blade width at base	36,25	
Blade width at tip/break	31,75	
Spine width at base	6,8	
Spine width at tip/break	1,85	
Guard length	146	
Guard Greatest width/diameter		
Pommel width	43,3	
Pommel thickness	32,65	
Pommel height	27,35	
Tang width at crossguard	17	
Tang width at pommel		Too corroded to be reliable
Tang thickness at crossguard	6,55	
Tang thickness at pommel		Too corroded to be reliable



Image 1



Image 2

3.5 A-13124

This sword does probably not fall into the time-frame set for this research but it will be included here as it, like most of the swords preserved in Iceland lacks documentation. The sword is most likely of a type referred to as a Sinclair saber. The saber has a basket hilt that is rather badly preserved as is the rest of the sword. When examined there is no visible decoration on the hilt except for two inscribed lines on the middle plate of the hilt. Although no decoration is visible it does not exclude any, because of the bad

preservation.

The remaining blade is just short of 60 centimeters, but it is difficult to determine if the blade was any longer as it seems to come to a point but this could be the result of the rust eating the blade.

The sword is most likely from the 16th century based on similar blades from Scandinavia and mainland Europe (Sarpur

<http://www.sarpur.is/Adfang.aspx?AdfangID=335583>).

All measurements are in mm.		Comments
Number	A-13124	
Total length		
Blade length	58,5	
Grip length		
Blade width at base	37,9	
Blade width at tip/break	35,4	
Spine width at base	9,85	
Spine width at tip/break	3,84	
Guard length		
Guard Greatest width/diameter		
Pommel width		
Pommel thickness		
Pommel height		
Tang width at crossguard		
Tang width at pommel		
Tang thickness at crossguard		
Tang thickness at pommel		



Image 3



Image 4

3.6 A-11711

This sword was found in Bakki close to Hjalteyri in Eyjafjörður, it was close to the surface and beneath it there were four stones, nothing else was found around it. (Sarpur <http://www.sarpur.is/Adfang.aspx?AdfangID=331605>)

This sword is rather interesting. It is of a type generally called a Swiss saber (Group 2007) or perhaps a Kriegesmesser or grosse-messer (Fajfar, Medved et al. 2013). What makes it so interesting is the fact that most of these sabers are dedicated swords for combat. That is they are most commonly found among professional soldiers and mercenaries (Hall 1997, Fajfar, Medved et al. 2013). Although it does have several attributes of such swords there are several clues pointing to something else.

The blade has been broken seventeen centimeters from the hilt. The spine is very thick at the base of the blade but is very thin where the blade ends, the difference is about seven millimeters. This is most likely due to the bad preservation of the sword, as it is badly corroded and there is barely anything left of the original surface or the possibility that the spine is the remains of a ricasso. Unfortunately due to the bad condition of the sword it is impossible to determine the original blade shape. The heavy corrosion distorts the proportions and therefore it is impossible to determine the length of the blade from the distal taper as the measurements most likely do not reflect the original dimensions of the blade.

The cross-guard is just over 32 centimeters long. The guard is straight and has two balls or spheres on each end. In the middle of the cross-guard on the “outside” or on the side that would be on the outer hand when the sword was in use there is an ovoid ring, the ring is around eight centimeters wide and five centimeters high. This is typical for many Swiss sabers and other similar swords. One thing should be noted, when the guard is closely examined one can see some file work on the guard, this is remarkable when the overall preservation of the sword is considered.

There is no sign of the pommel as the tang is broken about twenty centimeters from the blade. It is likely that the pommel followed the common form of most swords of the same type, messer construction, as there does not appear to be much variation between swords. But if it indeed is not a sword of the messer “family” there is no way of determining the style of pommel.

On the tang there is one hole, about five centimeters from the blade and it is

likely that there was another one further up the hilt, used to attach grip scales if they were present which seems unlikely due to the tapering shape of the tang and the lack of other holes. The hole might also have served another purpose, when heat treating the blade, the blade might have been suspended from a wire and dipped into the quenching tank. Because of the size and lack of other holes it cannot be ruled out that the sword had some other form of grip than scales. But when one considers the bad condition and heavy corrosion it is possible that what appears as a spine on a single edged blade might be the ricasso of a double-edged sword. This might explain some suspicious attributes that makes it unlikely to be a Swiss-saber or a grosse-messer. And more likely to be a double-edged sword.

This sword is most likely from the 15th century (Demmin 1893). This dating could be attributed to the sword, whether it is in the messer “family” or some other form of sword. Although the early 16th century cannot be completely ruled out.

All measurements are in mm.		Comments
Number	A-11711	
Total length		
Blade length	274,8	
Grip length	200,3	
Blade width at base	43,6	
Blade width at tip/break	32,8	
Spine width at base	8,7	
Spine width at tip/break	1,9	
Guard length	323	
Guard Greatest width/diameter	11,9	
Pommel width		
Pommel thickness		
Pommel height		
Tang width at crossguard	25,4	
Tang width at pommel	20,4	
Tang thickness at crossguard	6,7	
Tang thickness at pommel	3	



Image 5



Image 6

3.7 A-982

This sword was found in Jökuldalsheiði in reddish dirt. The blade stuck out of the ground but the hilt was buried, resulting in the bad preservation of the blade, and the relatively good preservation of the hilt, although no trace of the original grip is to be found (Sarpur <http://www.sarpur.is/Adfang.aspx?AdfangID=312271>).

The blade of this sword is badly corroded but a fuller can still be seen on the lower part of the remaining blade. It is impossible to say how far the fuller extended but it is likely that it extended as far as the remaining blade. This is evident from the way the blade has corroded, the rust has eaten through the blade in the middle, leaving the outer parts intact. Because of the corrosion the blade cannot be classified into any blade type but it is not unlikely that the blade belongs in either types XIIIb or XIIa of Oakeshott's typology. This classification is, in this case, derived only from the width of the fuller, as the tip of the blade is missing, it is extremely difficult to properly determine the blade type (Oakeshott 1997).

The cross guard is straight and square in cross section, it is twenty-two centimeters long and of style 1 according to Oakeshott's typology (Oakeshott 1997).

The pommel is a sphere that has six flat sides on it. This is an unusual type and is not commonly seen. There are known examples of this type, although extremely rare (Johnsson 2015). The pommel is likely a variation of type R (Oakeshott 1997).

Due to the prolonged use of this type of sword it is hard to date it accurately. If the blade is of type XIIIb with the long and straight cross guard it can most likely be dated to the 12th to the early 13th century. Although the early 14th century cannot be ruled out.

All measurements are in mm.		Comments
Number	A-982	
Total length	638	
Blade length	461	
Grip length	121	
Blade width at base	46,6	
Blade width at tip/break	31	
Spine width at base	N/A	
Spine width at tip/break	N/A	
Guard length	220	
Guard Greatest width/diameter		
Pommel width	52,85	
Pommel thickness		
Pommel height	N/A	
Tang width at crossguard		
Tang width at pommel		
Tang thickness at crossguard		
Tang thickness at pommel		



Image 7



Image 8

3.8 A-5867

This sword was found in Þjórsá in 1909 (Sarpur <http://www.sarpur.is/Adfang.aspx?AdfangID=321151>). Unfortunately no more information is to be found regarding this sword.

The sword or rather sword-blade, as all the hilt furniture is now missing. It is a single edged sword or most likely a messer. As has been previously stated the messer seems to be very common among the surviving swords in Iceland. Still the lack of holes on the tang might indicate that this sword was some other type of single edged sword. There is only one hole on the tang, messers usually had more than this as one rivet is not enough to secure the grip slabs to the tang, the shape of the tang also indicates some other type of swords as the tang seems to be shaped like the tang on swords with more conventional hilt furniture. The hole in the tang could also be a result of the manufacturing process.

Due to the corrosion and lack of any kind of guard and hilt it is difficult to describe the sword in any more detail. The blade is relatively whole but the tip of the blade is gone. Therefore it is very difficult to date this sword with any relative accuracy. The shape of the blade could indicate that it was a later style, perhaps even younger than 1600, but the sword could also have had similar fittings as sword A-11324 but the fact that sword A-11324 lacks the hole in the tang that this sword does have makes it less likely but not impossible.



Image 9



Image 10

3.9 A-5693

This sword was found lying on the surface close to Meðalland in the year 1905 (Sarpur <http://www.sarpur.is/Adfang.aspx?AdfangID=313797>).

The blade is badly corroded and is in many pieces. The piece that is attached to the hilt is only a few centimeters long. The blade was double edged with a fuller that is just under a third of the width of the blade. There is no way to say how long the blade was or how far the fuller extended. There is also no way of identifying the blade type. As the blade is so badly corroded and fragmented it is difficult to classify the blade into any type, but type XII is not unlikely (Johnsson 2015).

The cross-guard, like the blade, is badly corroded and bent out of shape. Thus it cannot be classified to any certain style of guards according to Oakeshott's typology. The cross-guard seems to be rectangular in cross section and was likely straight as there is no evidence of any curve except for the bends in the guard, but they are at strange angles and do not correspond with each other.

The pommel is made from copper-alloy, possibly bronze. It is most likely of type H according to Oakeshott's typology (Oakeshott 1997). The preservation of the pommel is surprisingly good. The metal has very little corrosion and some of the surface still has a smooth finish, although there is some general pitting on the metal.

Dating this sword is difficult. The sword is in overall bad condition but the well preserved pommel could be from the 12th to the 15th centuries. But when taking the remains of the cross-guard and the width of the fuller this sword can be tentatively dated

to the late 13th century to the mid 14th century.

All measurements are in mm.		Comments
Number	A-5693	
Total length	310	Total length of largest fragm.
Blade length		
Grip length	96	
Blade width at base		
Blade width at tip/break		
Spine width at base		
Spine width at tip/break		
Guard length	110	
Guard Greatest width/diameter		
Pommel width	52,5	
Pommel thickness		
Pommel height	48,9	
Tang width at crossguard		
Tang width at pommel		
Tang thickness at crossguard		
Tang thickness at pommel		



Image 11



Image 12

3.10 A-1030

This sword was found in the northern part of Kjarradalur. According to the information associated with this sword it has been put into fire with the purpose of remaking it into a tool. The cross-guard has had one end flattened, probably with the same intended purpose as the blade (Sarpur <http://www.sarpur.is/Adfang.aspx?AdfangID=328676>).

The blade is broken from the hilt. The remaining blade is only twenty-eight centimeters long and is single edged. It is very badly corroded and nothing remains of the edge, and only small fragments near the base of the blade confirm that it is single edged.

Of the hilt nothing remains but the cross-guard. As has been previously stated the cross-guard has been deformed by hammering. This appears to have been done some time ago as the corrosion is uniform across the whole piece. This might cast some doubt on the statement that the guard was hammered flat. It is not impossible that the cross-guard is an example of an early complex-hilt. The small nibs or hooks on either side of where the blade went through the cross-guard could confirm this speculation.

If this is in fact a sword with a complex-hilt it is most likely from the later 15th century or younger. However, single edged swords with similar guards as on this example are rare or unheard of. But the bad preservation of the sword blade does not exclude that what appears to be the spine of a single edged sword might be the ricasso of a double edged sword. If that is the case both blade and guard fit together nicely.

All measurements are in mm.		Comments
Number	A-1030	
Total length		
Blade length	285	
Grip length	91,99	
Blade width at base	36,8	
Blade width at tip/break		
Spine width at base	4,4	
Spine width at tip/break		
Guard length	210	
Guard Greatest width/diameter		
Pommel width		
Pommel thickness		
Pommel height		
Tang width at crossguard	21,3	
Tang width at pommel		
Tang thickness at crossguard		
Tang thickness at pommel		



Image 13

3.11 A-7684

This sword was found in Árneseýrar by Þjórsá in July 1917. The sword was found in a pile of sand close to a waterfall, the waterfall had eroded the river banks and revealed the sword, when it was found only the tip was sticking out of the sand. Of a particular note is that the sand around the pommel seemed to have a yellowish tinge to it (Sarpur <http://www.sarpur.is/Adfang.aspx?AdfangID=321906>).

The blade is most likely a type XVa in Oakshott's typology. Although very likely it is not possible to confirm this as the tip of the sword is missing, however the blade shows all the characteristics of an XVa. It has a central rib and the edges taper evenly

and would most likely have formed an acute point, well suited to pierce gaps in armour.

The cross-guard is most likely of style 7 according to Oakeshott's typology but one arm has been broken off almost completely. The cross-guard has a central rib and tapers to both ends. The cross section is rectangular but tapers into an octagonal gradually outwards.

The pommel is of type T3 according to Oakeshott's typology, this type of pommel was especially popular in England in the early 15th century and its popularity seems to have faded rather quickly after the middle of the 15th century (Oakeshott 1997). The pommel is in a notably better condition than the rest of the sword. This is possibly due to the mass of the pommel or it being deposited further from the wet bank of the river.

The grip is very long, almost thirty centimeters. Nothing remains of the original grip covering.

Dating this sword is relatively easy. Due to the narrow time-frame of the pommel and the sufficient preservation of the blade, this sword can be safely dated to the very late 14th century to the middle of the 15th century. Blades of type XVa were most common in the very late 14th and early 15th centuries.

All measurements are in mm.		Comments
Number	A-7684	
Total length	903	Small fragment not included
Blade length	550	
Grip length	277	
Blade width at base	50,6	
Blade width at tip/break		
Spine width at base		
Spine width at tip/break		
Guard length	160	
Guard Greatest width/diameter		
Pommel width	53,4	
Pommel thickness		
Pommel height		
Tang width at crossguard	22,75	
Tang width at pommel	11,1	
Tang thickness at crossguard		
Tang thickness at pommel		



Image 14



Image 15

3.12 A-9359

This Messer is rather well preserved although it is badly corroded overall. It is nearly complete, only the front part of the blade is missing.

Due to the corrosion on the blade it is hard to determine the details of the blade shape but it appears that the Messer had a false edge that extended far down towards the hilt.

The grip is especially well preserved in comparison to other swords from the same period in the National Museum of Iceland. There are remains of bone or horn scales on the grip and they are attached with three tubular rivets made from copper alloy,

most likely bronze. This messer is similar in size to other messers in the National museum and seems to be rather generic.

All measurements are in mm.		Comments
Number	A-9359	
Total length	737	
Blade length	596	
Grip length	91	
Blade width at base	39,05	
Blade width at tip/break	28,05	
Spine width at base		
Spine width at tip/break		
Guard length		
Guard Greatest width/diameter	13,45	
Pommel width		
Pommel thickness		
Pommel height		
Tang width at crossguard		
Tang width at pommel		
Tang thickness at crossguard		
Tang thickness at pommel		



Image 16

3.13 A-790

This sword was given to the museum by Jón Halldórsson (1832-1865). It was found in Suðurárhraun which adjoins Ódádahraun in Suður-Pingeyjarsveit.

The sword blade is around 102cm long and 3,3 cm wide at the base of the blade. The sword is broken around two-fifths from the point. The hilt and basket and crossguard are according to the description in Sarpur, long and thin crossguard with engraved spades at the end. The basket comprised of 13 strips of which 2 are broken off. The basket is engraved with two human heads and several roses and rosettes, most of square or triangular shape. The pommel is of a large cylindrical and tapering form. The grip is supposedly a relatively recent addition (Sarpur <http://www.sarpur.is/Adfang.aspx?AdfangID=313936>). This is very likely since it

seems uncharacteristically wide and crude for a sword of this type the fact that the wooden grip seems to lack any sort of taper also confirms this.

The sword is dated by the National Museum of Iceland as being from around 1550. It is similar to many South German swords from the 16th century. The sword also bears resemblance to many German and South German swords from the 16th century as stated above. Dating it from the early 16th century to the mid 16th century seems perhaps more appropriate because of the rapid development of swords in this period (Aleksic 2007).

The blade has a ricasso with three fullers. Two of the fullers terminate where the ricasso meets the sharpened section of the blade but the middle fuller continues on and runs the entire length of the remaining blade. It is likely that it terminates some 10 to 15 cm from the point based on other comparative swords.

4 Medieval swords in Iceland

There is a noticeable lack of any information or data on medieval weaponry in Iceland. Perhaps the reason for this is the assumption that Icelandic people were too poor to arm themselves properly.

Although there are some clues that this is not the whole truth. If written evidence is examined there are some clues that swords and their use was not entirely unknown among Icelandic people. For example descriptions regarding fights are vastly different depending on the subject, ranging from fantastical to more realistic (Jakobsson 1994).

The largest part of all weapons preserved in Iceland belong to The Viking age. Other weapons that do not belong to The Viking age are mainly spears, axes, swords and halberds with few daggers also surviving. This is not unusual as these are the main weapons of most European weapon collections. Although there are few swords remaining they are still a large part of remaining weapons surviving in Iceland, perhaps because of the status attributed to them (Fajfar, Medved et al. 2013).



Image 17

A large part of the surviving swords are messers. The word messer means knife in German. The word is applied to a wide variety of swords, either one- or two-handed. The messer has a single edged blade, most relatively straight although some have a slight curve towards the tip. The blade sometimes has a false edge, an false edge is where the back of the blade has been ground to look like it is sharpened, while it is not. Most messers have simple hilts with a small protrusion on the cross-guard, called a nagel which means nail in German. The grip is where the messer mostly differs from other swords of the same period. The grip is made from slabs of either bone, wood or horn. The slabs are riveted straight to the sword tang, often with tube rivets. The pommel is most often a simple iron knob on the end of the grip. This bears remarkable resemblance to many medieval knives and perhaps explains the name, messer. The messer has for a long time been understudied as if it was a commoners weapon and therefore was not considered worthy of preservation; this resulted in many messers in Europe being thrown away or recycled into something else. On the other hand many messers have been unearthed on archaeological excavations. (Fajfar, Medved et al. 2013). Among the swords preserved in the National Museum of Iceland there is one that is possibly a Swiss-saber or a grosse-messer. These swords are large swords, intended for two-handed use. What makes this sword differ from the usual messer is the fact that instead of having a nagel there is an iron ring attached to the cross-guard. This indicates that this is more likely a Swiss-saber rather than a grosse-messer. An interesting feature on the sword, now composed only of the cross-guard, a small part of the blade and a large part of the tang, is the decorative file-work evident on the cross-guard. Although the sword is in overall bad condition this small detail is still visible.

It is not so strange that messers are a large part of the surviving swords when one looks at contemporary art and examines its popularity in Europe. Messers are what can be called the commoners sword as has been previously stated. They are abundant in paintings of common soldiers and there are numerous examples preserved all over Europe, although it seems to have been most popular in German speaking areas (Fajfar, Medved et al. 2013). But what mostly distinguishes messers from other swords is the fact that messers are in almost every case solely a weapon, not a status symbol. There are exceptions to this rule but in general messers are very utilitarian in design. The messers that have been preserved here in Iceland are all stray finds, but it is difficult to prove this statement as most of the messers were gifts to the National Museum in its early years, therefore the documents associated with the messers are

most often, unfortunately, rather vague. But the fact that most, if possibly not all, are stray finds is an interesting piece of information and will be discussed further below.

The other swords that are preserved are a scattering of different swords and ranging from types with very early cruciform hilts to later period basket hilts. The swords that are preserved are mostly what can be described as general swords, meaning there is nothing uncommon about them which might indicate local manufacture or the area of origin. There is one exception, sword A-982 has an uncommon pommel, but there are known examples of this types in museums in Europe, one in Lübeck, one in Padova and yet another one in Musée de l'hôtel Sandelin and perhaps more (Johnsson 2015). Therefore very little can really be said about these swords. The preservation is overall too bad to reveal any signs of use. There is nothing left of the original surface on any of the blades and in most cases the rust has eaten away most of the blade. There are still remains of fullers on swords A-982 and A-5693. Fullers are grooves or long indents in the sword blade, they serve to lighten the blade without taking any strength away, similar to a I-beam. Sword A-7684 has the remains of a pronounced midrib. Sword A-11324 is single edged and has an interesting pommel of what appears to be an uncommon shape. Among the swords there are also two swords that should be considered apart from the others. One, sword A-13124, is likely of a later date than the rest, although it cannot be safely confirmed as the sword is heavily corroded and much of the decoration along with the grip and pommel is missing. Therefore an earlier date cannot be ruled out and it was included with the other swords.

The other one is sword number A-1030. Only the cross-guard and a small fragment of the single edged blade remain. The hilt is what is especially interesting about this sword. According to the data associated with this sword someone had begun re-shaping the guard into something else and that this was clearly visible by the disfiguration of the guard and the discoloration left on the guard by the heat of the forge. Today the guard is too corroded for any indication of dis-coloration left by heat to be visible, this means that the guard has most likely corroded severely since it was originally examined. But the guard has a very peculiar shape. One end has a round cross-section while the other end seems to have been flattened out to form a spade like shape. There are no visible hammer marks on the flat end of the guard, but this can be attributed to the corrosion of the piece. The guard also has two protrusions toward the blade, these seem similar to many early complex hilts from around Europe, but with the single edged blade it seems strange as there are evidently very few such swords in

existence. It is possible that what appears to be the spine of a single-edged blade is the ricasso of a double-edged sword, a ricasso is the unsharpened segment of a blade closest to the hilt but that does not explain what appears to be the edge on the other side of the blade. It is tempting to conclude that the two pieces do not belong together. But to confirm that the metal of the blade and the tang that goes through the guard would have to be analyzed and compared.

4.1 Conflict in Iceland

There have not been many major conflicts in Iceland during the period relevant to this research, but potential conflict has maybe been more of a factor.

The age of the Sturlungs (Byock 1986) (Þorsteinsson 1980) and the conflict surrounding the protestant reformation were perhaps the biggest conflicts during this period. During the protestant reformation there was also considerable threat of conflict, this might play a part in the fact that later swords are more common than early. Although time is most likely the largest factor (Hjálmarsson 1993). Those are the main periods of unrest during the years 1100 -1600. Some of the swords that were examined in the National Museum of Iceland can easily be dated to the decades of the age of the Sturlungs. Notable examples are swords A-982 and A-5693. Both these swords can easily be from the conflict associated with the age of the Sturlungs. During and after this period there are great changes in Icelandic society. For example Iceland becoming part of Norway and the social changes that resulted (Sigurosson 1995). This may likely be a factor in the short gap that seems to be in the dates of the swords. There appears to be a short gap from the late 14th century until the mid 15th century. Sword A-7684 falls within this period but it is the only one that can be safely attributed to this period. The rest of the swords can be dated either before or after this period.

	Number of swords
12 th /13 th century	2
14 th /15 th century	7
16 th century	2
indeterminable	2

The second big conflict, the protestant reformation falls in the same time period as most of the messers in the museum. This can mean that weapons were bought to arm the farmers for an upcoming conflict. This also can mean that the weapons belonged to professional soldiers. The Landesknecht were hired by the Danish crown to force peace and then later to try to destroy all the Icelandic arms and armour (Loftsson 2006). This could easily explain the lack of preserved swords in Iceland. Although the source states that the swords were “destroyed” the swords were more likely recycled into something else, such as scythes. There are other references to weapons being destroyed or confiscated. In an article from 1946 there is a discussion about laws from 1581 that states that Icelandic people should arm themselves according to wealth and status, the law cites another law from 1576 that made owning weapons illegal and weapons were apparently destroyed or confiscated. No written evidence remains from the 1576 laws which makes it rather questionable (Magnússon 1946). This can explain the apparent gap in Icelandic arms and armour from the end of the Viking age until the Late Middle ages. It seems that opinions on whether Icelandic people should be armed or not varied greatly and attempts were made to both arm and disarm the public. However it is not possible to confirm this without further studies.

When the find locations of the swords are considered it unfortunately does not necessarily reveal much about them. The swords seem to be focused on the North-West and South-east corners of the island. This might perhaps be explained by connection to events in Icelandic history or it might simply be coincidence. If the finding places are considered with events in Icelandic history the south eastern corner may not seem out of place. It was the seat of a bishop (Skálholt) and Alþingi in Þingvellir is also on the South-West corner. But it is difficult to associate the finding places with any conflict or any other event that might explain their finding location. Of note is the sword that was found on the West-Fjords. Sword A-13124 is a saber and most likely does not fall within the time-frame of this research, 1100-1600. It is tempting to associate the sword with foreign whalers or fishermen but there is absolutely no evidence that might support that claim. No comparable swords that can assert this have been found. Therefore making it no more than idle speculation.

In the book Icelandic Folk Customs (*Íslenskir Þjóðhættir*) by Jónas Jónasson, there is a small paragraph about the manufacturing of scythes. It states that scythes were always made here in Iceland. The author gives a short description of the manufacturing

process. He says that three strips of soft iron and two of steel were welded together. Jónasson says that most often scrap iron was used, but when old weapons were found, they were thought to be the best material for the scythes.

Ljáir voru ætíð smíðaðir hér heima, þangað til skozku ljáirnir fóru að koma um 1870. Efnið í ljáina var oftast 3 ræmur af deigu járn og tvær af stáli; var það svo soðið saman. Bezt var álitíð að láta járnarusl, skeifubrot og. fl. í stokk og láta það ryðga vel og sjóða svo saman. Áttu þá öll óhreinindin að ryðga úr járninu, en bezta bitjárn að verða eftir. Þá þótti og ekki ónýtt, ef til voru gömul vopn eða þau fundust, því að það var óhyggjandi, að í þeim væri got bitjárn, og var þeim því ætíð varið til ljáa eða gæruhnífa (Jónasson, 2010/1934)

As Jónasson states above the best material for scythes was considered to be old weapons that were either found or existed on the farms. It would be interesting and possibly rewarding to analyze the micro-structure of both scythes and swords from Iceland. As most swords of this period were made by professional craftsmen (Epstein 1991) and the steel that was used was generally of a higher quality than most every day cutting edge tools were made from. The carbon content and purity of the scythes might reveal if the material came from swords or originated elsewhere. Swords are generally of higher quality than many other tools made from iron or steel. If the carbon content of some of the scythes is unusually high or the steel is very pure, that is not many unwanted inclusions. It might mean that the scythe was reforged from something else (Edge and Williams 2003). There are more clues on weapons being reforged, for example the spear Grásíða (e. Greyflank) mentioned in Gísla saga Súrssonar, was reforged from an ancient sword (Kroesen 1982). Although this should be taken lightly due to the uncertain credibility of the Icelandic sagas it does reflect the importance placed on swords and might indicate that more old swords were made into spears or other weapons.

Along with recycling there is a possibility that swords never were common in Iceland. This seems rather unlikely as there are numerous references to conflicts in Iceland and men arming their followers. However the written record does not indicate any real number of weapons in Iceland and therefore should not be taken as concrete fact. These factors can easily play together, the few swords that were in Iceland were mostly recycled when they became unnecessary or too old or rusty to be of any use. Apart from the short paragraph in Icelandic Folk Customs there are no apparent mentions of swords or any other weapons being recycled. But perhaps recycling was

such a common thing that recycling swords was not thought worthy of being mentioned.

Another possibility to consider is that some of the swords were hidden or lost, either in the heat of conflict or under some other circumstances. The fact that most of the swords are stray finds might support this idea. Kristján Eldjárn also seems to have similar ideas in his article about three halberds found (Eldjárn 1971). Although it is more likely that it demonstrates the lack of awareness of the original finder, that he was not knowledgeable enough to notice any surrounding contexts.

Therefore after examining the possibilities and looking at the evidence the question seems to be: how representative are thirteen swords? Do they indicate that swords were rare or common – or just average by European standards?

The laws and decrees regarding swords point toward the destruction on recycling of the swords. Other texts, like Jónasson's paragraph about scythes for example, also confirm that many weapons were converted into other tools, such as scythes. Although it is not possible to confirm that all the weapons that were recycled were swords it is likely that the greater part of recycled weapons were spears and swords, as it is not impossible that axes would have simply been re-shaped or used as they were for everyday tasks.

5 Conclusion

Although the size of the collection is small and it is therefore hard to draw any concrete conclusions from this research it is still safe to say that it has revealed much. The swords that were examined reveal that Iceland has some excellent examples of rather well-preserved messers. There are also some interesting pieces in the collection. For example sword A-982 which sports a very uncommon pommel. Regrettably the preservation on many of the swords is poor but that does not subtract from their research value. The collection is overall too diverse to attribute them to any event or conflict in Icelandic history, along with the problem in accurately dating them due to the bad conservation.

If we consider the fact that Iceland had no armouries that were managed by the state or wealthy individuals. As Iceland was a vassal state through much of its history and due to its location relied on trade to supply it with what could not be produced on the island (Harrison, Roberts et al. 2008). Therefore it is not surprising that fewer

weapons, among them swords, have survived in Iceland as much of what has survived was preserved in armouries, such as the Royal Armoury at Leeds, England (Armouries and Hardy 1987). Therefore we have had to rely on either individuals or the elements to preserve the swords that were here.

When the evidence that points to weapons being recycled, confiscated or destroyed is taken into the equation the apparent lack of swords becomes even more understandable. The swords that might have been left with some farmer after some conflict or another or even something he might have found could easily have been made into something else entirely, such as some farming tool. It would perhaps be rewarding to analyze for example the scythes that have been preserved and look at the micro-structure of the scythe-blades. As swords generally have higher carbon content than many other sources of iron. Although the carbon content might have been distorted by turning the sword into a scythe (Williams 1977).

The fact that almost all of the swords are stray finds also makes the apparent lack more understandable and perhaps confirms that those swords that were not lost or hidden somewhere away from populated areas were indeed recycled into tools that are more useful for the everyday tasks of a farmer.

Last but not least there is the matter of numbers. Icelandic people have never been numerous and there have been several disasters regularly throughout history to keep the population relatively low (Haraldsson and Ólafsdóttir 2007). This does mean that there are fewer swords necessary to “fill the quota”. Meaning that as swords generally were expensive and prestigious objects and therefore not available to everyone there were most likely fewer people that could afford them here than elsewhere, where population numbers were higher.

If the original question is considered: To what extent do the number of surviving swords reflect the actual rarity or frequency of swords in medieval Iceland? It seems that thirteen sword. is an reasonable number.

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6.1 Other references

Johnsson, P. (2015). (private conversation)

6.2 Photo register

Photo register	
No.	Description
1	Hilt of sword 11324
2	Sword 11324
3	Sword 13124
4	Sword 13124
5	Sword 11711
6	Detail of sword 11711
7	Pommel of sword 982
8	Sword 982
9	Hilt of sword 5693
10	Sword 5693
11	Sword 1030
12	Pommel of sword 7684
13	Sword 7684
14	Sword 9359
15	Hilt of sword 9359
16	Sword 5867
17	Detail of sword 5867