Grappling Within The Sagas: The Techniques of the Heroes and the Knowledge of the Scribes Who Wrote About Them

Ritgerð til MA-prófs í Viking and Medieval Norse Studies

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Abstract

Both the fornaldarsögur and Íslendingasögur are replete with grappling sequences, techniques, and maneuvers. These sequences and maneuvers, however, have been virtually ignored by the academic community. Through the passing of time, changing of cultural interests, and poor translations, much of the once-understood sequences and techniques that are found in the sagas are lost upon the modern reader. Furthermore, what little scholarly attention has been directed towards these specific grappling passages has generally had underlying motives whose goals are not to understand and accurately represent the maneuvers and techniques to the modern reader, but rather to promote modern glíma and the notion that it is descended from the Vikings. This thesis aims to clarify, expand upon, and describe specific grappling techniques and sequences that are chronicled in the fornaldarsögur and Íslendingasögur to the modern reader in a way that is accurate, accessible, and easily understood. In conjunction with this, this thesis discusses the accuracy, detail, vocabulary, and realism of these grappling sequences, and promotes the idea that medieval Icelanders (both the scribes and their contemporary audiences) were well-versed in grappling and understood these passages to be accurate portrayals of realistic wrestling as opposed to solely sensationalized fiction.
Ágrip

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1. Introduction

Despite the varying levels of attention given to the content, historical and social value, and interpretations of the fornaldrarsögur and Íslingasögur over the last several centuries,¹ there remains at least one ubiquitous aspect of the sagas that has been all but ignored: grappling. The instances of glíma (a popular form of wrestling in medieval Scandinavia that I will define in more detail later) and grappling within the sagas have been under-researched, especially when one considers their frequency and plot-significance. Very little scholarly work has been done to identify the plausibility, realism, and importance of the numerous grappling sequences that appear throughout the sagas. As a consequence of this, little has been put forth in regards to how the modern reader and audience are to interpret and visualize these grappling sequences. Furthermore, we also have little understanding of what the contemporary scribes and audiences of the sagas thought and understood about them.

Of the 35 or so sagas that are generally agreed to make up the fornaldrarsögur corpus, roughly two-thirds of them contain explicit scenes of glíma, or at the very least descriptions of grappling and wrestling contests. Similarly, in the Íslingasögur roughly 20 of the 40 sagas that the corpus consists of (and many additional þættir²) definitively describe scenes of grappling. These scenes, described in varying amounts of detail and realism, not only tell of the exciting and gruesome exploits of champions and heroes of old, but also have the potential to give the modern reader a unique insight into the social value and esteem that grappling, glíma, and wrestling had in old Scandinavian society. Moreover, upon closer inspection and analysis of the descriptions of these grappling contests and their translations, we can gain a

¹The fornaldrarsögur and Íslingasögur have been preserved and passed down to us in hundreds of manuscripts, on both vellum and paper, and have been studied from a diverse variety of angles. "From the 13th to 20th century they have been copied and studied by people from all walks of life: self-educated farmers, clergymen, government officials and others motivated only by their passion and admiration for good literature." Hreindsson, Viðar., Ed. The Complete Sagas of Icelanders. Vol. I. Reykjavik: Leifur Eiríksson, 1997. xiii. Print.
²Þættir are short stories written mostly in Iceland during the 13th and 14th centuries.
better understanding of the scribes’ knowledge of the sport, as well as a general
idea of the level of familiarity the intended audience would have had with the
sport.

Despite the reputation that the *fornaldarsögur* have for being fantastical
and far-fetched in many regards, a large number of the descriptions of specific
grappling maneuvers and sequences are anything but fantasy. Indeed, after close
analysis of several of the more detailed scenes of grappling combat, I have been
able to discern a majority of the specific techniques, tricks, and throws used by
our heroes; many of which are still used to this day in combat sports such as
judo, jiu-jitsu, wrestling, and modern *glíma*.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the scenes of grappling in the *Íslendingasögur*
are, generally speaking, somewhat more retained in their violence and
fantastical elements. The heroes and protagonists of these *Íslendingasögur* find
themselves more often (but not exclusively) grappling other men, as opposed to
the trolls, monsters, and giants that are so common in the *fornaldarsögur*.

Many of the intricate moves and finer details of certain grappling
maneuvers described in these sagas, however, have been somewhat lost in
existing translations. As I will show, there are several instances where a
translator, presumably not well versed in grappling prowess, mistranslates or
misinterprets certain words and scenes. This results on several occasions with
the reader being left with vague, nonsensical, or even contradictory grappling
scenes instead of an explicit and probable description of a well-documented
maneuver.

Relatedly, as time has passed and the audience for these sagas has
become more and more removed from the original contemporary audience
(temporally, culturally, and geographically), much of what was originally
considered common-knowledge about grappling has been lost on the modern
reader. Whereas the original Scandinavians and Icelanders, for whom these
stories were composed, celebrated grappling and *glíma* on a societal and
national level, the modern audience for these sagas have, in general, a far weaker
understanding of grappling: if indeed they possess any technical understanding
at all.\textsuperscript{3} As a result of the modern audiences’ general ignorance of grappling, I find it particularly important to enlighten the present-day reader, and particularly the scholar, about the precise physical maneuvers and movements that are described in sagas who’s other various facets have been so cherished, dissected, studied, analyzed, and celebrated for centuries.\textsuperscript{4} Just as it was in the 17\textsuperscript{th} century,\textsuperscript{5} there are aspects of the sagas that need to be analyzed and studied by an appropriate and invested expert. In the realm of grappling and glíma, unfortunately, very few experts have delved into the sagas in a scholarly fashion. For this reason, I intend not only to describe to our modern audience exactly which grappling maneuvers were being performed by the heroes of the sagas, but also how the heroes would have performed these moves. In doing so I wish to prove that the maneuvers and techniques utilized in the sagas were, for the most part, both practical and realistic. Furthermore, as a result of this I wish to also shed some light on how well the original scribes and their contemporary audiences understood these maneuvers. As with other aspects of saga research and scholarship, my goal is to allow the modern reader to visualize these grappling exchanges, regardless of their level of grappling knowledge, as close as possible to the way in which the original and presumably grappling-educated

\begin{itemize}
\item This “temporal removal” that has caused much of our understanding of the grappling sequences’ to fade is a microcosm of a larger issue in saga scholarship and dispersal. As Viðar Hreinsson argues: “Saga literature has been a national treasure in Iceland for centuries, although it remained unknown elsewhere until it began to be printed in the 17\textsuperscript{th} century. Only then did Scandinavian scholars begin to realize that these accounts, which had been preserved on calfskin manuscripts on an island half-way across the Atlantic, had particular value for their own cultural heritage. Since then, the sagas have been acknowledged as one of world literature’s most remarkable achievements, although appreciation of their merits and importance has perhaps been limited by the smallness of the Icelandic-speaking community and the inconsistent quality and availability of translations.”- Viðar Hreinsson, ed. \textit{The Complete Sagas of Icelanders}. Vol. I. Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson, 1997. xiii. Print.
\item Indeed, it would appear that Robert Kellogg agrees with this notion when he states: “The Íslendingasögur describe a world so particular, interesting and consistent from saga to saga that it has not been in the least absurd to apply the point of view and methods of the social sciences – of history, anthropology, sociology – to an understanding of this fictional world, and in the course of doing so to imply an identity between an actual time in the past and the settings of the sagas.”- Kellogg, Robert. Ed. \textit{The Complete Sagas of Icelanders}. Vol. I. Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson, 1997. xlii. Print.
\item “[T]he sheer number and variety of manuscripts and the need for continuing interpretation of the unique saga world have called for extensive research by modern philologists. When the old literature of Iceland began to attract scholarly attention at home and abroad in the 17\textsuperscript{th} century . . . the bishops needed the aid of experts.”- Viðar Hreinsson, ed. \textit{The Complete Sagas of Icelanders}. Vol. I. Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson, 1997. xiii. Print.
\end{itemize}
intended audience of the sagas envisioned them when they read or heard these stories centuries ago.
2. Previous Research and the Background of Glíma

As briefly mentioned above, very little academic research and analysis have been undertaken upon the grappling sequences in the fornaldarsögur and Íslendingasögur. The specific scenes of grappling within these sagas have been read by scholars and the masses alike for hundreds of years, but rarely have they been analyzed in any substantial or consequential fashion. What little research has been done on this topic has been done by only a few, and is unfortunately predominantly undermined by its non-scholarly motives. Of those who have attempted to examine the grappling sequences found in the sagas in a scholarly fashion, Thorsteinn Einarsson is by far the most established and prolific. He was a former master and instructor of glíma, a well-regarded Icelandic sports and glíma historian, and wrote with passion several articles, pamphlets, and books on the topic. His publications include the books Próun glímu í íslensku þjóðlifí and Glíma, Icelandic Wrestling, a short book written for the Olympic Committee of Iceland, in an attempt to have glíma made into an Olympic sport. Although several of his works are scholarly in nature, and do indeed reference and analyze various aspects of glíma in the sagas, he does little to hide his agenda of advertising glíma, as it is represented in the sagas, as a pure, unadulterated form of unique Scandinavian wrestling that has been passed down through the generations, virtually unaltered, to the few remaining glíma practitioners.

Rather than dissect the grappling scenes within the sagas objectively, Einarsson uses the sagas’ celebration of glíma/grappling as a means to validate modern glíma as a legitimate sport. Unfortunately, as anyone with even a modest understanding of grappling and glíma could easily recognize, the glíma of the sagas, as I will go on to show, much more resembles traditional grappling and wrestling techniques, and is very unlike the modernized version of the sport that Einarsson and others seem so adamant to promote. Einarsson’s desire to promote and spread glíma, and to trace its unwavering roots back to medieval Iceland, is so iron-nosed and persistent that it taints what is otherwise high quality work. As a result of this desire, Einarsson time and time again misidentifies maneuvers and conveniently leaves out details from the sagas when they don’t go hand-in-hand with his vision of what glíma was supposed to
be.\textsuperscript{6} Despite these shortcomings, Einarsson is still one of the few researchers who has delved deeply into the sagas' grappling sequences and attempted to identify and catalogue them, and I find his work to be both interesting and valuable.

Following in Einarsson's footsteps, M. Bennett Nichols also studied \textit{glíma} from a scholarly and anthropological standpoint, but seems to have erred in the same way and for the same reasons. He admits in his work \textit{Glíma, Icelandic Wrestling} that he studied \textit{glíma} and its representations in the sagas primarily under the tutelage of Thorsteinn Einarsson himself, so the similarity of their opinions and conclusions should come as no surprise. Although Nichols identifies various forms of \textit{glíma} in the sagas, and attempts to trace their lexicological origins, he does little to shed any further light on what specific maneuvers are being described in the sagas, and instead is more concerned with the origin of various grappling-related terms and the rules and tricks of modern (20\textsuperscript{th} century) \textit{glíma}.

In the world of \textit{glíma}-relevant \textit{fornaldarsögur} and \textit{Íslendingasögur} research, Lars Magnar Enoksen is another rather prolific contributor. Although prolific, all of Enoksen's major works are popular, as opposed to academic, and even more strongly biased in opinion and observation than Einarsson's works. Despite his clear passion for the sagas, all things Viking, and \textit{glíma} in particular, Enoksen cannot, in my opinion, be taken seriously in his scholarship because of his almost fanatical obsession with the mystical and mysterious nature of \textit{glíma}.\textsuperscript{7}

\textsuperscript{6}Einarsson assumes on several occasions, without any evidence or indication from the saga sources, that the combatants are both wearing modern \textit{glíma} belts and gear, and that they are using specific grips on these belts and harnesses. In the source literature, however, the sagas rarely mention these devices, or any attire at all, when describing grappling interactions. Relatedly, the heroes frequently grapple or engage in \textit{glíma} with trolls, berserks, and other monsters who are often explicitly neither wearing the traditional \textit{glíma} attire nor using sanctioned grips, tricks, and maneuvers. Examples of these assumptions can be found in Einarsson's \textit{Próun glímu í íslensku hjáðlífi}, in the lists of \textit{glíma} maneuvers and altercations found on pages 70-71 and 74-75, whereas the lack of evidence for the said attire and maneuvers can be found in the examples' respective sagas.

\textsuperscript{7}Statements such as "First of all I must declare that the most vital thing with Glíma is that it is an old martial art which clearly states that those who do not have any connection with its unbroken traditions, will be hopelessly lost when it comes to understanding its art." (Enoksen, Lars Magnar, \url{http://www.viking-glima.com/masterstories.html}), and others like it, are almost bombastic in their self-aggrandizement and inaccuracy. Anyone who has actually studied or practiced a martial art, particularly any of the various forms of grappling, knows that there is no mysterious arcane knowledge that only the few unquestionable masters possess: this is the
Before going any further into the intricate details of the specific grappling techniques and maneuvers which are described in both the *fornaldarsögur* and *Íslendingasögur*, I find it necessary to first go over a brief history and explanation of the term *glíma*. In particular, I would like to examine the term in regards to its relationship with sport in both medieval and modern Scandinavia, and also clarify the term’s meaning and usage in medieval Icelandic literature.
3. Glíma

Glíma is a term referring to an old Scandinavian martial art that was practiced without weapons during medieval times. It most closely resembles modern wrestling, although there are several variations and differences between the two. The essential guiding principal behind glíma is similar to that of both judo and jiu-jitsu: to enable a smaller, weaker opponent to get the upper-hand on a stronger and heavier opponent by means of skill, technique, and grappling knowledge. As M. Bennett Nichols states:

Proper glíma emphasizes technique over power, stressing superior balance and nimbleness over brute strength and force. It is a sport not of who is strongest, but rather of who is the most quick, most clever, and most skilled in the wrestling techniques and their respective defenses.  

Unlike judo, wrestling, and jiu-jitsu, however, a contest of glíma does not officially begin until the two combatants have “gripped” one another, usually around the waist and/or at the thighs. This set-up is seen in numerous fornaldarsögur, as well as in various Íslendingasögur and the Prose Edda. Indeed, if the descriptions of wrestling contests in the fornaldarsögur sometimes seem eerily similar to more modern descriptions of glíma, there is an easy explanation. Jóhannes Jósefsson, former Icelandic Wrestling champion, addressed this very issue:

[Glíma] is carried out in the same way it was eight hundred years ago. All the maneuvers bear the same name, and very little change has been made as a whole since the eleventh century. Some few new maneuvers have been added, and two

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9 Through no coincidence, the championship belt which Jóhannes Jósefsson was presented with is called the Grettisbeltið “Grettir Belt”.

or three have been discarded, owing to their calling for more brute force than 
gymnastic ability. Amongst these is the "Giantess Trick".10

Jósefsson goes on to explain that historically there were not weight-classes11 like 
there are in other traditional and modern martial arts such as Greco-Roman 
wrestling, boxing, and jiu-jitsu. His reasoning being that “the light-weight man 
has equally as good a chance of winning as the heavily built one, the secret lying 
in keeping one’s balance, not so much in strength or weight” (Jóhannes Jósefsson, 
1908).12 This crucial principal, that the stronger opponent does not necessarily 
have the advantage, is adhered to and attested time and time again in both the 
Íslendingasögur and fornaldarsögur.

I would here like to introduce some of the traditional rules of glíma, as 
detailed by Jóhannes Jósefsson. These are the rules that I have deemed to be the 
most pertinent in helping modern readers further understand some of the 
intricacies of the maneuvers and grappling sequences that are described in the 
sagas:

1) Before any bragð13, or grappling trick, is commenced, the lawful wrestling 
grip must be taken.

Although not strictly adhered to, a majority of grappling encounters in the 
fornaldarsögur, particularly those between two humans, are instigated by each of 
the two combatants embracing each other in a grappling clinch. One difference 

between the grappling of the sagas and that of modernized glíma that should be

10 Jóhannes Jósefsson. Icelandic Wrestling. Akureyri: 1908. P 4. I would like to point, however, 
that Jósefsson wrote this work with the explicit agenda of self-promotion and the dissemination 
of the sport, of which he was the figurehead. I therefore find his statements such as “very little 
change has been made as a whole since the eleventh century” to be somewhat exaggerated for 
commercial purposes.
11 Even today there are only three weight classes: Those competitors below 90 kilos, those above, 
and an open weight class where anyone of any weight may compete.
12 Jóhannes Jósefsson. Icelandic Wrestling. Akureyri: 1908. P 3. I would like to add, however, 
that I disagree with Jósefsson’s claim that the lighter-weighing contestant has no disadvantage 
against a larger opponent. Like every other combat-sport, skill can often overcome strength, but 
when two combatants of equal skill compete against one another, the significantly larger and 
stronger one will almost always have the advantage. This is a universal truth in all competitive 
grappling sports, and glíma is no exception. Perhaps Jósefsson was making this exaggerated 
claim as some sort of publicity stunt, or perhaps, as a former strongman, he had never 
experienced what it was like being the equally skilled, yet overpowered contestant.
13 The term “bragð” is used somewhat loosely and can be used to describe various grappling 
techniques, from throws and trips to sweeps.
noted, however, is that only rarely in the sagas is there any mention of specific *glíma* attire and even more rarely is there any mention of "grip-names". This is done either in vague terms, or often by expressly grabbing one another around the chest or waist. Despite there being several attested grappling encounters that are described explicitly as "*glíma*, there are others still that much more resemble traditional wrestling or grappling matches.

2) It is not permissible to beat or smite with the hands, feet, or head. Each trick must be laid without the use of strikes.

Virtually nowhere in the *fornaldarsögur* or *Íslendingasögur* are there any examples of either the hero or the vile creature he’s battling engaging in punching, biting, head-butting, eye-gouging etc. *during* any form of grappling match.\(^\text{14}\) Despite the often over-the-top violence depicted in the sagas, there seems to be a certain sanctity and adherence to sportsmanship while grappling. The easiest and often most effective means of offense while in close quarters (especially when embracing someone or being in their embrace), for example, is the head-butt. Yet none of our saga heroes ever seem to display this maneuver *while* partaking in any form of wrestling. This also holds true for hair pulling and genital-gouging. The absence of these easily performed and well-known "techniques" is a testament to the popularity not only of the notion of sportsmanship, but also to the widespread understanding of and adherence to the principals of grappling and *glíma* throughout Scandinavia. The hero can and does dispatch his foe in the most gruesome of manners, but he does so "legally" whenever in the midst of a grappling encounter. Once the grappling encounter is considered over, however, all forms of brutality can be found within the sagas.

3) A fall is counted when any part of the body above the knee or elbow touches the ground.

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\(^{14}\) Somewhat frequently, however, we read in the sagas that the hero will bite or tear out his opponent’s throat, break their spine asunder, or decapitate them. These actions are explicitly done *after* the hero’s opponent has been felled with a throw, trip, sweep, or takedown. As with modern *glíma*, the wrestling struggles in the sagas were always considered over once an opponent was felled, although on occasion, and only in recreational or non-life-and-death confrontations, a certain number of falls, usually two or three, could be agreed upon.
In numerous sagas two contestants are grappling (often with great enmity), but when either one of their knees touch the ground, the contest is immediately understood to be over. This can be clearly seen in both *Hrómundar saga Gripssonar* and in Thor’s confrontation with *Elli* in the hall of Útgarda-Loki.

4) Brotherfall (*bædrabylta*), that is, when both grapplers fall at once, does not count as a victory for either contestant.

This rule, interpreted loosely, is pervasive in the *fornaldarsögur*, and even more so throughout the *Íslendingasögur*. Although not usually mentioned by name, there is never a winner declared or presumed among the grappling combatants if both participants fall simultaneously. Either the contest continues on the ground, or less frequently, one or the other combatant gets up and finishes his opponent in a more orthodox manner.

Despite all of the inherent similarities between modern *glíma* and grappling sequences and maneuvers found in the medieval sagas, I would like to stress that the term “*glíma*” is not interchangeable in these cases. Although seemingly similar on the surface, the techniques described and performed in the sagas consistently vary in some significant degree from their modernized Icelandic forms, as I will show. I do not deny, nor should anyone, that modern *glíma* has

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Furthermore, Enoksen states that “when Thor has lost his balance, Elli puts in the final attack and uses ‘very hard tugging’ (sviptningar allhardar) which ends with that Thor ‘fell down on one knee’ (fél á kné ódrun fæti). To be victorious in glíma/fang in ancient times it seems that the fighter only had to make the opponent touch the ground with anything other than his/her feet, because Utgard’s Loki immediately “told them to stop the fight” (bad þau hætta fänginu) when Thor fell down on one knee. It is totally clear that the game is over at this point and that Thor has no right to ask anyone else in the hall for a rematch.” – Enoksen, Lars Magnar. “What does a mythological text in Snorra Edda tell us about the ritual ceremonies that surrounded glíma fights in ancient times?” P 4-5.
its origins in medieval Scandinavia. And modern *glíma* can indeed be utilized as a helpful tool in interpreting and identifying particular maneuvers and techniques in the sagas, but not nearly to the extent in which Thorsteinn Einarsson and others would like to believe.

Lastly, before analyzing specific maneuvers from the source texts, I would first like to point out the inherent difficulty in describing any sport, particularly one filled with as many minutiae as grappling. In an effort to more clearly portray some of the grappling techniques described in the *fornaldarsögur* and *Íslendingasögur*, I have added an index of figures and images at the end of this thesis. Though a thorough verbal description may suffice in most instances, the addition of a visual aid supplements, and in many ways clarifies, the written depictions. As Jóhannes Jósefsson confirms, “volumes may be written in explanation of the numerous tricks, without conveying to the reader, however, a sufficiently clear idea as to how to perform them. It is necessary to study carefully the illustrations of the various positions.”

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4. Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda

The *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, or literally “ancient sagas of the northern lands”, are customarily regarded as one of the youngest saga groups. They were primarily written during the 13\textsuperscript{th} through 15\textsuperscript{th} centuries, although they are often based off of older traditional poetry. Some of the older *fornaldarsögur* may have been written contemporarily with the *Íslendingasögur* and other classical sagas.\textsuperscript{18} The actual term *fornaldarsögur* is a fairly modern invention, however, and was first used by Carl Christian Rafn as the title of his book, published in 1829-30. This three-volume book brought together the majority of narratives preserved in Old Icelandic dealing with the early history of mainland Scandinavia before the unification of Norway under Haraldr Hárfagr\textsuperscript{i} and the settlement of Iceland.\textsuperscript{19} While many of these younger sagas have been denounced by scholars as being too fanciful, written in bad taste, and containing little of historical value, the large number of preserved manuscripts containing them is a testament to their contemporary popularity (over 1,500 individual texts in nearly 800 manuscripts).\textsuperscript{20} These sagas are also defined by their story location, where action almost exclusively takes place in far-away mythical lands, in which the heroes encounter magic, adventure, and do battle with fantastical monsters and creatures.

Despite the aforementioned hallmark traits of the *fornaldarsögur*, one cannot read from the collection and ignore the fact that grappling and *glíma* play an integral role in the sagas’ entertainment value, if not also in their plot. With a prevalent stereotype of many sagas, and particularly the *fornaldarsögur*, being that they have a “fondness for the fabulous, stock characters” and “have often been dismissed as historically unreliable and of scant artistic merit”,\textsuperscript{21} it would

be easy to dismiss many of the depictions of grappling in the sagas as merely fanciful fiction, unfounded in any sort of reality. The fact that many of the heroes and champions can jump as far forward as backward, are the most handsome men in the land, kill swaths of berserkers and giants, and are the best in their kingdoms and countries at all forms of sport and competition does not help dispel this stereotype. I would like to posit, however, that in regards to realistic and accurate depictions of grappling, and the display of scribal knowledge about the sport of grappling and glíma, that this stereotype could not be further from the truth. On the contrary, whereas the modern reader or scholar may gloss over the sagas’ depictions of grappling and compartmentalize them in the realm of tasteless fantasy and fictional-filler, the descriptions are, in fact, extremely accurate, detailed, and quite realistic. As opposed to the modern reader, the medieval contemporary audiences would have had a much fuller understanding of the back-and-forths of the grappling matches being described, and also understood the intricacies of the various maneuvers being performed.22 This can be ascertained indirectly from several revealing aspects of the sagas and their grappling sequences that I will investigate further on.

4.1. Gríms saga loðinkinna

An example from the sagas that helps elucidate the grappling expertise and familiarity that I posit the original scribe and his contemporary audience would have been privy to can be found if we take a look at the 14th century Gríms saga loðinkinna (The Saga of Grim Shaggy-cheek). In this rather short saga we have

22 This can be ascertained from various passages in the sagas such as: “Time went by until the Hegranes Assembly came around in the spring. A great gathering from all the districts which the assembly covered attended it… Some young men said that the weather was fine and pleasant, and that it would do them good to arrange wrestling matches and entertainment. Everyone agreed that this was a good idea and went to sit down near the booths.” - Scudder, Bernard. trans. “The Saga of Grettir The Strong.” The Complete Sagas of Icelanders. Vol. II. Reykjavik: Leifur Eiriksson, 1997. 160-161. Print. The Old Icelandic passage can be found here: Guðni Jónsson, ed. "Grettis saga." Íslenzk Fornrit. Vol. VII. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1936. 229-230. Print.
an interesting passage dealing with a grappling contest between the hero Grím and a troll-woman. The passage reads as follows:

Þá spratt Hýrja kerling upp og rann á hann, og töku þau að glíma, og var þeirra atgangur bæði harður og langur, því að hún var íð mesta tröll, en Grímur var rammur að aflí. En þó lauk svo, að hann brá henni á loftmjöðm, svo að hún fell.

[Then the woman Fiery jumped up and ran at him, and they wrestled hard and long, for she was a big huge troll, and Grim a powerful man. But the upshot was, he caught her out and threw her over his hip so she fell.] 24

I would first like to point out, as is not uncommon, that in this saga the hero, Grím, is outsized and overpowered by his large trollish opponent. We also read that “they fought/wrestled hard and long” (og var þeirra atgangur bæði harður og langur), which anyone familiar with grappling or glíma would naturally interpret as a struggle for position, wrist-control, and a firm grip. 25 As can be seen from the above passage, however, he does not utilize his strength alone to defeat her, but rather uses a hip-throw to fell his opponent. To someone unfamiliar with the physics behind grappling, and more specifically throws, this passage serves as little more than a vague description of the hero struggling against and eventually overcoming his troll opponent. To a learned grappler, however, as the scribe and contemporary audience would most likely have been, this brief passage is full of important details that pertain to how, and in what manner, the hero specifically outwrestles his trollish enemy.

First, as I touched upon above, despite the hero being described as “rammur að aflí” (being of “enormous of power”), his opponent is a “mesta tröll”, or “the greatest troll”. We can take this to mean that, although Grim is powerful, his opponent is even more so, as well as larger. I would also note here that the original text uses the specific term “glíma” to describe their engagement. This

25 Virtually all grappling encounters begin with a struggle between the two participants for a dominant position or grip, with the exception of when one combatant shoots-in, thereby bypassing any necessity for proper grips. Especially in sanctioned glíma bouts, both participants are forbidden to even begin grappling or trying to throw each other until both get a particular grip on one another.
point, in conjunction with their size difference and the fact that Grím eventually “throws” his opponent with a “loftmjöðm”, would suggest that Grím did not overpower his foe, but instead used a technique that required strength rather than his hips to throw, or move, his opponent “so that she fell”. Given this information I can, and it can be presumed the grappling-savvy intended audience of the story could as well, confidently identify the maneuver being described as a hip-throw variant, or more specifically as something very similar to the Right Hip-Swing still practiced in **glíma** today.28

The standard hip-throw is accomplished by facing your opponent, holding them either around their chest, with both arms under theirs (called double underhooks), or with one arm under their arm, and one arm over (having an underhook and an overhook).29 It can also be done while holding one of your opponent’s wrists, and then having an under or overhook with your other arm. Once any of these grips are secured, you should turn your body while putting your right hip to your opponent’s right thigh (or your left hip to your opponent’s left thigh), and proceed to bend your body at a 90-degree angle forward and to the left. If done properly, this will cause your opponent to turn about in the air, pivoting over your hip, and landing on their back (See Figures 1-3). As one can

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26 **Brá**, as used in the text, is a past tense form of **bregða**, which most commonly means “to cause to move quickly”, but can also be used in conjunction with **loft** to mean “to lift one aloft”. **Bregða**, in regards to describing **glíma** interactions, may also often mean “to throw”.  
27 Maintaining a lower center of gravity than your opponent is a central foundation of almost all forms of grappling around the world.  
28 This maneuver is also very similar to judo’s **uchi mata**, except without the wearing of a gi, the traditional combat attire of both judo and jiu-jitsu.  
29 Due to its popularity and versatility, there are actually several less common grips and variations of the set up for a hip-throw. The above-stated options, however, are by far the most commonly practiced, and therefore the most likely to have been known to the scribe and intended audience.
imagine, there are many variations to this move, but given the details in *Gríms saga loðínkinna* this is almost certainly the way in which the maneuver was done, or at least how it was supposed to be envisioned by the reader.

The use of vocabulary, phrasing, and terminology such as “*glíma*”, “*og var þeirra atgangur bæði harður og langur*” and “*að hann brá henni á loftmjöðm*” imply that the scribe was not only knowledgeable about both specific grappling techniques and the back-and-forth format of grappling encounters, but that he also assumed that his intended audience would be familiar with the terminology. As there is no explanation of the maneuvers given in the text, which is otherwise replete with graphic detail, we can take this to mean that the scribe, knowledgeable himself about at least the basics of grappling, assumed his audience to be equally so. Furthermore, in regards to the hip-throw, or Right Hip-Swing, Jóhannes Jósefsson states when it is “done in this way success is sure, and the fall is softer, in that the overcomer has perfect power over the outcome.”

This implies that one can be “gentlemanly” with this throw, as done in sport, or put strength behind it and use it to forcibly slam one’s opponent, as is often depicted in the *fornaldarsögur* and *Íslendingasögur*.

4.2. *Göngu-Hrólf’s saga*

Another fine example of grappling prowess in the *fornaldarsögur* can be found in *Göngu-Hrólf’s saga*. Although there are several instances of *glíma* and grappling in this particular saga, the one which I find most realistic and pertinent to analyze is as follows:

Þeir glímdu ok eigi lengi, áðr Hrólfr vá Hrafn upp á bringu sér ok færði niðr, svá at hann lá lengi í óviti, en af gekk skinnit af herðarblöðunum. [They hadn’t been

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wrestling long before Hrolf lifted Hrafn against his chest, then threw him down flat, scraping the skin off his shoulders and knocking him unconscious.]\(^{32}\)

Here we have described for us another maneuver that to the untrained eye may seem like a generic “slam” of no technical import. Once again, however, the author uses the precise term “glímdu” (as opposed to a vague term for fighting or quarrelling), and gives the grappling-educated audience enough details of the maneuver being performed to accurately identify it. In this instance, the technique depicted would most convincingly be identified as the Inverted Split Trick, or a belly-to-belly slam\(^{33}\). To begin with, one of the only ways (and by far the most common) in which one could lift one’s opponent against his/her chest would be with the aforementioned double underhooks.\(^{34}\) Once the initiator has clasped both hands underneath their opponent’s arms or around their mid to lower back, they would make sure that their center of gravity, i.e., their hips, were lower than their opponent’s. They would then straighten-out their own posture by bringing their hips forward, effectively bringing their opponent upwards and towards themselves, effectively lifting their opponent off the ground. Once the opponent is suspended in such a manner, they are virtually at the mercy of the initiator, who may wish to either sweep their opponent’s legs out from under them with one of their own legs, while pulling the opponent sharply downwards towards the respective side that their legs were swept from, or hurl them backwards over their own head in a maneuver called the overhead belly-to-belly suplex (which I will address later). Referring to the former of these options, if done harshly, the opponent would be slammed with significant force into the ground, with one or both of their shoulders hitting the ground first (especially if the slam is performed with the above-mentioned double-overhook technique, although this is still quite possible with a double or single-underhook

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*I would translate the last section as “so that he laid long in unconsciousness, scraping the skin off his shoulders”.

\(^{33}\) This maneuver, and several similarly-described ones, appears in several sagas with numerous variations. For similar accounts of belly-to-belly suplexes, see the grappling sequences described in Svarfdæla saga, Gunnars saga Keldagnúpsflís, and Finnboga saga ramma.

\(^{34}\) It is possible to perform this maneuver with only a single underhook or even double overhooks, but doing so proves far more difficult, and is therefore significantly less common.
grasp as well), thus scraping with a great amount of friction along the ground as the slam is followed through (See Figures 4-7). This maneuver could easily lead to an unconscious-like state in one of two ways: either the opponent's head would hit and bounce off the ground shortly after, or simultaneously with, their shoulders, or the impact of the slam could be so great as to knock the wind out of the opponent, who would become stunned and virtually paralyzed until he/she could regain his/her breath.

I would also like to note here that I take some issue with the English translation of this brief passage. As opposed to the original scribes and intended contemporary audiences, who I believe would have had a more culturally inherent understanding of the sport of grappling, many of the finer subtleties of the art of grappling can be lost on the modern translator who lacks sufficient familiarity with the sport of grappling. The translation of “færði niðr” as “threw him down flat” implies to the reader that the opponent, Hrafn, landed flatly on his back, which is virtually impossible from a technical standpoint given the other details of how the maneuver was initiated and ended. “Færði niðr” can also simply translate to “brought down”, and therefore leaves the maneuver used more open for accurate interpretation. Although details like this may seem trivial to a linguistically orientated translator, the contemporary audience, and indeed fans of wrestling and grappling in general, would be confused by such translations. Indeed, such loose or faulty translations also take away from the perceived quality of the narrative as a whole. With one of my primary aims being to depict and help accurately visualize the many gripping grappling scenes within the sagas to readers unfamiliar with grappling techniques, the importance of having clear and accurate translations is paramount.

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35 Jóhannes Jósefsson describes this maneuver, the Inverted Split Trick, with a slight variation: After that the right foot has been put into position, the knee touching the inner part of the opponent’s thigh, a lift from the floor is given, while the attacker bends himself backwards as much as he can, and suddenly swings himself to the left. (Jóhannes Jósefsson, 1908. 20).
4.3. *Hálfdanar saga Eysteinssonar*

Another *fornaldarsaga* that contains some interesting and informative grappling sequences is *Hálfdanar saga Eysteinssonar*. This saga is filled with almost comedic amounts of gore and violence, and the hero has the tendency to grapple with several grotesque characters and creatures. There are two grappling altercations in the saga that I find it particularly fruitful to analyze. First let us look at the passage where Hálfdan battles the giant Sel:

> Greip hann þá til Hálfdanar ok kreisti svá fast at síðum hans, at blóð fell út um eyru hans ok nasir. Hálfdan lék þá Sel hælkrók, ok fell hann á bak aprtr.36 [He grabbed at Halfdan and squeezed his side so hard, that blood came out of his eyes and nostrils. Halfdan then hit Sel with a knee-crook, and he fell backwards.]37

This exchange begins with the rather unrealistic depiction of our hero Hálfdan getting squeezed so hard that blood begins to flow from his ears and nose. Although this “death-clutch” may seem implausible, it could nonetheless be performed if the aggressor possessed the impressive amount of required strength. In the instance of this example the aggressor is a giant, who by nature would possess the hypothetical strength necessary to perform such a fantastical maneuver. Allowing sufficient strength, he could simply wrap his arms around the center of the victim’s torso, such that his own elbows are on either side of the victim, and clench his hands in what is known as the gable-grip (See Figure 8). Next the initiator would simply need to squeeze with a great amount of force while pulling his hands towards himself and trying to bring his elbows together. This could in turn break the recipient’s floating ribs, potentially causing death. Or, more dramatically, this could cause the victim to lose blood through their nose and ears. The sagas actually commonly use the verb “*hrygg-spenna*”, which

means “to clasp the arms round another’s back”\textsuperscript{38}. This clutch is commonly used in conjunction with putting one’s chin into their opponent’s chest or ribcage, which in turn causes them either to submit in excruciating pain, or more likely, to fall backwards or give up their grip or position.

From a technical standpoint, however, I am far more interested in the later half of this confrontation, where “Hálfdan lék pá Sel hælkrók, ok fell hann á bak aptr”. Here, as in the previous example from Göngu-Hrólfs saga, I once again take issue with the English translation of the passage. As seen above, this portion is often read in English as “Halfdan then hit Sel with a knee-crook, and he fell backwards”. “Lék” in Old Icelandic is a past tense form of “leika”, to play, or in this instance to perform, trick, or bewitch. Furthermore, I am unfamiliar with what a “knee-crook” is, and unfortunately the passage does not give the reader enough details about the grappling sequence to properly infer what sort of maneuver is being performed, other than the fact that he, presumably Sel, falls backwards from it. Fortunately for us, “knee-crook” is not at all an accurate translation of “hælkrók”, which is a compound word consisting of Old Icelandic “heel” and “hook”. As it turns out, a “heel-hook” is a popular and attested traditional maneuver used in glíma, similar to an inside leg-trip in modern grappling.\textsuperscript{39} The heel-hook is performed while facing your opponent (as Hálfdan clearly would be if he were being clutched as described above) and by hooking your right leg around the inside or outside of your opponent’s left leg/heel (or vice versa), and then pulling their hooked leg towards you while pushing their upper body away (See Figures 9-12). To maximize their opponent’s imbalance, the instigator of the maneuver would also try to keep his chest and/or head pressed against his opponent for the duration of the technique. This results in the opponent losing their balance, and falling away from the instigator, onto their back. This maneuver fits perfectly the Old Icelandic description of the confrontation. With these translation errors elucidated, we can now clearly see that Hálfdan did not “hit Sel with a knee-crook”, but rather he “performed a heel-


\textsuperscript{39} The Heel-hook, or “hælkrók” throw used in glíma is not to be confused with the heel hook used in modern grappling, which is a foot-lock submission that targets the opponent’s ankle and knee ligaments.
hook” on Sel. This brief yet precise description would be quite clear to most contemporary readers or audience members, and through the use of the specific maneuver’s name, allows the author of the saga to explain a rather intricate altercation in easily understood terms. Moreover, the explicit use of a maneuver’s name, i.e., “hælkrók” should help to further convince us that the scribe believed his intended audience to have an understanding of grappling to such a degree that they were expected to be able to identify and visualize grappling maneuvers done in sequences by their title alone, with little other peripheral information.

I would argue that another very real maneuver that is performed in the otherwise supernatural Hálfdanar saga Eysteinssonar is the single-leg takedown, described here:

Hálfdan greip hana upp ok rak hana níðr fall mikit ok greip síðan í annan fótinn á henni ok reif hana sundr at endilöngu ok kastar henni síðan út fyrir dyrr.40

[Halfdan picked her up, and pushed her down violently, and then grabbed her other foot, and tore her apart from one end to the other, and then cast her out of the door.]41

In this description the audience must apply some critical thinking to the situation in order to make any sense of what maneuver is plausibly being described. We know that the (troll) woman is picked up, slammed down with great might, and then apparently pulled apart by her feet. Once again, this rather absurd series of events seems to make little to no sense to the modern common observer, but once some grappling acuity is applied to the situation, a very possible and plausible solution presents itself. In this situation I would postulate that the only technique liable to explain this scenario is a single-leg takedown. Such a takedown is performed by grasping your opponent’s leg, behind the knee, with your opposite arm (i.e., grab his/her left leg with your right arm). Once this is done, draw his/her knee towards your body in an upward motion, while

straightening your posture and bringing your hips forward, so as to get your center of gravity below his/her hips. From here you can use your strength to lift your opponent up into the air (enabling you to slam them down in any number of manners), or jerk their captured leg sharply in a downward motion, while bending over at a 90-degree angle, to the side in which their leg is captured, bringing them to the ground. Either of these common variants would sufficiently fit this description thus far. Additionally, the single-leg takedown would also allow the maneuver’s initiator to maintain a firm hold on the opponent’s leg once the opponent is on their back (See Figures 13-16). This would leave Hálfdan standing with one of the woman’s legs still in his grasp, allowing him to, rather impressively, then grab her other foot and tear her apart “from one end to the other”. I would not, however, dare to put forth a possible method as to how this feat could be performed!

4.4. Sörla saga sterka

A fornalðarsaga that exemplifies the apparent diversity of grappling knowledge inherent in the contemporary Scandinavians’ minds is Sörla saga sterka (The Saga of Sorli the Strong). This saga is filled with melees and grappling, but the maneuver I wish to extrapolate upon appears twice, and can be somewhat enigmatic at first glance. The technique is described both here:

Nú snærist Þórir við Bólverki, greip sinni hendi um hvárn fót á honum ok slengdi honum niðr, svá at hausinn brotnaði í smámola.42 [Now Thorir turned toward Bolverk, grabbed each foot with his hands, and threw him down, so that his skull broke into tiny pieces.]43

And here:

<http://www.germanicmythology.com/FORNALDARSAGAS/SorliStrekaHardman.html>
Spratt nú Svalr fimliga á fætr, greip sinni hendi um hvárnfót Ívari ok slengdi honum niðr, svá at haussinn brotnaði í smátt.\(^{44}\) [Svalr then sprang nimbly to his feet, grasped his hands around each of Ivar's feet, and threw him down, so that his skull broke into small pieces.]\(^{45}\)

Once again the maneuver is described in a rather flamboyant fashion, complete with seemingly inhuman strength and excessive carnage, emphasizing the entertainment value of these stories. We may also see, once again, that the move is somewhat vaguely described in both instances, and may seem quite illogical or improbable. Even with assumed superhuman strength, it is hard to picture in one’s mind the particulars of how to grab a (presumably) standing man’s feet, and throw him down. For clarity’s sake, and because the description is slightly more detailed, I will analyze the second of the passages above to interpret what grappling technique was most likely being described.

We know from the passage that Svalr grasps around both of Ivar’s feet, and summarily throws him down. Let us start by assuming from a purely logical standpoint that Ivar is standing, as throwing someone “down” who is already lying down is certainly not what the author could have reasonably intended the audience to imagine. As mentioned above, this does not make particular tactical or physical sense. Here once more, as often appears to be the case, the translation has not maintained the original text’s true meaning. It must be noted that Old Icelandic “fót” can mean either “foot” or “leg”. If we take the later meaning, “leg”, and apply it to this situation, it suddenly seems much more plausible to pick a standing man up by wrapping one’s arms around both of his legs, perhaps at the knees or around the thighs, than by grabbing his feet. Furthermore, the Old Icelandic word “slengdi” can indeed translate to “threw”, but also to “slung” or “swung”, either of which would more aptly describe what is happening in this sequence. With these terms in mind, the above depicted maneuver no longer seems implausible or vague, but instead almost perfectly fits the description of a double-leg takedown: a wrestling maneuver almost any

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grappling sportsman since antiquity would be familiar with. A more detailed description of the double-leg takedown is as follows: First, the attacker would attain a low center of gravity by lowering their waist, while still maintaining an upright posture. Next, they would close the distance between themselves and the target by “shooting”, i.e., stepping their lead leg deeply in between the target’s legs (See Figure 21). After achieving sufficient penetration, the attacker then wraps his arms around and behind the target’s legs, often behind the knees, and may choose to clasp his hands together to ensure a firm hold. From here, the assailant can easily lift the target up onto one of his/her shoulders (See Figure 22-23), and put him down with varying degrees of force either to the same side from which he lifted him, or can pull the victim’s legs backwards and downward (See Figure 24-25), thus “slinging” the victim’s back and head violently into the ground. I presume this later variant is what is being executed in the above passages, as suggested by the shattered and broken skulls of the victims. It must also be inferred, due to both the lack of supporting details and terminology, that the scribe and audience must have known what maneuver was being performed (for example, that Ivar was not being thrown by the feet, from the ground, but rather that he was in an upright position, and being grabbed around the legs, in a double-leg takedown-like scenario).

I would also like to point out at this juncture that the vast majority of the aforementioned moves, regardless of the level of detail in which they are described, are grappling and wrestling maneuvers. Although these maneuvers do in some cases have obvious counter-parts in traditional and sanctioned glíma, as they are described in the source texts, the modern reader must admit that they are not explicitly glíma techniques, per se, but rather that they are prevalent and customary wrestling and grappling techniques. More precisely, of all of the excerpts that I have analyzed above, and indeed among the majority of the fornaldarsaga corpus as a whole, there is virtually no mention of either traditional glíma attire or grips. What throws and techniques from the

46 For a more detailed example of shooting for a takedown in the sagas, see the later example from Hávarðar saga Ísfirðinga.
fornaldarsögur that can be attributed to the sport of glíma find, without exception, counterparts in the broader world of grappling. Likewise, more often than not these technique’s descriptions better fit those of wrestling and grappling maneuvers, in both context and in details, than they do traditional or modern glíma techniques.
5. Íslendingasögur

Unlike the Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda, the Íslendingasögur, also known as The Sagas of Icelanders or as family sagas, take place primarily in Iceland and Scandinavia, and, although the heroes often travel abroad, they tend to avoid the fantastical lands and realms that the heroes of the fornaldarsögur so frequently frequented. In a similar fashion, despite generally being older works of literature than the fornaldarsögur, the Íslendingasögur’s heroes are generally Icelandic farmers and chieftains as opposed to princes and heroes of legendary descent, and as a result many of the over-the-top fantastical elements associated with the Legendary Sagas are found to be quite scaled-back in the Íslendingasögur. This more “grounded” theme in the family sagas is also reflected in their critical literary reception, where they have been touted as “the crowning achievement of medieval narrative art in Scandinavia”.47 a stark contrast to the fornaldarsögur’s “scant artistic merit”.48 This knack for stoic realism can be seen not only in the heroes’ travels, battles, and adventures, but also in the sagas’ grappling sequences.

As with the fornaldarsögur, there are scenes replete with examples of specific grappling scenarios, sequences, techniques, and maneuvers found within the Íslendingasögur. Yet these scenes are often more realistic and plausible in their descriptions, and, following the general localized character of the family sagas as a whole, more customarily depicted than their legendary counterparts. One possible reason for this perceived realism is that, as with the family saga literature as a whole, the anonymous author’s credibility was based off of his ability to relate (or convince his audience that he was relating) events exactly as they happened.49 This pursuit of verifiable detail and credibility perhaps bled-

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49 Or, as Kellogg puts it, “[the author] derives his authorial authority not from the originality of his style or story but from its fidelity to the events themselves, or to others’ accounts of them and their judgments on those who were involved.” Kellogg, Robert. Ed. The Complete Sagas of Icelanders. Vol. I. Reykjavik: Leifur Eiríksson, 1997. xxxiv. Print.
over into the accounts of grappling, which, as opposed to the legendary sagas, often plays a central role in the plots of the sagas. The grappling scenarios in the *Íslendingasögur* also tend to play out more like complete scenes rather than brief anecdotes. One effect this pursuit of veracity has had on the sagas is that the grappling sequences are generally more realistically described and can therefore be envisioned, and with greater ease, by the readers and audience.

A further result of this scribal pursuit of veracity is that *glíma* proponents and experts such as Thorsteinn Einarsson and M. Bennett Nichols have focused their gaze somewhat predominantly upon the family sagas, as opposed to the *fornaldarsögur*. They do so because these sagas are not only more prone to having examples of “proper” *glíma* grips, but also often have grappling and wrestling encounters that are depicted in traditional grappling locations with traditional *glíma* rules, and are for the most part between two human combatants. These facts, in conjunction with the often pro-Icelandic sentiments generally given off by the sagas, have made the *Íslendingasögur* prime source material not only for those who wish to research medieval Scandinavian grappling, but also for those who wish to compare and contrast detailed grappling techniques of the past to modern maneuvers.

### 5.1. *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*

In the *Íslendingasaga Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* we are treated to a rather intricate grappling scene that serves as a microcosm of some of the hallmarks of grappling within the larger corpus of *Íslendingasögur*. The excerpt is as follows:

> Hann gekk í glímur við þá kaupmennina og gekk þeim illa við hann. Þá varð komið saman fangi með þeim Gunnlaugi. Óg um nóttina áður hét Þóður á Þór til sigurs sér. Óg um daginn er þeir fundust tóku þeir til glímu. Þá laust Gunnlaugur báða fæturna undan Þórði og felldi hann mikið fall en fóturinn Gunnlaugs stökk
úr liði, sá er hann stóð á, og fél Gunnlaug þá með Þórði. [He was always challenging the merchants at wrestling, and they generally came off worst against him. Then a bout was arranged between him and Gunnlaug, and the night before, Thord called upon Thor to bring him victory. When they met the next day, they began to wrestle. Gunnlaug swept both Thord’s legs out from under him, and his opponent fell down hard, but the ankle of the leg Gunnlaug’s weight was resting on twisted out of joint, and he fell down with Thord.]

This scene, though relatively brief, is ripe with intricate and important details whose understanding and interpretation is essential to the identification of what grappling maneuver is being performed. Furthermore, we can notice right away that the scene does not follow the simple equation of “hero meets monster, grapples against said monster, and defeats it”. Rather, the scene is better integrated into the flow of the saga, and, despite still being an anecdotal incident in the larger story, we are given some situational and circumstantial details that lend credibility to the exchange. First of all, we notice that Thord is a human being, that he has a reputation for being aggressive and challenging merchants to wrestling, and that he generally wins these challenges. Already his character is flushed out for us somewhat, and we are not told simply that he is strong and powerful, but can instead infer that he is a skilled and knowledgeable wrestler, if not also a scoundrel. We even learn that he calls upon Thor for victory, a detail whose primary purpose may be to lend depth and credibility to the grappling sequence, and tale as a whole, that is to follow. This example, however, is by no means an outlier, as these sorts of small credence-lending details are quite commonplace in the Ísleindasögur.

With some contextual subtleties pointed out, let us now look at the more technical grappling aspects of the passage. We can read “tóku þeir til glímu/they took to wrestling”, with no additional contextual or positional information, and can conclude that the two men are facing one another, engaging in grappling. We then read: “Þá laust Gunnlaugur báða fæturna undan Þórði og felldi hann mikið

fall”, which is described in quite loose terminology. As can be seen from the above translation, “laust” has been read as “swept”, but could just as easily, or perhaps more appropriately, be understood as “freed”, “loosened” or “removed”. With this understanding, Gunnlaug “frees” or “sweeps” both of Thord’s legs from beneath him (Thord), causing Thord to be on the receiving end of a great fall. Virtually all “falls” require the recipient’s legs to be removed from beneath them, so this leaves the listener/reader with several possibilities as to how to envision the precise way in which Thord was felled. Þorsteinn Einarsson, in his book Próun glímu i íslensku þjóðlífi, states that the maneuver being described here is either a leggjarbragð or hælkrókur52. Although I agree with Einarsson that these two maneuvers are possible candidates for the technique being described, it does not appear that he took into account the remainder of the passage in his analysis of the situation. Furthermore, Einarsson seems to take for granted that these two combatants are using proper, rather modern glíma grips, and are also wearing the appropriate attire to utilize such grips, which seems like somewhat of a stretch of one’s imagination considering that there is no such mention of either grips or attire in the passage.

The key to understanding and interpreting this otherwise enigmatic exchange is revealed to us in the remainder of the sentence, in which we learn that while performing the thus far indecipherable and broadly-described maneuver, Gunnlaug twists out of joint the ankle of the leg on which his weight was resting upon, and proceeds to fall down with Thord. Although this may seem at first to be a detail that only serves to relate an injury acquired by the hero during the altercation, an astute grappler can use this information to accurately visualize a very plausible grappling scenario, and therefore identify the maneuver being performed by Gunnlaug.

Assuming, as previously discussed, that Gunnlaug and Thord are facing each other and have “taken to grappling”, we can now determine that, whatever maneuver Gunnlaug used to fell Thord, one of Gunnlaug’s feet was firmly planted

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on the ground. This fact alone greatly limits the possibilities of potential maneuvers being performed. For example, the vast majority of single-leg takedowns, hip-throws, and slams require both feet to be firmly planted, and those hip-throws which leave the initiator on one foot do so in a manner such that the foot is firmly rooted, and unlikely to slip or twist. We can therefore surmise that the action being performed by Gunnlaug is more of a trip involving a sweep-like movement, or maneuver that requires a “shooting-in” action in which one’s own weight is put primarily on one foot. With this information in mind, there are only a few plausible possibilities for which maneuver is being described. I find Einarsson’s suggestion of the hælkrókur to be reasonable, but I posit, as evidenced by Gunnlaug’s twisted ankle, that the most likely maneuver being performed is a variation of the double-leg takedown. During the execution of this technique there are several opportunities in which the assailant could potentially slip and/or twist their ankle. First, when the assailant “shoots in”, he/she puts all of their weight on their own lead foot while driving forward. If this first step-in is done improperly, i.e., the foot is not firmly planted, the ankle is not locked in a straight position, the ground is not level etc., the ensuing addition of the entirety of the assailant’s own body weight could easily cause a very damaging self-inflicted ankle-twist. Furthermore, assuming that the “shoot-in” is successful, it often happens that the defender will try to maintain balance and/or escape the takedown in what is known as a sprawl (See Figures 26-28).

It can be reasonably assumed that Thord would attempt to sprawl, as it is a common and natural defensive maneuver, and Thord himself is described as a well-practiced wrestler (Hann gekk í glímur við þá kaúmmennina og gekk þeim illa við hann). When one’s opponent attempts to sprawl, especially during a double-leg takedown scenario, the primary countering maneuver is to clasp one’s arms around their opponent’s waist, thighs, or knees. After doing this, the assailant should then plant their outside foot firmly, and drive and turn sharply

53 See detailed description of the double-leg takedown above.
54 The sprawl is a wrestling/martial arts defensive technique that is done to defend oneself from various takedown attempts, most often single or double-leg takedowns. To sprawl, one tries to scoot/push their own legs backwards and away from their opponent, who is trying to grasp them either around their waist or their thighs/knees/legs, resulting in the defender landing on the upper back and shoulders area of the opponent attempting the takedown.
to their left (if one’s head is on the right side of the opponent), thus circling somewhat to the side of or behind their opponent, which in turn would knock the opponent off-balance sideways as opposed to backwards, thus preventing their feet from supporting them if they attempt a sprawl. During this driving movement it is not uncommon for the initiator of the double-leg (Gunnlaug in this example) to twist or sprain their “driving leg” while trying to drive the opponent to the ground, because the outside leg that is posting off of the ground is pushed out sideways rather than in a forwardly fashion, and therefore quite susceptible to a lateral twist or sprain. Regardless of whether or not the initiator of the double-leg takedown twists their ankle, if the takedown is successful, as it was is Gunnlaug’s case, then the initiator will end up either standing at or between their opponent’s feet, or falling on top of or simultaneously with their opponent, in an advantageous position. The later is what would surely happen in a scenario in which the instigator of the takedown snaps their ankle asunder, which fits the passage’s description nicely. In the double-leg takedown scenario I have described (with the inclusion of the likely sprawl attempt) we have the two combatants facing one another, a double-leg takedown attempt being successfully attempted, the opponent falling in a harsh manner, along with the takedown instigator, and a severely twisted ankle being acquired on the side of the initiator of the takedown: all of which can be attested to and surmised from the details given to us in the original text. We can then safely assume that this (or a reasonably similar) common sequence of grappling events is what was meant to be envisioned between Gunnlaug and Thord.

Admittedly, it is of course possible that the grappling sequence described was either written in an intentionally vague manner, or that the scribe describing the scenario was not well versed in grappling, and therefore penned some vague grappling account of no technical import. This perfectly plausible scenario, however, would not alter the fact that the assumedly grappling savvy contemporary Icelandic audience would still “fill-in-the-blanks” on their own, and come to a conclusion about the grappling scenario similar to the one which I have posited.
5.2. Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss

*Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss* (Bard’s Saga) is another *Íslendingasaga* which contains several accounts and descriptions of grappling. Among the eight or so significant grappling encounters found within the saga, there is one in particular that I would like to analyze and break down for the modern reader. In this particular example, we are given a couple of precise details during the grappling confrontation that can be interpreted as evidence that, once again, the scribe and/or original intended audience were expected to have a certain level of inherent grappling-acuity in order to accurately comprehend and appreciate the intricacies of the maneuver being performed. It reads as follows:

Gestur og Gljúfra-Geir gengust fast að og lauk svo að Gestur leiddi hann á mjöðm og brá honum á loft með svo miklu afli að höfuðið kom fyrst niður á honum svo hart að haussinn brotnaði í smán mola og var dauður innan lítils tíma.\(^{55}\) [Gest and Gljúfra-Geir went at it at once, and it happened that Gest got him across his hip, raising him aloft with such great force that he came down head first so hard that his head broke into small bits; he was dead a short time later.]\(^{56}\)

Despite the somewhat outlandish description of this sequence, it should be rather apparent to the reader that Gest used his hips to somehow violently throw Gljúfra-Geir to the ground, in a fashion similar to the earlier description I have given about the way in which the hero in *Gríms saga loðinkinna* fells his foe. In this example “*Gestur leiddi hann á mjöðm*” can be most probably read as “Gest laid/dragged/pulled him across (his) hips”, which nicely fits the fundamental description of most hip-throws. Gest then proceeds to throw, or move, Gljúfra-Geir into the air so powerfully and violently that his head hits the ground, before the rest of his body, and shatters. Einarsson once again plausibly identifies the maneuver being performed, and argues that it was any one of the following


traditional *glíma* hip-throw variants: the *lausamjöðn*, the *mjaðmarbragð*, or the *loftmjöðn*.57 Once again, however, in order to perform these maneuvers Einarsson conveniently assumes that the combatants were wearing some sort of proper and traditional *glíma* attire: an assumption which once again cannot be inferred from the passage or surrounding saga. Einarsson also, once again, makes no mention of the later portion of the selected passage in his identification of the maneuver at hand.

Although I agree that the described technique is indeed a hip-throw of sorts, much can be deduced by the fact that Gljufra-Geir lands on his head first, as opposed to either his shoulders or his back: A detail that, according to the list of plausible moves he has suggested, Einarsson seems not to have taken into account. The fact that Gljufra-Geir lands head-first doesn’t simply serve as an excuse for the author to describe some explicit gore, but also functions as a very detailed and revealing description of the precise maneuver being performed by the hero’s son, Gest. With Einarsson’s suggested maneuvers, particularly if they were performed using “proper” *glíma* grips and attire, there is no tenable reason that Gljufra-Geir wouldn’t brace his landing with either or both of his arms and/or hands. Rather, I would suggest that Gest, while facing his opponent, should be understood to have had an underhook on one of Gljufra-Geir’s arms, while holding/trapping either Gljufra-Geir’s wrist or elbow with his other arm/hand. From this positioning, Gest would then have performed the conventional hip-throw movements (as previously described), with the variance of, while pivoting and bending his own body at a 90-degree angle in order to raise Gljufra-Geir off of the ground, Gest in this instance would simultaneously pull Gljufra-Geir’s arm and wrist that he has a hold of downwards and towards himself. This sharp pull of Gljufra-Geir’s arm would, in conjunction with the swivel of Gest’s own hips, cause Gljufra-Geir’s head to be pulled sharply downwards by the momentum of the throw and the weight of his own body, while simultaneously preventing him from intentionally or instinctively breaking his fall with what would otherwise have been his free hand. The result of this

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technique, it is not hard to imagine, is the defender’s head being slammed into the ground with the force of the throw and the two combatants’ combined body-weight behind it, easily culminating in a fractured skull, as described in the saga passage. Another alternative, although very similar, interpretation of this very passage is that Gest performed what is commonly referred to as a head-throw (See Figures 29-31), which replicates almost all the movements of the hip-throw as described above with the difference that Gest’s arm that was underhooking Gljufra-Geir’s arm would instead be around the neck of Gljufra-Geir. Once again, it is possible to imagine that the original scribe did not, in fact, have any grappling background or knowledge. Even so, that would change neither the kinetics nor the inevitability that, in order for Gljufra-Geir to land as he did, the above-mentioned maneuver would have to be performed as described.

Shortly after this altercation, there is another passage of some interest to the grappling-inclined. Due to both the nature of the technique being described, and in particular the scribe’s choice of vocabulary, I find the following passage to bolster, rather than detract from, the idea that the initial scribe did indeed have at least some functional knowledge and understanding of grappling. The passage reads as follows:

Í því kom Gestur að og þreif í hjassann á Kolbirni en setti hnéin í bakið svo hart að þegar gekk úr hálsiðinum.\(^{58}\) [At that moment Gest came, grabbed the hair of Kolbjorn, and put his knees into his back so forcefully that his neck was dislocated as a result.]

From Anderson’s English translation of this passage, we can surmise that Gest plants his knee in Kolbjorn’s back, pulls Kolbjorn’s head back by the hair, and breaks his (Kolbjorn’s) neck. Anderson, however, seems to have translated the Old Icelandic “hjassann” as “(the) hair”, whereas I would argue from both a grammatical and logical standpoint that “hjassann” is more likely an alternate


form of “hjarsi/hjarsann”, which means “the top of the head”.\textsuperscript{60} In conjunction with the use of “hjassann” as the top of one’s head, the saga also uses the somewhat unusual verb “þreif” to describe the motion by which Gest “grabs” Kolbjorn’s head. This word, “þreif”, does not, however, simply mean to grab, but is instead a more vague term meaning “to feel with the hand”, or “to grope along”.\textsuperscript{61} To the grappler’s mind, the motion of “feeling” or “groping” along someone’s head or body immediately conjures up the image of searching for and/or tightening a grip on one’s opponent. In this particular case, as the human head does not have many natural crevices on which to grasp onto, and considering the author’s specific use of “hjassann”/”top of the head”, it can be reasonably inferred that Gest, who has already shown the reader/audience that he is a veteran grappler, used a grip of sorts\textsuperscript{62} to secure Kolbjorn’s head before putting his knee into Kolbjorn’s back and pulling or twisting his neck until it was dislocated.

With the definition of the aforementioned words clarified, we can see that Gest did not barbarously pull on the hair of Kolbjorn, but that he rather more plausibly (and no less barbarously) grasped around the top of Kolbjorn’s head, used his knee to maintain leverage and firmly ensnare Kolbjorn’s body to the ground, and performed a variation of what is known in grappling and as a spinal lock.\textsuperscript{63} These difficulties in translation also serve as fine examples of how one or two mistranslated words can ruin or drastically alter the reader’s understanding of a passage, and can also have the power to render particular grappling maneuvers indecipherable. And, once more, the author’s choice of vocabulary inclines me to believe that he not only was aware of and familiar with the specific maneuvers that he was describing, but that he depicted them


\textsuperscript{62}The grip described would most likely be a gable-grip (see Figure 6), or done by interlacing his fingers.

\textsuperscript{63}“Spinal lock” is a broad-spanning blanket term for any submission hold that is applied to the spinal column, and which results in any part of the spine being extended beyond it’s normal range of motion. A forcefully applied spinal lock has the potential to cause severe damage to the vertebrae, and can result in paralysis or death.
intentionally, with the aim of his audience understanding and visualizing them with the same alacrity that he himself did.

5.3. Hávarðar saga ísfirðings

Hávarðar saga ísfirðings is another of the Íslendingasögur in which there is a grappling sequence I would like to investigate. This sequence is particularly revealing in that it is replete with intricate grappling details and actually plays out as an entire grappling contest, rather than as a single deathblow or finishing maneuver. The back-and-forth nature of the encounter, especially when viewed in conjunction with the specific terminology and intended inferences written within, further bolsters the notion that both the scribe and his audience would by necessity need a certain level of grappling knowledge to logically follow the events. The passage reads thus:

Ólafur rann þegar upp á bakkann að Þormóði en hann gefur honum rúm. Og er Ólafur kemur á upp rennur Þormóður þegar undir hendur honum. Ólafur tekur og við eftir megni. Gangast þeir að lengi. Þykir Ólafur hann ekki raknað hafa eftir hnyskingina. Þar kemur að þeir falla báðir senn fram á bakkann og er svo er komið, veltir hvor öðrum þar til er þeir tumba báðir ofan fyrir fönnina. Eru þá ýmsir undir þar til er þeir koma í fjöruna. Þá bar svo til að Þormóður varð neðri. Neytír Ólafur þá þess og braut í sundur hrygginn í honum…\(^{64}\) Olaf suddenly ran up the ridge towards Thormod, who gave way to him. When Olaf arrived at the top, Thormod suddenly ducked under his grasp and clutched him around the waist. Olaf countered with all his might, and they struggled a long time. Olaf found Thormod no more tractable after his beating. Finally, they both fell down the slope, and they turned over and over as they tumbled through the snow. First one, then the other, was on top until they reached the beach. Then it

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In this rather interesting sequence the reader is given a colorful description of the back-and-forth grappling encounter Olaf and Thormod have together. Due to the somewhat vague wording and vocabulary, this sequence of events and the precise meaning of parts of the passage remain open to interpretation. For example, we read in the above English translation that “Olaf suddenly ran up the ridge towards Thormod who gave way to him. When Olaf arrived at the top, Thormod suddenly ducked under his grasp and clutched him around the waist”. With this interpretation, it remains somewhat unclear as to when Olaf reaches the top of the ridge, and exactly how the two combatants are spatially arranged. For instance, one could logically assume that when Thormod “gave way” to Olaf, that he did so because Olaf was near him, yet the next sentence then seems to illogically begin with “[w]hen Olaf arrived at the top”.

I have found an interpretation, however, that not only solves this conundrum but also serves to better illustrate some of the passage’s finer grappling details. To start with, forms of the common and versatile verb “*renna*” are used to describe both Olaf’s ascension of the ridge/charging of Thormod (“Ólafur *rann* þegar upp á bakkann ad þormóði”), and his “ducking” under Thormod’s arms (“*Og er* Ólafur kemur á upp *rennur* þormóður þegar undir hendur honum”). Although both of these English interpretations are individually viable, combined they leave the reader with a slight sense of confusion as to precisely how and where the two combatants are interacting with each other. “*Renna*”, as I mentioned, is a versatile verb, and I would therefore argue that the scribe used it in a different sense than the way in which it has been popularly interpreted. “*Renna*” is a verb that most commonly means “to run”, but in the context of grappling and the specific scenario above, it can also mean “arise/rise”, particularly when used with “*upp*”, which it is in both of these instances. Therefore, it could be interpreted that Olaf either ran up the ridge at Thormod,
who gave him space/a wide berth ("rúm"), or that Olaf ascended the ridge, and Thormod dodged his attempts at initiating grappling. More importantly for the understanding of the grappling sequence, however, is perceiving that the use of "rennur" must explicitly mean "rise", as opposed to "run", if we are to have any semblance of a realistic grappling encounter. In consequence, Thormod does not "run" under Olaf's arms, but can be understood to "rise up" under Olaf's arms, and then grasp him around the waist. Not only does this lexically make sense, but it also better follows the principles of wrestling engagement. If Thormod literally were to "run" under Olaf's arms, what strange position would he have to be running in in order to get that low, or, conversely, how much of a height difference would there have to be between the two combatants for one to literally run under the other's arms? It could be argued that Thormod tried to tackle Olaf while running, but that interpretation does not fit the ensuing description of the grappling confrontation, nor does it seem likely that the scribe would use such a vague term for "tackle" when various other terms would be more appropriate. What suits the situation much better, and fits perfectly with the vocabulary used, is to describe Thormod as "rising up" under Olaf's arms, which could only be realistically done if Thormod were attempting to "shoot" on Olaf. This understanding also goes much more closely with Heinemann's "ducking" inference, although it is more precise. Shooting-in, as opposed to running-at, is a far more likely and becoming behavior for two combatants who are, after all, (as previously mentioned in the saga) each other's "glímufélagi", or wrestling partners. There are a variety of ways to shoot-in on an opponent, although most of them generally involve either attacking the opponent's legs or securing at least one underhook on them. In simplified terms, to successfully perform a "shoot" you first must lower your level, i.e. get your hips and/or center of gravity lower than your opponents, and then propel yourself forward and upwards (thus "rising"), driving your opponent either backwards, or lifting them up. With this somewhat simplified definition in mind, we can see that this is exactly what Thormod did, and indeed would have to do to Olaf in order for the next progression of events to occur: "Ólafur tekur og við eftir megni". After being shot-in on by Thormod, Olaf instinctively does what any well-versed wrestler or grappler would do, and "catches" (tekur) Thormod, which can most identifiably
be interpreted as a sprawl attempt, and their struggle proceeds to ensue in somewhat of a stalemate. At this point, the two grapplers tumble and roll down the ridge, rotating between who is on top, in the dominant position, and who is on bottom. We learn that at the end of their tumble, it comes about that Thormod is on the bottom, with Olaf on top of him, and that Olaf utilizes his dominant position to swiftly end their encounter. Unfortunately, in what is otherwise an interesting back-and-forth well-documented grappling encounter, we are told only that Olaf “makes us of this” (i.e., his dominant position) and breaks Thormod’s back. I am skeptical as to the realistic potential of breaking a man’s back from this position, and would be very interested myself to know what exactly the scribe or original author envisioned.

If, however, the author intended “hrygginn” to be interpreted as “the neck” or “the spine” rather than “the back”, then one very real possibility to consider is that Olaf performed a neck-crank on Thormod, while resting either on top of Thormod’s torso (See Figure 32), or in between his legs (See Figure 33). Olaf would do so by resting his weight down upon Thormod while straddling his chest with his thighs and buttocks (thus keeping Thormod’s shoulders and torso trapped against the ground), and locking his hands behind Thormod’s head, one over the other, and pulling Thormod’s head sharply towards his own chest while leaning backwards. This maneuver could still be performed if Olaf were to be in between Thormod’s legs, although in this case Olaf would have to keep downward pressure on Thormod’s chest using his own elbows in order to keep Thormod’s chest/back planted to the ground while pulling his head towards himself. This later interpretation would also not fit the description of Olaf being “on top” as effectively. Either of these variants of the neck-crank, however, could be interpreted from the language and scenario described in the saga.

5.4. Grettis saga
Perhaps the most renowned Íslendingasögur that I’ll be dealing with in this analysis is Grettis saga, or The Saga of Grettir the Strong. The hero, Grettir, shows off his physical prowess throughout the saga via various feats of strength and by grappling and wrestling with various enemies, be they human or monster. Because of the saga’s high literary-quality and length, there are several examples of grappling and wrestling which I have analyzed and from which I have gleaned some interesting interpretations and conclusions.

The first passage from this saga that I wish to take a look at takes place during Grettir’s childhood, and is one of the first impressions we get of the hero’s physical prowess:

Tókust þeir þá á fangbrögðum og glímdu. Þóttust menn þá sjá að Grettir var sterkari en menn ætuðu því að Auðunn var rammur að afl. Áttust þeir lengi við en svo lauk að Grettir féll. Lét Auðunn þá fylgja kné kviði og för illa með hann.67

[Then they grappled with each other and started wrestling, and everyone could tell Grettir was stronger than they had imagined, because Audun was very powerful. After they had fought for a long time, Grettir lost his balance in the end, and Audun jumped on him and kneeled him in the groin.]68

This passage serves to elucidate several explicit points in reference to the fundamentals of grappling, and also provides us with what I have found to be a unique example of a particular grappling position/technique in both the Íslendingasögur and fornaldarsögur. In regards to grappling fundamentals, this passage reveals a couple of grappling truths to the reader: Firstly, despite Grettir’s being acknowledged as the obviously stronger of the two opponents, his strength does not guarantee him victory in what is explicitly referred to as “wrestling/grappling”.69 Secondly, in conjunction with the previous fact, Grettir

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69 The terms “fangbrögð” and “glíma” are both used to describe both various forms and styles of “wrestling” and “grappling” somewhat interchangeably. In later centuries, however, glíma became more and more synonymous with what is now recognizable as the modern sport of glíma: a distinction certainly not made by the scribes of the sagas, their intended audience, nor by the characters and heroes the sagas depict.
is several years the younger of his opponent (as previously stated in the saga), and in a refreshingly realistic fashion, therefore less experienced and practiced in grappling than his opponent. This combination of Audun's skill and Grettir's inexperience leads to the inevitable and realistic conclusion that any grappling aficionado would arrive at: that the younger, less experienced grappler, despite being stronger, would lose to the older, veteran grappler. And as the saga describes, this is exactly how the scenario plays out, even when a hero of legendary strength is involved. Details such as this give weight to the arguments that both the scribe and his intended audience had a solid understanding of the principles of grappling and combat, and that the description of these grappling exchanges were not merely meant as hollow embellishments of a hero's abilities.

I find this particular passage interesting not only for the aforementioned tenets of grappling it subtly expounds upon, but also for it's mention and description of a particular grappling technique that I have not found mentioned or described in any other saga. Using Scudder’s popular English translation (see above), we read that “Grettir lost his balance in the end, and Audun jumped on him and kneeled him in the groin”. This translation, once again, does neither the saga nor the grappling accounts therein proper justice. I would have no interest in interpreting the techniques and grappling “techniques” behind kneeling one’s opponent in the groin, yet, luckily for us, there once again seems to be poor translation at play.

From the Old Icelandic versions of the text, we can read “Lét Auðunn þá fylgja kné kviði og för illa með hann”. From this we can clearly determine that Audun, after Grettir has fallen, decides “to guide”/“fylgja” his knee onto Grettir’s “kviði” (from kviðr), and then proceeds to deal with Grettir badly. Here “Kviðr” does not mean groin (nor did it ever, to my understanding), but rather means

71 Saga heroes have the tendency to show almost supernatural strength, grappling prowess, and physical abilities at a very early age, usually 12 or younger. It is very common for saga heroes in their formative years to handily defeat fully-grown men and champions in combat and grappling exchanges. In Grettis saga, however, we are told that Grettir is already 14 years old and stronger than his opponent, yet he still manages to be defeated by him. This level of realistic plausibility is somewhat of a rarity.
“belly” or “abdomen”.72 If Audun’s knee is on Grettir’s belly, we can be assured that Grettir must have fallen on his back, and is facing upwards, on the ground. Audun is therefore using his knee to apply pressure to Grettir’s chest or stomach in order to maintain control of his opponent, and keep Grettir pinned to the ground. This technique and position are referred to in various martial arts as “knee-on-belly” or “knee-on-stomach (See Figure 34). This technique, although deceptively simple at first, is actually a very effective technique often utilized by advanced grapplers to incapacitate, maintain control over, and/or submit their opponent. The top assailant is not only in a dominant position and maintaining control over his opponent’s movements, but can also easily disengage or escape from his/her opponent if necessary. Furthermore, although this is primarily a technique used for control, positioning, and stability, the grappler in top-position has a variety of potential submissions at his/her disposal, and can even submit their opponent beneath them by applying excessive downward pressure and compressing their sternum, ribs, lungs, stomach, and torso in general. This, in turn, can cause severe pain and even asphyxia. It is therefore not surprising that the author of the saga gives the reader the additional, albeit rather vague, detail that Audun “för illa med hann” (“went evilly against/with him” or “treated him roughly”). From his dominant knee-on-belly position, Audun would have had the opportunity to either strike Grettir from above (one possible interpretation), or to simply apply great amounts of pressure to his chest/abdomen. Whichever way he chose (I would posit that he simply used the position to apply pressure to Grettir’s abdomen, as there is no evidence in either this saga or others that strikes were thrown in such situations), whenever one’s opponent is dominated in such a fashion the audience should not be surprised when they read/are told that several people come to break up the contest.

Another interesting grappling passage occurs later in Grettis saga, and gives us a rather vivid description of a technically impressive grappling maneuver. This maneuver is seldom depicted in the sagas, and in this particular

instance it is depicted with some alluring additional details that give can aid us in identifying it with certainty:

Grettir stóð fyrir réttur en hinn hljóp að honum sem snarast og gekk Grettir hvergi úr sporum. Grettir seildist aftur yfir bak Þórði og tók svo í brækurnar og kippi upp fótunum og kastaði honum aftur yfir hófuð sér svo að hann kom að herðum niður og varð það allmikið fall.73 [Grettir stood there firmly, and Thord took a swift run at him, but he did not budge. Then Grettir reached over Thord’s back, took hold of his breeches and lifted him off his feet, and threw him backwards over his head so that he landed on his shoulders, suffering a considerable fall.]74

Here we have a well-detailed and realistic description of a grappling contest between two men. The author’s grappling knowledge is shown here in a twofold manner; firstly, he describes a realistic maneuver, and situates the characters for the audience. Secondly, the author also gives the audience vital details that not only allow them determine the precise maneuver that is being done, but which also eliminate other variable interpretations as to what maneuver has been performed. We start by learning that Grettir has a firm stance and solid footing, and that he cannot be budged by his charging opponent. With this scenario in mind, we can understand that Thord is coming at Grettir with forward and constant pressure, and that the two combatants must therefore be facing one another. These are the first clues that indicate to the mindful reader what kind of grappling maneuver is to be expected. Next, we read that Grettir reaches back over Thord and grabs him by the breeches. It is easy for the uninitiated grapple to imagine that Grettir is literally reaching over a bent-over Thord’s back, and grabbing his breaches from above. Realistically, however, it is far more likely that by reaching “over”/“yfir” Thord, Grettir is actually reaching around Thord, or over his sides, and enveloping him in a “bear-hug”-like hold, while grasping his breeches at the waist, along the small of Thord’s back. This is

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certainly the way in which the reader is meant to interpret the scenario thus far, as can be further proven by the way in which Thord proceeds to land. Any other interpretation as to how Grettir would manage to throw Thord from such a position would be farcical at best, and impossible at worst. Grettir then throws Thord over his own head, behind him, in such a manner that Thord lands on his shoulders. Once again, upon envisioning this maneuver in their minds, the uneducated grappler may imagine the sequence to be implausible and almost absurd, but the maneuver being described is nonetheless a well-attested wrestling maneuver most commonly referred to in modern parlance as the belly-to-belly suplex. The particular variation that Grettir performs in the above passage on Thord is a specific maneuver referred to as an “overhead belly-to-belly suplex”, and can best be performed by a grappler with great upper-body strength, such as Grettir surely possessed. To “throw” Thord, Grettir would clutch Thord close to himself, and simultaneously lift/throw Thord upwards and backwards, directly over his own head (as specifically stated in the saga passage), while arching his own back and falling backwards (See Figures 35-40). Grettir would then, as an educated audience might automatically assume, release his hold on Thord while falling backwards, resulting in Thord doing a full 180-degree arc-rotation over Grettir’s head. If done properly, the recipient of the overhead belly-to-belly suplex would land on their shoulders, a detail our grappling-savvy scribe did not forget to leave out.

From detailed and intricate descriptions such as the above-mentioned examples from Grettis saga, it can be clearly inferred that both the scribe and audience were well-versed in the finer points of the grappling art, or at least that the author of the saga assumed his contemporary audience to intrinsically have such knowledge. If neither the saga author nor the audience had thorough familiarity with grappling and wrestling maneuvers, the grappling sequences described within these sagas would therefore have to be the result of staggeringly unlikely coincidence, and I consider this possibility to be most unlikely.
6. Conclusion

The grappling scenes, their frequency, prevalence, importance and realism have thus far been all but ignored by serious saga scholarship. I hope to have shown through the above examples and explanations that grappling and glíma were not of mere peripheral importance in many of the fornaldarsögur and Íslendingasögur, but rather that they held meaningful places within the sagas and tales. I also hope to have shown that the grappling sequences found within the sagas were described in great detail and were understood and enjoyed by their contemporary audiences and readers. Furthermore, I would like to emphasize that despite the sagas’ (and in particular the legendary sagas’) penchant for the fantastic, the grappling scenes depicted therein were anything but fanciful. The majority of the wrestling and glíma exchanges found in the legendary and family sagas are precise and often vivid descriptions of realistic maneuvers and scenarios that celebrate and reflect a rich tradition of grappling and grappling knowledge in Scandinavia. With this being said, however, I would once more like to reiterate that the glíma of the sagas has much less to do with the modern sport than most contemporary experts would have us believe. Rather, modern Icelandic wrestling, or glíma, evolved from the style of wrestling found in the sagas, but does not replicate it.

I have argued that the intended readers and recipients of these sagas would have known and implicitly understood the various maneuvers that were being performed by their favorite heroes, and this would surely have added to the stories’ worth and the readers’/audience’s pleasure and enjoyment. The very fact that the fornaldarsögur and Íslendingasögur were primarily valued for their entertainment value only further reinforces this claim. Just as the stories, plots, and stock characters all had their place and tradition within the sagas, so too did the representation of the peoples’ preferred sport and pastime.

The sagas were written and told in large extent for their entertainment value just as glíma and grappling matches were watched for theirs. Thus the maintaining of strict guidelines and the adherence to realistic and attested maneuvers while within the realm of grappling was a necessity for the sagas’ reputation and for the readers’ understanding. I argue that only through the
passage of time and the combination of a lack of understanding of the principles of grappling and vague or inaccurate translations of the texts have the grappling and glíma sequences of both the fornaldarsögur and the Íslendingasögur been rendered incomprehensible, absurd, or nonsensical. The sports of grappling and glíma are not, however, confined in the world of medieval Scandinavian literature to only the fornaldarsögur and Íslendingasögur. They are also attested, celebrated, referenced, and described in accurate and colorful detail in the Snorra Edda, the Poetic Edda, and even in the Old English Epic Beowulf. Going into these genres, however, would be beyond the scope of this thesis.
Bibliography


Appendix

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