

Combat in Saga Literature

Traces of martial arts in medieval Iceland

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A note on spelling and edition:

No convention of how to include Old Norse names and words into an English text is fully satisfying. In this study, personal names are given in the old form (*Hǫskuldr* instead of *Höskuldur*), but are not declined following Icelandic rules (*Hǫskuldr's* instead of *Hǫskulds*, 'to *Egill*' instead of 'to *Agli*').

All page and chapter numbers of *Íslendingasögur* are given according to the digital version published by *Mál og menning* ("Íslendinga Sögur"), which in turn is based on the edition by (Halldórsson, Torfason, Tómasson, & Thorsson, 1987), and features the same page and chapter numbers. Numbers will be given in brackets, sometimes amended by the saga's name to avoid misunderstandings. However, for the sake of brevity usually only page and chapter will be given where sagas of this edition are quoted.

The texts quoted accordingly are: *Droplaugarsonar saga*, *Fostbræðra saga*, *Finnboga saga ramma*, *Grettis saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, *Heiðarvíga saga*, *Jökuls þáttr búasonar*, *Laxdæla saga*, *Njáls saga*, *Vatnsdæla saga*, *Víga-Glúms saga*

All other sources used will be separately indicated in the text.

1. Introduction

Bændur flugust á - „farmers came to blows“. (Kommissionen for det Arnamagnæanske Legat, 1900, p. 425) The words of 18th century saga compiler Jón Ólafsson are famous among the scholars of Old Norse literature. Intended as an ironic comment on the content of the sagas of Icelanders, they express quite adequately most novices' first impression of this type of literature. On a first glance, the *Íslendingasögur* can seem like a never-ending chain of feud killings, and many of the best known and most noteworthy saga scenes are scenes of combat. We may think, for example, of Gísli Súrsson's last stand, when he is both fighting and reciting stanzas while struggling to hold his entrails in his slit-open body; of Skarpheðinn Njálsson's trick of decapitating an enemy while sliding over a frozen river; or of the near mythic wrestling match of hero versus revenant in *Grettis saga*. The images these scenes evoke appear in vivid colours before the reader's inner eye. They are often crucial for a saga, and tend to be among the first things associated with a certain text. Physical combat is the condensation of the principal of conflict that the sagas thrive on.

However, it is as if Jón Ólafsson's words had laid a spell on generations of scholars, and their attitude towards the combat scenes in saga literature. Of all the metres of bookshelves which have been written on the genre, next to nothing covers the topic of combat. This is astounding. If not for their importance in the stories, the number of combat scenes alone would have justified a closer look. Considering the genre's obsession with bloodshed, one should assume that an abundance of relevant academic research exists. But the opposite is the case. Maybe combat, as depicted in the texts, seemed all too trivial, and appeared to hold no deeper meanings to unearth. After all, a chopped-off head is a chopped-off head, one might say. Or maybe the act of physical violence was both too far away from the scholars' life experiences, and too much at odds with their vision of human society as it should be. Or maybe, as a combination of both, dealing with what they deemed a voyeuristic look on bloodshed carried an odour of the vulgar, the cheap thrill not worthy of proper academic research.

No matter what the reasons were, the absence of a scholarly discourse on the topic of combat in both saga literature and Old Norse society is a vacuum that needs to be dealt with. Like in other parts of pre-modern Europe, the ideal of the warrior was fundamental for the medieval North. The literary depiction of combat in such a context is not mere entertainment, but an reflection of core values and abilities.

In the tradition of Jón Ólafsson's quote, scholars have been fond of making fun of the saga's combat scenes. The object of a joke is usually a thing that seems easily comprehended, and not worthy of deeper thought. Irony is a tool to belittle its target. The ironic view on combat in saga literature, embraced by so many scholars, is, in fact, a strategy to unburden oneself from the duty to deal with the subject in the way that it deserves, properly and thoroughly. The work at hand sets out to fill this gap in scholarly literature.

Some few exceptions to the general trend exist. And of course, several authors have mentioned the topic on a side note. On the following pages, I will first give an overview about the relevant research that has been conducted so far.

1.1. On (medieval) violence

Any study of medieval armed combat must be embedded in the wider context of medieval violence.¹ In contrast to the details of combat, violence in general has been in the focus of various, often interdisciplinary studies. The common denominator of an overwhelming part of the research conducted is the perception of violence as a purely negative form of social interaction. However, this is a notion of modern philosophical and political discourse. Even though I (and hopefully my readers) share this notion, we must not allow it to inhibit our perspective on the past. Of course, the Middle Ages knew theological discussions about avoidance and restriction of violence. But at the same time, the medieval outlook on the nature of human society defined the *ordo* of noblemen as *bellatores*, 'those who fight'. The ability to exert violence was thus not only acknowledged as a necessary evil, but affirmed as the foremost quality of the worldly ruling class. In such a context, it is not enough to ask for the victims of violence, the factors that lead to the institutionalization and outbreaks of violence, or the attempts to restrict it. We must look at the practitioners of violence, at their training and actual doing, and at their affirmation or even praise of violence.

1 'Violence' shall be understood here as *violentia*, not *potestas*; that means: as the act of inflicting physical harm to another human being. In other contexts, wider definitions – psychological violence, structural violence, social, economic, or political power – may be appropriate. Compare Braun and Herberichs (2005b, p. 15, FN 50): "Unter den beiden Optionen, das Phänomen Gewalt entweder durch die Beschränkung auf körperlich-physische Gewalt zu deflationieren oder es durch die Konzeption der strukturellen Gewalt zu inflationieren [...] erscheint uns für die gegenwärtige mediävistische Diskussion die erste forschungspraktisch die sinnvollere zu sein."

The academic shortcomings in the approach towards violence have been noted by authors from several disciplines, *mutatis mutandis*. For example, Georg Elwert remarked in the introduction to a sociological volume on the dynamics of violence:

Recent debates in social sciences [...] must also deal with violent conflict. However, in these debates violent group conflicts are seen as phases or elements of other social processes. Even in peace and conflict research, collective violence is analysed in terms of its causes and consequences and not as a social phenomenon as such [...]. Collective violence is still a neglected subject in sociological and anthropological research in its own right. (Elwert, Feuchtwang, & Neubert, 1999, p. 9)

In line with Elwert, Sidney Anglo criticized his fellow historians for neglecting the practice of violence, the preparation for it, and its significance for the self-understanding of earlier generations:

Both the significance of these [martial] arts, and the fact that they have been largely ignored by historians, are easily established. While nobody has ever doubted the importance of expertise in the handling of weapons to the knightly classes of medieval Europe, our knowledge of what these skills were and how they were acquired remains generalized and inexact. [...] Medieval and renaissance warfare have long been under academic scrutiny, and historians have much to say about the evolution of military organization, weaponry, and communications; about finance and logistics; and about the social and political consequences of warfare. The one thing they scarcely ever mention is hand-to-hand combat and the ways in which soldiers might have been prepared for it. [...] Even the rapidly expanding modern literature on duelling has managed to ignore fighting altogether. This may seem remarkably perverse, but recent scholars [...] have come to regard ritualized personal conflict as a symptom of some psycho-sociological malaise afflicting the elite; as a manifestation of something called a 'crisis' of the aristocracy; or as a gesture of defiance against increasing centralization and bureaucratization of government. The psychological implications of social alienation have been duly pondered. The relevance of systematical personal combat training, wholly aggressive and homicidal in purpose, has not even been recognized let alone studied. The intellectual atmosphere has become so rarified that nobody asks how duellists studied the arts of killing, who taught them, and where. (Anglo, 2000, p. 2)

In the years since Elwert and Anglo wrote their lines, some progress has been made on the subject (see below). But by and large, their assessments are still valid.

A look on a book that can be considered typical for the discussion shall demonstrate the imbalanced attitude towards medieval violence and, more precisely, combat. Edited by Manuel Braun and Cornelia Herberichs, the interdisciplinary volume "Gewalt im Mittelalter. Realitäten – Imaginationen" (Braun & Herberichs, 2005a) collects 18 articles which aim to enhance the understanding of medieval violence by analysing its various representations.²

² "Unser Band macht es sich zur Aufgabe, den Status von Gewalt im Mittelalter näher zu bestimmen, wobei er vor allem von den Gewalt-Darstellungen der überlieferten Texte und Bilder ausgehen muss." (Braun and Herberichs (2005b, p. 7)) A similar anglophone title would be, for example "Violence in Medieval Society". (Kaeuper (2000b))

It was well received among German speaking scholars,³ and can be viewed as a standard reference on the topic. The book earned this place by a generally well-rounded, academically sound overview. It is not the intention of this chapter to question its value in general.

However, the title is also a prime example of the approach towards violence that Anglo attacked so heftily. Of all the collected articles, only a single one cares to mention the existence of medieval combat training, and the skills (martial arts) and objects (weapons) necessary for armed violence. (Meyer, 2005) The introduction by Braun and Herberichs clearly displays the aforementioned concentration on the result of violence – suffering –, and an entanglement of scholarly research in perceived moral dependencies. Even though the authors reject the socio-philosophical musings of violence as the anthropological constant and ever-impending threat that Wolfgang Sofsky laid down in his widely read „Traktat über die Gewalt“ (Sofsky, 1996),⁴ their perspective is indebted to his thinking. In respect to violence, Sofsky divided a human being's physical existence into two qualities: the active *Körper* that exerts violence, and the passive *Leib* that has to suffer it. Braun and Herberichs focus on the processes that made human beings in the Middle Ages painfully aware (in the literal sense) of their *Leib*-existence, and the expressions of these processes:

Denn die empirische Realität der Gewalt, die am menschlichen Körper spürbar und sichtbar ist, ist zugleich immer schon Ergebnis wie Ausgangspunkt semiotischer Prozesse. Diese markieren einen Menschen als Opfer, verwandeln dann die Spuren der Gewalt in Zeichen und machen den misshandelten Körper⁵ zum Ausgangspunkt einer

The book collects twelve articles, of which only three – Kaeuper (2000a); Vale, J. (2000); Vale, M. (2000) – consider ‘constructive’ effects of violence, that is, martial skills as a tool for the self-fashioning of social elites. However, the underlying question of the three texts is still how violence can be controlled and contained. Another book worth mentioning here is “Violence in Medieval Courtly Literature”. (Classen (2004a)) The book's title should indicate great relevance for the work at hand, but the opposite is the case. As its back cover text says, “*Violence in Medieval Courtly Literature* explores the dark side of courtly literature.” Classen's introduction states: “The essays in this volume are specifically addressed toward the first semantic component [violence as *violentia*, not *potestas*] with its explicit negative connotation [...]” (Classen (2004b, p. 14)), and only two of the fifteen articles included – Christoph (2004); Harney (2004) – deal (more or less) closely with the descriptions of armed combat.

3 See, for example, Müller (2006).

4 “Am Beispiel Sofskys zeigt sich jedoch, was eine konsequente Historisierung bedeutet: den Verzicht auf die Möglichkeit, Gewalt und ihre Folgen vor dem Hintergrund angeblicher anthropologischer Konstanten zu beschreiben und Affektivität und Aggression als einzig denkbare Determinanten, Schmerz und Trauma als invariable Resultate des Gewalthandelns auszugeben. Der anthropologische Universalismus, der hinter einem solchen Ansatz steht, ist epistemisch unhaltbar. Zudem versprechen die Erklärungen, die er generieren würde, nur wenig für Fallstudien, denen es um das historisch Besondere zu tun ist.” (Braun and Herberichs (2005b, p. 9)) Even though the critique on Sofsky is convincing, one may add that the very construction 'A hurts B', and its existence in all known human cultures, can of course be perceived as an anthropological constant. Otherwise, the category 'violence' would not exist, and speaking about it would not be possible.

5 The authors do not use Sofsky's terminology of a differentiation between *Körper* and *Leib*, and use *Körper* for both the active and the passive physical condition.

Kommunikation über Gewalt, die Beobachter, auch späterer Epochen, fortzusetzen vermögen. (Braun & Herberichs, 2005b, p. 16)

And furthermore:

Der Körper erleidet Gewalt auf eine Weise [...] die Objektivierung grundsätzlich ausschließt, da dem erlittenen Schmerz ein vorbewusstes Moment eignet und da die Fülle der mit ihm verbundenen Sinneseindrücke und Emotionen nicht in das symbolische Medium der Sprache übersetzbar ist. Greifbar sind jedoch die kulturellen Prozesse, die [...] den Körper mit Zeichenhaftigkeit versehen. (Braun & Herberichs, 2005b, pp. 18–19)

All these observations are convincing, and yet, they remain one-sided. To the authors, the body as the agent of violence plays no roll at all. In their rejection of a ‘universal nature of violence’ – as presumed by, e. g., Sofsky –, Braun and Herberichs opt for an analysis of violence as contextual, communicative actions, and state that “Auch der systemtheoretische Gewaltbegriff muss sich [...] dafür offen halten, dass Körper Gewalt erleiden.” (Braun & Herberichs, 2005b, p. 18) Nowhere do they mention that a “systemtheoretische” definition of violence must be open to the fact that bodies also *inflict* violence.

One might go as far to see a sublime Christian heritage in this perspective, which understands suffering as the pivot point of human existence. Even though rejecting Sofsky's universalism of violence, Braun and Herberichs (and most other contemporary authors) share the fundamental understanding that violence is the negative antithesis of human existence ‘as it should be’. A purely analytical reflection seems to leave them ill at ease, and they feel the need to reconcile academic research with moral conviction: “Bejaht man diese Frage [if cultural sciences should deal with historic violence without judging it morally], sieht man sich in die Position versetzt, alle Arten von Gewalttaten sowie von Gewaltrechtfertigung und -verherrlichung neutral zur Kenntnis nehmen zu müssen [...]” (Braun & Herberichs, 2005b, p. 36) The authors cannot be comfortable with such a neutral perspective, as “der Schritt vom Verstehen der Gewalt zu ihrer Rechtfertigung klein ist.” (Braun & Herberichs, 2005b, p. 37)

We may also interpret such a reservation (especially among German scholars) in the context of Western intellectual culture post World War II, which perceives violence as the ‘absolute evil’, the chaos which threatens civilization, and which has to be kept at bay. Other issues, like e. g. religious heresy or sexual deviation, may be impossible to handle ‘neutrally’ in other (non-Western, non-academic) cultural systems, but have largely lost

their threat potential in modern academic circles. Violence, in contrast, seems to leave those ill at ease who analyze it. However, any research done by the historical, anthropological, or cultural disciplines should aim at interpreting and understanding the subject, not at judging it. This is as true for violence as for any other subject. Undoubtedly, depictions of violence can trigger emotional responses – spanning all the way from fascination to abhorrence –, whose intensity usually surpasses that of a reaction to, e. g., documents of a medieval tax system. But this is nothing fundamentally new. The researcher must always distinguish between his or her academic persona, and any personal views on the subject matter. A total separation can hardly ever be achieved. But this problem does not discharge from the duty to approach any given subject as neutral as possible, no matter how horrible it may be.⁶

The subject of this study are Old Icelandic accounts of armed and unarmed combat, a form of violence that is probably more fascinating and less repellent than other ones, like execution or torture. The key feature which sets combat apart from such other forms is the symmetrical relationship between the agents of violence, at least in theory: equally armed men fight each other, and each of them has a chance to survive the fight unharmed.⁷ Even if there is asymmetry (in numbers, weaponry, fighting skills), the combatants do not know at the beginning of a fight who will be *Körper*, and who will be *Leib*.⁸ Such symmetrical violence, in whichever way communicated, tends to leave its audience with much less horror than asymmetrical violence does – to think of torture is more repulsive than to think of battle, even if the wounds inflicted can be similar. The abhorrence of asymmetrical violence is deeply inscribed in Western culture. Its fundamental myth – the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ – is the story of the suffering and overcoming of asymmetrical violence. The myth highlights the core problem of all human interaction, being that, potentially, one man must suffer at the hands of another.

6 Compare Braun and Herberichs (2005b, p. 36): “[...] ein weiteres schwieriges Problem, [...] ist] das der Faszination durch Gewalt(darstellungen). Wenn man sie in einem Akt der Selbstzensur leugnet, bringt man sich möglicherweise um wichtige Erkenntnisse; wenn man sich allzu sehr auf sie einlässt, läuft man Gefahr, Gewalt zu verharmlosen oder gar zu verherrlichen. Hinter diesem Dilemma steht möglicherweise eine tief gehende Ambivalenz der Gewalt in unserer Kultur, über die man in manchen Kontexten nur unter den Vorzeichen moralischen Abscheus sprechen darf, während sie in anderen als selbstverständlicher Anlass unverbindlicher Unterhaltung gilt. Ein Blick auf fremde, vergangene Gewaltverhältnisse könnte zumindest helfen, solche Diskursreglementierungen ins Bewusstsein zu heben. Diese wirken ihrerseits auf die Erforschung mittelalterlicher Gewalt zurück, wenn es etwa darum geht, zu entscheiden, ob die Geschichtsschreibung überhaupt nach der anschaulichen und verstehenden Darstellung einer Schlacht streben soll oder ob bei der Rekonstruktion einer Gewalttat die Perspektive der Erfahrung oder die der Analyse einzunehmen ist.”

7 Of course, many accounts of combat do not fit into this simple outline, as we will see.

8 This in accordance with Braun and Herberichs (2005b, p. 23), who speak of “reziprok aufeinander bezogene Gewaltakteure”.

However, any academic approach that reduces historical violence to its dimension of suffering turns the self-understanding of the Medieval European warrior culture upside-down, be it on the continent, or on Iceland: Even under the influence of Christian thought, the ideal was to always be *Körper. Leib*: that is what the others are.⁹

Successful participation in combat is a way to maximize one's *Körper*-being. But since combat is one of the most stressful situations the human body and mind can experience, people instinctively shy away from it, are unable to cope with it, or react in uncoordinated, chaotic fashion. (Molloy & Grossman, 2007) Humans have to learn how to act violently, especially in combat, and how to deal with the emotional stress called “confrontational tension” by Randall Collins. (Collins, 2008, pp. 19–20; 25–29) The necessary learning process is part of the socialization into classes affine to violence,¹⁰ particularly into those groups that researchers have termed *Gewaltgemeinschaften* – “communities of violence” –, for which the use of violence is not only a possibility, but the key feature of group identity. (Speitkamp, 2013) The social elites of the European Middle Ages could be subsumed under this label, including the Icelandic upper class, as far as we understand it.

To prepare themselves for combat, people made use of training systems that promised to teach the necessary mindset and physical skills. These martial arts, or fencing systems, of medieval and Renaissance Europe have been under research since the late 19th century, and have attracted increasing attention in the last thirty or so years.¹¹ However, the majority of history scholars seems to have taken hardly any notice of the results produced by this research. In the course of this thesis, I want to show how the study of historical European martial arts can improve our understanding of medieval (Icelandic) literature, and the society that produced it.

Where the engagement in potentially lethal combat is not an extreme exception from normal life, but rather an accepted or even appreciated option of social interaction, the willingness to fight, fighting itself, and depictions of fighting exist in a relation of mutual

9 It is not the place here to discuss the counter model for warrior ideology that medieval culture had in stock, that of Christian asceticism (whose imagery sometimes made intensive use of motives of violence, of course). Viewed from the perspective of the *Körper-Leib*-dichotomy, a dynamic of disintegration is apparent. The ascetic separates mind from body, turning the latter into a *Leib*, while psychologically remaining the *Körper* in charge. Bernhard of Clairvaux, we are told, had a bowl in the floor of his church, which he used when his stomach, severely damaged from constant fasting, made him throw up during prayers. The very same man is notorious for requesting Christian knights to take up their arms for the crusade.

10 Though with a later historical and different geographical perspective, Ann Tlusty's outstanding “The Martial Ethic in Early Modern Germany” shall be mentioned here. (Tlusty (2011)) The book demonstrates the importance of personal combat skills for the male (non-noble!) population of early modern German cities.

11 To name a few important titles, in chronological order: Castle (1885), Hils (1985), Welle (1993), Anglo (2000), Jaquet, Verelst, and Dawson (2016).

amplification, and are dependent on each other. Thus, the accounts of combat in medieval literature are not only attempts by the authors to entertain their audience.¹² They are also fuel for and reflection of a warrior ideology that enables people to exert violence on another human being, and to face the risk of suffering it.¹³

Before we turn to the specific Old Icelandic ways of narrating combat, and the scholarly research that has been conducted on it so far, some other works shall be pointed out. They deal with the accounts of combat in medieval European literatures other than the Old Norse, and influenced the work at hand.

1.2. Research on combat in medieval European literature

The observed scarcity of research on combat in saga literature is also apparent when other medieval European literatures are discussed. Compared with the vast space that descriptions of combat occupy in medieval texts, astoundingly little has been written on them. If there is research, it usually asks either for the stylistic characteristics, narrative functions, symbolic meaning, or social contexts of the combat scenes.¹⁴ The question in

12 Concerning the question of whom this audience consisted of, and if chivalric literature indeed aimed at female readers/listeners (like some authors had suggested), Kaeuper (1999, p. 32) remarked ironically: “Anyone who has read thousands of pages of chivalric literature knows that either these texts were meant for men as well as women, or that medieval women simply could not get enough of combat and war, of the detailed effects of sword strokes on armour and the human body beneath, of the particulars of tenurial relationships, and of the tactical manoeuvres that lead to victory. Such evidence suggests that the great body of chivalric literature was aimed at knights even more than at their ladies.”

13 In this respect, not so much has changed since the Middle Ages. Today, the US military sponsors Hollywood blockbusters by lending tanks, helicopters, or airplanes, obviously in the hope to gain reputation and new recruits. The famous test case is the movie “Top Gun” from 1986, telling the story of a young US Navy fighter pilot. In the wake of the movie, the US Navy saw an increase in applications for fighter pilot careers of 500%. (Robb (2004, pp. 180–182))

14 Examples for such approaches include, in chronological order: Hausen (1885): *Die Kampfschilderungen bei Hartmann von Aue und Wirnt von Gravenberg*; Züchner (1902): *Die Kampfschilderungen in der Chanson de Roland und anderen chansons de geste*; Bode (1909): *Die Kampfschilderungen in den mittelhochdeutschen Epen*; Clausnitzer (1926): *Die Kampfschilderungen in den ältesten Chansons de geste*; Kirchmeir (1936): *Die Darstellung des Zweikampfs im mittelhochdeutschen Heldengedicht*; Grundmann (1939): *Studien zur Speerkampfschilderung im Mittelhochdeutschen*; Rychner (1955): *La chanson de geste*; Hitze (1965): *Studien zur Sprache und Stil der Kampfschilderungen in den Chansons de Geste*; Pütz (1971): *Die Darstellung der Schlacht in mittelhochdeutschen Erzähldichtungen von 1150 bis um 1250*; Kühnemann (1972): *Die Schlacht an der Unstrut und die Schlacht am Larkant*; Schäfer-Maulbetsch (1972): *Studien zur Entwicklung des mittelhochdeutschen Epos*; Heinemann (1973): *Composition stylisée et technique littéraire dans la Chanson de Roland*; Heinemann (1974): *La place de l'élément 'brandir la lance' dans la structure du motif de l'attaque à la lance*; Knapp (1974): *Die große Schlacht zwischen Orient und Occident in der abendländischen Epik*; Green (1978): *Homicide and 'Parcival'*; Ashby-Beach (1985): *The Song of Roland*; Voorwinden (1990): *Kampfschilderung und Kampf motivation in mittelalterlicher Dichtung*; Hahn (1996): *Zur Kriegsdarstellung in Herborts von Fritzlar 'Liet von Troye'*; Huber (1996): *Überlegungen zu den 'Erec'-Romanen Chrétiens und Hartmanns und zum 'Prosa-Lancelot'*; Jones (1996): *Schutzwaffen und Höflichkeit*; Krause (1997): *Imaginierte Gewalt in der mittelalterlichen Literatur*; Kellner (2002) *Der Ritter und die nackte Gewalt*; Bätz (2003): *Konfliktführung im Iwein des Hartmann von Aue*; Bruckner (2003): *Of Swords and*

how far combat descriptions relate to the physical experiences of the contemporaries tends to play a very minor role, or is neglected altogether. However, the narrative function of a combat scene cannot be properly understood while it remains unclear if, if not, or how far it represents the world outside the text, even when standard *topoi* are used.

Yet, there are some studies that try to analyse depictions of combat as entities in their own right, and that try to set them into context with the physical side of medieval culture.¹⁵ 90 years ago, Otto Clausnitzer published his book on the combat scenes of the oldest *chansons de geste*. It discussed, among other things, the typical exaggerations of the protagonists' fighting abilities. (Clausnitzer, 1926, p. 78) Peter Czerwinski wrote on the battle and tournament scenes of Middle High German court literature. (Czerwinski, 1975) Though his interpretations of the texts' social circumstances cater very obviously to the ideological demands of East German Marxism, Czerwinski's study delivered a well balanced and precise analysis how literature represented military practice. Thomas Bein's article "Hie slac, dâ stich!" (Bein, 1998) on the aesthetics of killing in the pan-European *Yvain* tradition is only twenty pages long, but nevertheless a key text in several respects. Bein noted the analogy of combat scenes in medieval literature and modern action movies; he studied how the depictions of the same combat can vary from language to language and author to author; and he (briefly) discussed the question of 'realism' in the combat scenes, and their possible dependency from older, Latin models. In one line with Bein is Will Hasty (Hasty, 2002), who – similarly to Kaeuper above, but more eloquently – stressed the connection between chivalric ideology, physical violence, and narrations of combat:

[I]t would be a mistake to ignore the social value attached to *gewalt* in the practice of knighthood, which inevitably would have affected the production and reception of narratives such as these. One must consider the possibility that the moral or didactic element may not always have been as significant for medieval audiences as the pleasure involved in seeing a military way of life, with all its risks and rewards, represented in romance. The connection between courtly status and chivalric force, if given the attention it deserves, provides sufficient reason to be sceptical toward interpretations of

Plowshares; Fiedler-Rauer (2003): Spielregeln der Gewalt in Pleiers Artusromanen Garel vom blühenden Tal und Tandareis und Flordibel; Ridder (2003): Affektivität und Gewalt in mittelalterlicher Epik; Saunders, Le Saux, and Thomas (2004): Writing War; Schnyder (2005): Erzählte Gewalt und die Gewalt des Erzählens; Bergeron (2008): Les Combats Chevaleresques dans l'Évre de Chrétien de Troyes; Malcher (2009): Rezeptionsästhetische Untersuchungen zu aventurischer Dietrichepik; Dietl (2013): Ritterliche Gewaltgemeinschaften in der mittelalterlichen Literatur, untersucht am Beispiel des deutschen Prosalancelot.

15 Of course, similar studies can be and were undertaken on texts from times other than the Middle Ages. Joachim Latacz's work on combat in archaic Greek poetry (namely, Homer, Kallinos, and Tyrtaios) shall be mentioned, both for the importance of the texts he deals with, and for his observations concerning the depiction of 'heroic' combat. (Latacz (1977)) Or Jennifer Feather's book, which deals with "Writing Combat and the Self in Early Modern English Literature". (Feather (2011))

a moralizing tone that would ignore or underestimate the value attached to successful feats of arms, which likely constituted in large part the attraction of these works for their military, feudal-aristocratic audiences. (Hasty, 2002, pp. 45–46)

Regine Reck's study of "The Aesthetics of Combat in Medieval Welsh Literature" (Reck, 2010) deals briefly with the historical development of mounted shock combat in medieval Wales, but then turns to "the thematic implications, that is, evaluating the violent encounters in their context and their function in the tale, and the discourse-analytical and stylistic aspect that deals with their formulaic character." (Reck, 2010, p. 27) Reck emphasized the formulaic, repetitive character of combat descriptions, which will also play a role in our discussion of combat in the *riddarasögur*. Furthermore, she provided models for the close reading of combat scenes, taking into account single combat actions, weapons used, and spacial setting, among other things.

The most important models for the thesis at hand, however, are the works of Catherine Hanley, and Rachel Kellest. Hanley's volume on the connection between high medieval war/combat and Old French literature appeared only one year after the above-mentioned book by Hasty, and shared the same line of thought. Hanley noted that

knights were not only consumers of literature but also became the chief protagonists in a number of the major genres. As the knight's primary function was a military one, depictions of combat are frequent in literary works; warfare was so embedded in the class psyche that it was difficult to avoid as a narrative topic. As an experience common [...] to both literary protagonists and audience members, it was an ideal subject to be employed as the common currency of communication between author and audience. [...] The knight at war and the knight in literature are therefore inextricably linked. (Hanley, 2003, p. 2)

Hanley wondered about the lack of research on the connection between real world violence and combat in Old French literature, and her observations are in many cases equally applicable to the combat scenes in Old Norse texts, *mutatis mutandis* – especially her basic assumption that "the literary war depicted in medieval texts must be set in the context of real contemporary war and its general perspective". (Hanley, 2003, p. 4) Her work fills the perceived gap by bringing military history, archaeology of weapons, and literature in one context.

The necessity to compare historical evidence with literary description concerns not only the mass phenomenon of 'war', but also fighting on a smaller scale – skirmishing, one-on-one duels, judicial combats, or tournament. Rachel Kellest shared this view, and discussed "Single Combat and Warfare in German Literature of the High Middle Ages". (Kellest, 2008)

Her perspective is defined, on the one hand, by her education as a medievalist, on the other hand by her practical training in historical European martial arts (HEMA). In this respect, it is comparable to the approach of the work at hand. Kellett is mainly concerned with the combat scenes of two Middle High German works of Stricker, namely his *Karl der Große* and *Daniel vom Blühenden Tal*. Its introductory lines can easily be transferred to our study of combat in saga literature:

Although literature provides the most likely models for Stricker's descriptions of single combat and battle, the potential importance of influence from contemporary instances of actual combat should not be underestimated. The details of the battles in Karl and Daniel may be compared fruitfully with what is known of contemporary tactics both in battle and tournaments, and the influence of the judicial combat tradition on medieval literature (and possibly vice versa) is clearly apparent. Records of historical combats and styles of combat are to be found in chronicles, legal records, manuals on historical fencing and other literary/historical sources, but also in pictorial sources and archaeological evidence. Where possible, I investigate the links between historical martial practice and Stricker's work. (Kellett, 2008, p. 4)

A second text from Kellett, her article on “the art of fencing in thirteenth- and fourteenth century German literature” (Kellett, 2012), is fully dedicated to single combat, and further explores the links between historical practice and literary expression. It is her merit to directly compare the ample evidence of medieval, mostly German fencing literature (or ‘fight books’, see chapter 7.2) with the depiction of sword fighting in Middle High German texts. Her results are as straightforward as they are convincing. Both the fight books and chivalric literature are reflections of a tradition of armed martial arts that must have been well-known in the Holy Roman Empire. After Kellett's insightful work, it is no longer possible to dismiss the combat scenes of medieval European literature *totaliter* as entertaining exaggerations, repetitions of fixed formulas, or re-arrangements of older *topoi*. Throughout the Middle Ages, proficiency in armed and unarmed combat was a highly valued skill, whose acquisition demanded time and dedication. Literature reflected this, be it in Central Europe, on the British Isles, or in the North.

1.3. Research on combat in Old Norse literature

So far, a work comparable to those of Hanley or Kellett does not exist for saga literature. As pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, Old Norse studies have largely managed to circumvent the topic of combat. If physical fighting, and the depiction thereof, can be

considered the *chronotopos* where conflict culminates, scholars rather stayed on its periphery. Yet, the existing research is of importance for our endeavour. It will help us to understand the contexts of combat and at least some of its features, both in history and literature.

The best known works in this area are those that deal with the social and legal context of armed violence. Jesse Byock and William Ian Miller studied the dynamics of feud and reconciliation in early Iceland, while Guðrún Nordal concentrated on the situation in the thirteenth century. (Byock, 1982; Miller, 1990; Nordal, 1998) Heiko Hiltmann discussed the ambivalent character of three important, violence-related themes in Old Norse literature – the *berserkr*, male honour, and *fóstbræðralag* (foster-brotherhood) – and interpreted them mostly as literary constructions of the 13th and 14th century. (Hiltmann, 2011) Of interest is also Oren Falk's recent article on “shaming by numbers”. It asks about the role of group-sizes in the foreplay of violent conflict. (Falk, 2014)

As far as I can see, there are only two academic books that deal exclusively with the combat scenes of saga literature.¹⁶ The first is Arthur Emil Haase's dissertation “Narrative Techniques in Scenes of Combat in the Icelandic Family Sagas“. (Haase, 1970) Although he remarked on the general tendency “to regard the combat narratives, which form a rather prominent part of most of the sagas, as both non-historical and non-realistic” (Haase, 1970, p. 8), Haase's main aim was not to contest this view. His perspective was a stylistic one, and asked for the content and vocabulary of the combat scenes, while

[t]he procedure used here is [...] descriptive rather than being theoretical. The goal is to obtain more information about one important aspect of the sagas both with respect to the individual sagas and to the family sagas as a group. While the goal of this investigation is not primarily the development of yet more theories about the sagas, it is to be hoped that such descriptive work will help any future theorizing to be more informed about saga phenomena. (Haase, 1970, p. 10)

Naturally, the result of this approach is rather encyclopaedic in character. To our benefit, Haase provided detailed close readings of a number of combat scenes, and made the important observation that the scenes are much too varied to be called simple repetitions of common models:

Combat scenes which resemble each other greatly with respect to their content, that is, in which much the same events are said to have taken place need not be, and often are not, depicted in equal detail, using the same order of events with the same narrative

16 Mathias Kruse's (University of Kiel) forthcoming dissertation “Komische Gewalt: Groteske Körper und Kämpfe in Märchen- und Vorzeitsagas” will likely be also highly relevant for the topic.

scheme, or in similar language. It is also possible to have the formal structure of two scenes resemble each other, have them related in much the same degree of detail, and have the language much the same except for the demands of the differing content, and still have the content differ to a significant extent. (Haase, 1970, pp. 16–17)

And he furthermore wrote:

It is found to be necessary when analyzing similarities and parallels [*sic!*] to make a distinction between form and content. Similarities in content appear much more frequent than do parallels in the language used to express that content. Even where the events depicted are almost identical, they are expressed in a variety of ways. Even in brief passages lacking in detail examples of repetition of other episodes are nearly nonexistent. It is found to be possible to investigate parallels and similarities, but the combat scenes in the sagas cannot really be considered stereotyped or lacking in individuality. (Haase, 1970, summary)

Haase's hope that his “descriptive work will help any future theorizing” was not fulfilled, at least not on a large scale. Fifteen years after his book, the combat scenes of saga literature were still perceived as “stereotypical” and “highly stylized”. (Clover, 1985, p. 278)

More nuanced in his judgement than Carol Clover was Bernhard Gottschling in his dissertation “Die Todesdarstellungen in den Islendingasögur”, the second book to deal almost exclusively with the topic in question. (Gottschling, 1986) Although the title suggests a study of death and dying in the sagas, Gottschling did in fact present an analysis of the narrative conventions and/or originality of the combat scenes. However, his perspective was much wider than just the moment of combat, as it also considered the immediate chain of event which leads to the (potential) death of a protagonist. Gottschling's interest was not in the physical actions of the fights, but in the schematic construction of the scenes, and in the use of recurring patterns. In contrast to Clover, he acknowledged the existence of both rigid and more free modes of application of literary conventions, both of which have the function to guide the recipient's expectations. (Gottschling, 1986, p. 319) According to Gottschling, for the recipient the question is not “Wird NN zu Tode kommen?”, but “In welcher Weise wird NN zu Tode kommen? [...] Das Interesse des Rezipienten ist hier also von der rein inhaltlichen Fragestellung zu einer ästhetischen Fragestellung hin verschoben.” (Gottschling, 1986, pp. 321–322) The „how will he die?“, the aesthetic question, would also be the one concerned with the details of combat description. While Gottschling did not discuss any of such details, he maintained: “Außerdem dienen die Todesdarstellungen [...] der Bewertung und Einschätzung der Hauptpersonen der jeweiligen Saga.” (Gottschling, 1986, p. 324) This assertion is one of the subjects of the work at hand.

While the combat scenes of the *Íslendingasögur* have not again been a central object of study after Gottschling's work, several authors have touched on them, usually during the discussion of a single saga. Of all *Íslendingasögur*, the fights of *Njáls saga* have drawn the most attention – the thesis at hand being no exception –, and a number of authors have considered their content, their form, and their meaning for the total of the text. Examples are Einar Ol. Sveinsson “Á Njálsbuð” (more widely known in its English translation from 1971), or the works of Richard F. Allen, and Lars Lönnroth. (Allen, 1971; Lönnroth, 1976; Sveinsson, 1943, 1971) While Sveinsson and Lönnroth dealt rather briefly with the topic, Allen's analysis is much more detailed and contributes several key issues to the discussion. His description of the saga's ship battle scenes, of the role the heroes Gunnarr and Kári play therein, of the narrative functions of certain combat actions, and of the integration of the scenes into the saga, are an ‘in a nutshell’-version of the methods and theories devised in the following chapters of the study at hand. More recently, the works of Andrew Joseph Hamer and Alois Wolf studied the theological – and in Wolf's case also political – implications of the armed violence in *Njáls saga*. (Hamer, 2008; Wolf, 2014)

Besides the research in *Njáls saga*, questions concerning the theological and/or moral dimension of violence have also been raised concerning those texts that seem to demonstrate an ambivalent attitude towards violence, most notably in two studies on *Fóstbrœðra saga*, by Uwe Ebel and Nils Hartmann. (Ebel, 2000; Hartmann, 2002) Although not dealing with an *Íslendingasaga*, but a king's saga, Edith Marold's article on the fights in *Sverris saga* shall also be mentioned here. (Marold, 2000)

Even though there is a lack of in-depth analysis of the combat scenes, sometimes individual scenes have served as examples within wider discussions of certain features of saga literature. For example, Margaret Clunies Ross highlighted a fight from *Valla-Ljóts saga* in an introduction to the narrative tools of the *Íslendingasögur*, while Vésteinn Ólason concerned himself with the question of realism in the sagas, and explicitly in the depiction of combat. (Clunies Ross, 2010; Ólason, 2007)

The issue of realism has also played a role in studies on the less prominent, more phantastic sub-genres of saga literature. Astrid van Nahl discussed the mass battles of the *riddarasögur*, and compared them with the combat scenes of *Íslendingasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*. (van Nahl, 1981) She emphasized the gory exaggerations and repetitive character of the scenes in the *riddarasögur*, and perceived them as similar to those of the *fornaldarsögur*, while different from the *Íslendingasögur* (these issues will be dealt with in

depth during following chapters). Jürg Glauser, also dealing with the original *riddarasögur* – or *Märchensagas*, as he called the texts of this corpus –, provided a list of the formulaic elements that make up the battle scenes in these texts, and discussed the role armed violence plays in them. (Glauser, 1983, pp. 114–115)

Outside the academic field of Old Norse studies, several hobbyists, fascinated with what they deem ‘Viking Age combat’, have also written on the *Íslendingasögur*’s combat scenes. However, the only one who deserves to be mentioned here is William Short. His work is a prime example of an anachronistic reading of the sagas, but his efforts in compiling and interpreting the relevant scenes should be acknowledged. (Short, 2009)

Besides the aforementioned works, that deal in one or the other way with saga literature’s combat scenes themselves, there are those studies that concentrate on separate topics belonging to the field of fighting and warfare. First to mention, and unsurpassed to this day, is Hjalmar Falk’s encyclopaedic presentation of arms and armour in Old Norse literature. (Falk, 1914) Similar, but not as extensive, is Hilda Ellis Davidson’s “The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England”, which, despite its name, also includes a chapter on the sword in Old Norse literature. (Davidson, 1962) Important in this respect are also Friedrich Grünzweig’s book on the sword among the Germanic people, and his article on cursed and enchanted swords in the sagas. (Grünzweig, 2009, 2014) Recently, Sue Brunning has discussed “swords as ‘living’ artefacts in Anglo-Saxon England and Scandinavia between c. 500 and 1100”. (Brunning, p. 10) Furthermore, Rolf Heller wrote on the narrative functions of body armour in *Laxdæla saga*. (Heller, 2009) The various archaeological studies of (mostly Viking Age) weaponry shall not be mentioned here; however, of interest is Jan H. Orkisz recent interdisciplinary article on pole-weapons in the *Íslendingasögur*, which compares literary and archaeological sources. (Orkisz, 2016) A general overview of Icelandic military history came from Birgir Loftsson, while Regis Boyer published a short discussion of the armed conflicts of the Sturlunga Age. (Boyer, 1970; Loftsson, 2006)

If weapons are one side of the coin, wounds and death are the other. Titles that deal with them are the books of Charlotte Kaiser and Stefan Buntrock, and Úlfar Bragason’s article on “the art of dying”. (Bragason, 1991; Buntrock, 2003; Kaiser, 1998) However, there is a prominent form of fighting in the sagas that, if done ‘correctly’, does not lead to bloodshed and death: convivial *glíma* wrestling (which will be the subject of chapter 8). After a very short account on the matter by Johannes Brøndum-Nielsen (Brøndum-Nielsen, 1924), it was Þórsteinn Einarsson who collected and thoroughly discussed the evidence for *glíma* in

Old Norse literature, also from the practical perspective of an active *glíma*-wrestler. (Einarsson, 2006) In some ways a trial balloon for the present work, an article on *glíma* was published in Matthias Teichert's collection on Old Norse games and sports. (Wetzler, 2014a) Recently, Qays Stetkevych wrote an excellent master thesis on how wrestling in the sagas can be interpreted from a modern martial arts perspective; his results are very much in line with the study at hand. (Stetkevych, 2015)

Convivial wrestling was a clearly defined form of fighting, as was the practice of ritualized duel, the *hólmanga*. Of all the possible subjects in the context of combat in saga literature, *hólmanga* is one of the two that have drawn the most scholarly attention (the other being the *berserkr*, see below). Early studies on the phenomenon were mostly interested in its assumed connection to religious ideas and rites, like that of Magnus Olsen, and tried to establish a connection to a postulated pan-Germanic tradition of religious ordeals by combat. (Olsen, 1910) Gwyn Jones rejected this view in two articles from the 1930s, and instead focussed on the procedure and elements of the *hólmanga* as described in the sagas. (Jones, 1932, 1933) In the same direction point four articles from the 1960s, two from Marlene Ciklamini, one from Gerd Sieg, and one from Olav Bø. (Bø, 1969; Ciklamini, 1963, 1965; Sieg, 1966) Carola Gottzmann concentrated on the *hólmanga* in *Njáls saga*, and its role within the legal fabric of the Icelandic Commonwealth. (Gottzmann, 1982) Being not a scholar of Old Norse, but a historian of law, R. S. Radford aimed for a re-assessment of the importance of the *hólmanga* as a “dispute resolving mechanism” for the stability of the Icelandic legal system. (Radford, 1988-89) This position was later backed by Jón Viðar Sigurðsson. (Sigurðsson, 1999) Hermann Pálsson and Stefanie Würth gave a wider overview of the subject, summarizing the previous research. (Pálsson & Würth, 1995) They emphasized the use of the duel as a narrative tool for the characterization of saga protagonists. Oren Falk discussed in two articles how the social network of the combatants (family members, and especially the audience) played a decisive role in the *hólmanga*. (Falk, 2004, 2005) *Hólmanga, glíma*, and open combat as parts of a continuum of violence were discussed by myself in a recent article. (Wetzler, 2014b)

Similar to early studies on the *hólmanga*, the research of the *berserkr* had been for a long time mainly concerned with the assumed religious dimension of the phenomenon, and certain remnants of old, pan-Germanic beliefs that might or might not shine through the Icelandic sources. The most influential work in this regard is, of course, Otto Höfler's

“Kultische Geheimbünde der Germanen”. (Höfler, 1934) A more recent proponent of an alleged ancient tradition of berserks is the work of Michael Speidel. He wrote that “[w]e first hear of berserks in the army of Tukulti-Ninurta, king of Assyria 1243-1207 BC.” (Speidel, 2004, p. 57) Since the discussion on the *berserkr*'s cultic background has, on the one hand, been going on for decades, while it is, on the other hand, hardly ever concerned with the details of combat itself, I shall only mention some recent titles here. For a summary of the previous research, see the work of Heiko Hiltmann (Hiltmann, 2011, pp. 95–105). Hiltmann rejected the common attempts to construct the *berserkr* as a heathen animal-warrior and asked instead how the literary figure could serve as both positive and negative male role-model when the sagas were written down. (Hiltmann, 2011, pp. 254–258) However, the older disputes are still alive. In two brief articles, Anatoly Liberman harshly attacked the idea of a connection to shamanistic, Odinic war bands; the latest version of his argument, expanded by a few pages and with further comments on the history of the subject's academic discussion, can be found in his monograph on Óðinn. (Liberman, 2004, 2005, 2015, pp. 101–112) Liberman's point of view was no less vigorously rejected by Jens Peter Schjødt. (Schjødt, 2011) Though more careful than Schjødt, Vincent Samson is basically in line with his emphasis on the cultic warrior groups and fighting under trance.¹⁷ (Samson, 2011, 2012) Recently, Roderick Dale dedicated his dissertation to the subject. (Dale, 2014) Likely the most complete work on the *berserkr* at this point, Dale pointed out that too much attention had been laid on the *berserksgangr*, the fighting under trance, and the *berserkr*'s aberrant behaviour. According to him, the *berserkr* should rather be perceived as a ‘champion’, an elite warrior with positive connotation. Lily Geraty, on the other hand, aimed at “introducing combat trauma to the compendium of theories on the Norse berserker“, as the subtitle of her MA thesis states. (Geraty, 2015) And finally, while the *berserkr* is being perceived as a thoroughly male phenomenon, Oren Falk's recent work on the “bare-sarked warrior” (note the play on words) discussed the topos of the naked and thus threatening female body in combat. (Falk, 2015)

¹⁷ I thank Anne Hofmann for making a lecture manuscript of Vincent Samson available to me.

1.4. A threefold approach towards combat in Old Norse literature

As the survey of the existing research has shown, combat itself, as depicted in saga literature, has never been in the spotlight of Old Norse studies. The work at hand shall fill this gap. To do so, it will take a threefold approach on the source material:

- a) The use of the combat scenes both for entertainment, and for other literary purposes shall be analysed.
- b) The traces of martial arts knowledge in saga literature shall be made visible.
- c) The place of combat and combat practice in the medieval Icelandic society shall be discussed.

Perspective a) governs the major part of the work, and will discuss the literary tools and the narrative functions of the combat scenes of saga literature. This shall happen on a wider basis and in greater detail than in the studies listed above. Scholars often explained combat in the sagas by the results deduced from a limited number of texts. And they tended to inspect their examples rather superficially, fitting them into a rough grid that hardly allowed for nuanced observations. Both mistakes shall be avoided here.

Combat scenes can be realized very differently, and it is not feasible to subsume all of them under one general category. After a short discussion of the problem of genre in the study of saga literature, four ‘modes of combat’ will be introduced, each in its own chapter. These ‘modes of combat’ can serve as archetypes of combat description in the sagas. Although they reflect some of the sub-genres commonly used in the study of Old Norse literature – *fornaldarsögur*, *riddarasögur*, *ævintýrasögur*, and *Íslendingasögur* –, they shall not be understood as each being invariably assigned to one or the other type of texts. Especially in the case of longer *Íslendingasögur*, one text may include combat scenes that adhere to the characteristics of more than one ‘mode of combat’.

The longest chapter, and heart of the study, will be dedicated to what shall be called the ‘factual mode of combat’. It will be developed in a discussion of the combat scenes of *Njáls saga*. The ‘factual mode of combat’ accounts for those kinds of combat scenes that, even though exaggerated, still depict fighting in a way that is grounded in reality, and

reflects it more adequately. 'Historical reality' is, of course, a rather fluid thing to define. It is not meant here as 'factual historicity' – the question is not if the fights referred in the saga did indeed happen, or if they were fashioned after historical models. The question is instead, if the movements described in the saga compel to the techniques of martial arts that did or do exist. The tradition of the medieval European martial arts and their important sources will be described in an own sub-chapter. Together with knowledge gained from existing Asian martial arts and first hand experience with surviving medieval weapons, this 'practical' perspective on fighting will be the background on which the realism of the combat scenes will be judged.

However, it is self-explaining that *Njáls saga* is a literary text with literary intentions, not a martial arts manual. If there is a realistic dimension to the combat scenes, there is also a narrative dimension – the latter most likely being the more important one for the saga's author. Where realism and narrative function might clash, the text puts story first, and plausible description of fighting second. It is thus impossible to decide to which extent the combat scenes of the saga reflect actual martial practices without first analysing their narrative functions in the text.

Such an analysis will demonstrate how carefully the author constructed his depictions of fighting and to what great extent the scenes reflect the themes of the saga. Close reading will reveal that the individual actions used by the protagonists in combat are not randomly interspersed in the text, nor are they simple stereotypes. They carry meaning for the story, and they highlight the conflicts between, but also within the protagonists.

By the use of recurring constellations, situations, or motifs, the combat scenes are woven into a network that permeates *Njáls saga* and also creates intertextual connections to similar scenes of other sagas. The principles of the 'factual mode of combat' can easily be applied to them, too. To demonstrate this, a number of combat scenes from *Grettis saga* and *Víga-Glúms saga* will be analysed, and common patterns discussed.

After a detailed discussion of the narrative purposes of combat, it is possible to assess the degree of realism in the combat scenes, and to check to what extent the descriptions resemble the movements of actual martial arts training. A sub-chapter on *Njáls saga* will deal with these questions, which belong to the above-mentioned *perspective b)*. However, as the narrative dimension and the realistic dimension are often interwoven in a given combat scene, *perspective b)* will unavoidably play a role at various other places throughout the text.

Finally, the last chapter will adhere to *perspective c)* and concentrate on *glíma* wrestling. It will further discuss how literature attests to actual historical practices, and how these practices have to be imagined.

My hope is that by looking at the sources from these three perspectives, a new understanding can be achieved: The understanding that combat in Old Norse literature had been far too important a theme – both for authors and audience – to be neglected in scholarly research. Nor that it could be simply shrugged off with a joke. *Bændur flugust á*, indeed – but: How did they do it? And why did they love so much to write about it?

2. The problem of genre and the concept of a ‘mode of combat’

In Old Icelandic literature, a combat scene is not just a side note. The descriptions of interpersonal violence and weapon fighting are dense, most of the times exciting moments, and various, different layers of meaning are attached to them. These layers of meaning – e. g., the atmosphere of a fight, the qualities of a protagonist, the relations between the characters – are dependent on the overall tone of the saga to which the combat scene belongs, and at the same time help to define this tone. Just as tone, setting and atmosphere of the classic *Íslendingasögur* are different from a *riddarasaga*, so are their depictions of combat.

The main focus of this thesis is on the combat scenes in the *Íslendingasögur*. However, to better understand how these scenes are situated within the corpus of saga literature, we will first take a look at four sagas that are commonly assigned to other sub-genres: *Rémundar saga keisarasonar* as one of the original *riddarasögur*, and three examples of the *fornaldarsögur*. These latter three can be further divided into ‘adventure tales’ and ‘hero legends’, following Pálsson (Pálsson, 1984, p. 138): *Völsunga saga* counts as ‘hero legend’, whereas *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana* and *Bósa saga ok Herraudós* can be identified as ‘adventure tales’.

Of course, the borders between genres can be blurry. Furthermore, a single text can include quite different approaches towards the narration of a fight. On the other hand, sagas do indeed adhere to typical or even standardized ways of combat description. Such typical or standardized ways are the basis of the aforementioned ‘modes of combat’. Because the ‘modes of combat’ will be associated with some of the genres commonly used to describe saga literature, a short discussion of the problematic distinction between the genres is necessary.

Much has been written about the difficulties of establishing the sub-genres of saga literature as distinct entities, and of drawing clear borders between. But no definite conclusion has been reached so far, and “der Gebrauch der Terminologie in der Forschung ist also uneinheitlich”. (Schäfer, 2013, p. 6) In his overview of saga literature, Kurt Schier notes the overlap between younger *fornaldarsögur* and *Märchensagas* on the one hand (Schier, 1970, p. 72), between *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur* on the other (Schier, 1970,

p. 105), and he points out that almost all *fornaldarsögur* show characteristics of more than one of the sub-types ‘hero legend’, ‘adventure tale’ and ‘Viking saga’. Other authors had less problems with a distinction than Schier, while the characteristics that assign a saga to this or that genre may vary. Torfi Tulinius ties the genres to their personnel:

The fact that these sagas [the *fornaldarsögur*] feature heroes who are Scandinavian or linked with Scandinavia in some way is an important characteristic and results in these sagas being categorized as a separate group, distinct from the chivalric sagas or *riddarasögur*. (Tulinius, 2002, p. 19)

In his extensive discussion of the problem, Stephen Mitchell (Mitchell, 1991, pp. 8–43) suggests a two-dimensional coordinate system to organize saga literature, with one axis “factual – fabulous” and one axis “more traditional – less traditional”. Especially the axis “factual – fabulous” will become important in the course of this work. According to the coordinate system, Mitchell defines *fornaldarsögur* as “Old Icelandic prose narratives based on traditional heroic themes, whose numerous fabulous episodes and motifs create an atmosphere of unreality” (Mitchell, 1991, p. 27), whereas original and translated *riddarasögur* can be distinguished from them by being orientated towards the less traditional end of the scale. In his study of *Märchensagas*, Jürg Glauser emphasized their “polymorphen Charakter“ (Glauser, 1983, p. 21) and understood them as „eine Art Mischform aus Rittersaga und Vorzeitsaga“. (Glauser, 1983, pp. 10–11) Paul Bibire identified a

clear and conscious distinction made by most saga-authors between the body of styles and motifs proper to Secondary Romance [original *riddarasögur*], and that proper to the *fornaldarsaga*. They are parallel but largely independent genres, and overlap to a surprisingly limited extent. [...] It must be noted that there is little certain reciprocal influence from romance upon the *fornaldarsögur*. (Bibire, 1985, p. 73)

Only a few pages later in the same volume, Marianne Kalinke argued that the distinction between *riddara-* and *fornaldarsögur* is an artificial one. According to her, both genres are not even sufficiently homogeneous within themselves to be identified as distinct entities:

The designation *riddarasögur* for one group and *fornaldarsögur* for another group of sagas suggests not only the existence of two distinct genres but also an essential homogeneity for the works subsumed under the respective categories. Such a homogeneity exists for neither *riddarasögur* nor *fornaldarsögur*. (Kalinke, 1985b, p. 75)

She maintains this view in her study on the bridal-quest romance: “The traditional terms, which suggest generic differences between the categories and a certain homogeneity

within each classification, turn out to be illusory.” (Kalinke, 1990, pp. 9–10) Instead, Kalinke opted for a study of individual structures or motifs that can appear across assumed genre borders. This approach is important for our analysis, and has been further elaborated on by Lars Lönnroth. Following Hans Robert Jauß' theory of genre in medieval literature (Jauß, 1972), Lönnroth asks whether the classification of a *fornaldarsaga* into one of the sub-genres 'hero legend', 'Viking saga' or 'adventure tale' makes sense at all:

Frågan är då om det överhuvudtaget är möjligt att entydigt bestämma den enskilda sagatextens genrekarakteristik. Kanske får man i stället läsa den som en mångskiftande och motsägelsefull diskurs där flera genrer satt sina spår och stilambitionen växlar från kapitel till kapitel allt efter vad som avhandlas: hjältedåd eller erotik, holmgång eller bröllop, livet på båndgården eller livet i kungaborgen. (Lönnroth, 2003, p. 39)

According to him, we can “kanske därför uppfatta alla fornaldarsagor som blandade eller hybridartade texter med större eller mindre inslag av Edda-myt, hjältesaga, folksaga och riddarroman”. (Lönnroth, 2003, p. 44) Consequently, Lönnroth argues for an analysis of a saga not as a homogeneous monolith of text, but instead of its various scenes as more independent entities:

Men framför allt finns det skäl att fråga sig om det inte är meningsfullare att hänföra enskilda scener och scenetyper - snarare än hela sagor - till en bestämd genre. [...] Långt viktigare blir att utröna lånordfrekvensen eller versfrekvensen eller förhållandet mellan berättande och direkt tal eller andra sådana genremarkörer i *enskilda scentyper* eller *handlingsmoment*. Med stor sannolikhet kan vi förvänta oss att finna 'sagastil' när det handlar om traditionella sagaämnen, medan vi däremot kan vi förvänta oss att finna höviska lånord, riddarromantisk stil och så vidare när det handlar om tournering, hövisk kärlek eller bröllop. (Lönnroth, 2003, pp. 43–44)

In our discussion of the saga examples in chapter 3,4, and 5, Lönnroth's approach will be followed. These sagas have been chosen because each of them displays a certain style of combat description, one that remains more or less homogeneous within the particular text. Therefore, no matter whether the attribution of the sagas to the genres is appropriate or not, different genres of combat scenes can be made out – or, to avoid the difficult term 'genre', different 'modes of combat' that are clearly distinguishable from each other.¹⁸ The concept of literary 'modes' is used according to Margaret Clunies Ross:

18 Of course, one could argue that micro level and macro level mirror each other, so that Lönnroth's argument, consequently followed through, must also be applied on the level of *enskilda scentyper* and *handlingsmoment*. Then, instead of analysing whole scenes to distil the 'modes of combat', we would have to look for the genre classification of ever smaller units, at single sentences, from there at single words... to end up with a “map of the world scale 1:1”. The level of observation at which we perceive, describe and analyse is inevitably arbitrary, to some degree. Yet I hope to choose one that has the right scale to deepen our understanding of the subject.

Literary modes exist within a variety of external forms, as, for example, when a novel is described as 'comic'. This particular modal designation can be applied to a number of literary forms, dramatic, narrative or operatic. Thus, in the case of the Icelandic saga, its generic identity determines characteristics of its form, including such qualities as structure, setting, characterisation and narrative character, while its mode gives the genre its distinction of mood, its approach to the relationship between possibility and actuality as depicted in the saga world. (Clunies Ross, 2010, p. 96)

Thus, the 'modes of combat' described in the following chapters define how and how not combat is executed in a saga, what is possible and impossible, what may or may not happen, and which emotional undertone a combat scene transports.

3. Sword and lance: The ‘knightly mode of combat’

Because knighthood is typically associated with ideal, chivalrous forms of behavior both in combat and in non-combative social situations, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that it is, basically, a form of *fighting*, the aim of which is the forceful subordination of one's opponent. This aspect of knighthood is often overlooked or ignored in appraisals of the Arthurian romances that view chivalry solely as a refined, gentlemanly kind of interaction with one's fellow man, be this a military opponent or a beloved lady. While a good part of knighthood may involve [*sic!*] gentler, courteous forms of interaction, it remains in its most basic historical form attached to values, priorities, and interests of an essentially military nature. (Hasty, 2002, p. 31)

Originally pointed towards German court poetry, Will Hasty's words should also be borne in mind for a discussion of the Icelandic *riddarasögur*. While the English word *knight* (from Old English *cniht*, and similar to Middle High German *kneht* and Modern German *Knecht*) originally conveyed the meaning of ‘young boy’, and then ‘one who serves’, Old Icelandic *riddari* indicates the very martial meaning that lies at the core of the knightly class's self understanding and military importance – a *riddari* is one who knows how to fight on horseback (and has the financial means to support steed, arms, and armour). The technique of mounted fighting is a latecomer to the Northern European and Scandinavian people, who, in Viking times, had been used to fighting on foot. The importance of heavy cavalry, successfully applied by the Frankish military, or by William the Conqueror's troops, had been growing continuously, and spread to Scandinavia during the High Middle Ages. Evidence of the precise Norse awareness of mounted fighting can be found in *konungs skuggsjá*, written around 1250. Herein are not only the weapons and armour a knight should use explained in full detail, but also the necessary armour and gear for his horse. (Brenner, 1881, pp. 102–104) Furthermore, the appropriate fighting technique is described and guidelines for training are given:

Ef þu ert staddr þar sæm hæstum ma riða oc att þu þer sialfr hæst þa stigh þu ahæst þinn mæð þungum wapnum oc tæm þec til hværsu þu mægir þærs sitia a hæsti þinum er bæðe fægrr oc fastazt. Wæn fot þinn at þrysta fast istaðum mæð rettum læggium oc lat hæl þinn noccot swa siga læghra en tær næma þwi at æins at þu þurwir framan at warazt alagha oc wæn þec þo fast at sitia mæð þrystanndum læggium. Hyl wæl briost þitt oc alla limi þina mæð locnum skilldi. Wæn þu hina winstri honnd wæl at geta bæizlz oc munnriða en hina hægri honnd wæn þu at hœwa wæl glæwiu alaghe mæð fulltingiannde briost afli. Wæn þu hæst þinn goðan um at kasta alaupannda skrifi oc haf hann hvartwæggia wæl at holldum oc reinan skwæþu hann wæl oc fastlegha mæðr stærkium oc fagrum allum hæst bunaðe. (Brenner, 1881, p. 99)

Of course it remains open for debate how many of the Norwegian king's *hirðmenn* had the financial means and spare time to follow the given instructions. It has been argued that the term *riddari* was introduced to Norway most of all as a title for a certain social status (Meissner, 1902, p. 120), and that the adaption to the new fighting techniques happened considerably later than in most other parts of Europe. In fact, as Sverre Bagge pointed out,

no military revolution took place in Norway [until the late Middle Ages], and as far as we can see, there was considerable continuity in the military organisation from the tenth to the early fourteenth century. [...] Norway thus adapted to the military technology of the centre to a lesser extent than most other countries in the northern and eastern periphery of Western Christendom. (Bagge, 2010, pp. 133–134)¹⁹

But it is clear that in a culture where martial prowess and military know-how was held in high esteem, the *konungs skuggsjá* reflected the medieval Norwegian elite's desire to connect with the cultural standards of more southern regions of Europe – probably even more so, since their Scandinavian neighbours in Denmark and Sweden had been quicker to adopt the new combat methods:

Heavy cavalry was used from the first half of the twelfth century in Denmark and somewhat later in Sweden. From the late twelfth century onwards, the Danish peasant levy was gradually replaced by full-time warriors [...] The formal expression of the new order in Sweden came in *Alsnö stadga* (the Statute of Alsnö), probably in 1280, which is usually regarded as a kind of ‘constitution’ for the Swedish aristocracy, confirming the principle of specialised military service on horseback in return for privileges. (Bagge, 2010, p. 71)

This desire to participate culturally did not only result in the awareness and adaptation of Central European military technology and the related martial arts. At the same time and in the same social context in which *konungs skuggsjá* was written – that is, at the court of Hákon IV. Hákonarson (1204-1263) – European chivalric romance began to be translated into Old Norse.²⁰ Now, the literature produced in the North highlighted the techniques of mounted combat, comparable to what Kay Malcher has noted concerning High Middle German chivalrous literature: “Die hierarchisch-ständische Komponente der Demonstration von Gewaltfähigkeit eines *herren* ist geknüpft an die Bedingung des Berittenseins.” (Malcher, 2009, p. 105) The adaption of both military technique and corresponding literature is an example of the interrelation between combat practice, combat training and the narrations of combat that Phillip Zarrilli described:

¹⁹ Bagge (2010, pp. 69–135) discussed several possible reasons for this slow development – like limited resources, distance from the European centre, and importance of naval warfare – which are not of direct interest here.

²⁰ Kramarz-Bein (2002) discussed the role of Hákon's court for the translation and adaptation of continental literature into Old Norse. Her focus is on *Þiðreks saga*, but her results are just as valid for other texts.

The heroic display ethos of a culture or subculture is that collective set of behaviours, expected actions and principles or codes of conduct that ideally guide and are displayed by a hero [...]. The heroic display ethos [...], the oral and/or written mythologies and histories of martial exploits, and specific martial techniques collectively constitute a network of three symbiotically interrelated phenomena. Together, they combine to constitute a variety of genres of cultural performance ranging from aesthetic, virtual displays [...] to game-contests or mock combats arranged as part of a public festival [...], to duels or combats [...], to external warfare itself. (Zarrilli, 2010, p. 606)

Zarrilli's observation helps to disperse the doubts on the dating of the first translations of *riddarasögur* under Hákon Hákonarson, that e. g. Glauser carefully utters.²¹ It is quite likely that the social elite's growing awareness of new combat techniques was accompanied by the adaptation of literary representations to tell about them.²² In respect to *Parcevals saga*, one of the Arthurian texts translated at Hákon's court, Susanne Kramarz-Bein pointed out the close relationship to the *konungs skuggsjá*, and the ideal picture of the knight both texts present:

Der junge Parceval ist also zuerst das unerfahrene törichte Muttersöhnchen, das sich jedoch mit Hilfe von Gormanz' höfischem Erziehungsprogramm schnell zum idealen Ritter bildet. [...] Mit dieser Dominanz des Erziehungs- und Bildungsaspekts hebt sich die *Parcevals saga* aus dem Corpus der anderen übersetzten Riddarasögur ab und steht damit zugleich in deutlich vernehmbarer Nähe zum altnorwegischen *Königsspiegel*, der sich in seinem zweiten Teil über die königliche *hirð* ausführlich mit Fragen einer Hof- und praktischen Ritterlehre befaßt. Besonders das V. und VI. Kapitel der *Parcevals saga* mit der Schilderung der höfischen Unterweisung durch Gormanz in praktisch-ritterlichen (Unterricht auf freiem Feld), aber auch in ritterethischen Fragen [...] macht enge Textbeziehungen zwischen der *Konungs skuggsjá* und der *Parcevals saga* offenkundig. [...] Im Gegensatz zu Chrestien fehlt der altnorwegischen Saga die ironische Distanz zu ihrem Helden, die Chrestiens Werk bestimmt und auch dessen Bild vom höfischen Rittertum prägt [...]. In gewisser Weise stellt sich die Idee des Höfischen in der *Parcevals saga* somit in weniger gebrochener und idealisierter Form dar als bei Chrestien. Auch unter diesem Aspekt steht die *Parcevals saga* in deutlicher Nähe zum *Königsspiegel*, dessen *hirð*-Abschnitt als ein Kompendium des Höfischen betrachtet werden kann. Mit ihren Textbeziehungen erweisen sich die *Parcevals saga* und die *Konungs skuggsjá* als eng zusammengehörige Texte innerhalb des altnorwegischen höfischen Milieus. (Kramarz-Bein, 1999, pp. 69–70)

21 “[T]he dating [of the first translations of *riddarasögur* to the reign of King Hákon Hákonarson] is based on details in *riddara sögur* manuscripts, where references are made to King Hákon as commissioner in the prologues and epilogues of some sagas [...]. However, one must keep in mind here that these references are often found in recent, sometimes post-Reformation manuscripts and are of uncertain value as sources.” (Glauser (2005, p. 375))

22 For a concise discussion of the compound symbol ‘knight & horse’, see Friedrich (2001, p. 250). He writes: “In diesem Zusammenhang erhält das Gefüge Ritter-Pferd [...] auf ganz unterschiedlichen Ebenen Bedeutung zugeschrieben. Grundlage ist die Funktion als militärisches Instrument [...]; darüber hinaus wird diese reale Funktion mit Bedeutung angereichert, wenn vornehmlich in der volkssprachlichen Literatur Körperkonzept und Gewaltethos des Adels im Pferd gespiegelt werden [...]; im politisch-sozialen Feld der Historiographie dagegen dienen die verschiedenen Inszenierungen des Ritter-Pferd-Gefüges der Darstellung von Gewaltüberlegenheit [...]; schließlich erhält der Ritterstand über das Pferd Anschluss an kulturgeschichtliche und metaphysische Legitimationsmuster.”

3.1. Different perspectives on combat: *Ívens saga* and foreign literature

The focus of this chapter lies on how the North visualized knightly combat and translated it into literature in the so called 'original *riddarasögur*'. Nevertheless, it is important first to take a quick look at the 'translated *riddarasögur*', and to understand that the combat scenes of the original ones were not created *ex nihilo*. They have their direct forerunners in chivalric texts of the continent. This is not as self-evident as it may seem, as a medieval translator was just as much redactor and interpreter of the original text, and enjoyed great freedom to work with the source material he encountered.²³ To demonstrate how closely the Old Norse versions could follow the continental texts, I will compare some combat scenes of Chrétien de Troyes' *Yvain* with their Old Norse translation in the *Ívens saga*.²⁴ Taking furthermore the Middle High German *Îwein* of Hartmann von Aue and the Middle Kymric *Chwedyl Jarlles y Ffynnon* ('The Lady of the Fountain', for shortness' sake called *Owein* from here on) into consideration will help to highlight the saga's fascination with knightly fighting. The four texts are variations of the same story, namely of the adventures of Yvain, the knight with the lion. The relationship between the Welsh and the French text remains unclear,²⁵ and shall not be addressed here, while Hartmann's work is an adaptation of that of Chrétien - "der deutsche Dichter steht zur französischen Vorlage in einem differenzierten Adaptationsverhältnis, das sich insbesondere auch in der Umsetzung von Gewaltszenen niederschlägt". (Bein, 1998, p. 39) However, both *Îwein* and *Owein* display a very different technique of describing combat than the French and the Old

23 Seidel (2014, p. 62) contested the use of the term 'translated' *riddarasögur* altogether: "Zudem wird die Bezeichnung ü. Rs. [übersetzte Riddarasögur] dem komplexen Übertragungsvorgang nicht gerecht. Die erhaltenen Texte sind dabei m. E. besser als Adaption und Bearbeitung zu bezeichnen, und nicht als Übersetzung."

24 Two medieval manuscripts of *Ívens saga* exist, *Holm perg 6 4to* and *AM 489 4to*, dating to the first quarter and the middle of the 15th century, respectively. Furthermore, the paper manuscript *Holm papp 46 fol* from 1690 contains a shorter version of *Ívens saga*, copied partly from the lost medieval *Ormsbók*, dating to ca. 1350-1400, and from *Holm perg 6 4to*. Kalinke (1985a, pp. 335-336) has stressed the importance of this paper manuscript for an understanding of *Ívens saga*. For a most recent and detailed survey of the textual transmission of *Ívens saga*, see Seidel (2014). For a general discussion of the relationship between the Old French and Old Norse texts, see Marold (1985) and Kretschmer (1982). Seidel (2014, p. 31) criticised the comparisons of *Ívens saga* and the Old French text in general, for methodological reasons. Her arguments cannot be easily dismissed insofar as we have to consider the possibility that the combat scenes (like any part of the texts) may be later insertions to both the Old French and the Old Norse versions. However, the convergence of military development and textual representation would provide the basis for a plausible dating of especially the combat scenes' origin in the 13th century. Even if this is not the case, the scenes show obvious similarities that are hardly coincidental, and a rather direct dependence of the Old Norse on the Old French text can reasonably be assumed.

25 "The relationship between the Welsh prose tales and the metrical romances of Chrétien de Troyes has been the source of much controversy. The degree of correspondence between both sets of tales is such as to presuppose a close relationship between them; yet, the nature of the exact relationship is still contentious. The situation is further complicated by the fact that each of the individual texts has its own history of composition, so that the relationship with the French poems may vary considerably from tale to tale." (Reck (2010, p. 63))

Norse versions.²⁶ Of course, a comparison of further translated combat scenes with their continental originals would be interesting in their own right. However, the study of the four *Yvain* versions shall suffice for now.

Chrétien's *Yvain* includes seven central combat scenes. (Bein, 1998, p. 42) Of these seven, three scenes shall be discussed here. The other four are outside our direct focus, since they depict fighting not among knights, but include non-human creatures (dragon, lion, giants). To compare parallels and differences more easily, the scenes are quoted in their English translations, broken down into passages and put side by side. (See the appendix for the scenes in their original language.)

a) *Yvain* against the Keeper of the Fountain

| <i>Yvain</i> ²⁷ | <i>Íven</i> ²⁸ | <i>Îwein</i> ²⁹ | <i>Owein</i> ³⁰ |
|--|--|---|--|
| (I) And the moment they saw each other they rushed together, both seemingly full of mortal hatred. | (I) As soon as the two saw each other, they met with such great hatred, as if each had a mortal offense repay the other. | (I) And Iwein was well aware that he had to defend himself unless he wanted to suffer sorrow and shame. Each man was intent on defeating his opponent. Fierce determination and anger had taken hold of them, and they were so eager to get at one another that they spurred their horses on to the charge. | (I) And Owein came against him, and he jousting fiercely with him, |
| (II) They each had a stout and strong lance; and they exchange such hard blows that both of the shields at their necks are pierced, the hauberks are rent, the lances shatter and shiver, and the splinters from them fly aloft. | (II) Both had extremely strong, stout lances. Their coats of mail cracked, their lances broke, and the pieces flew up in the air. | (II) Each man ran his spear through his opponent's shield onto the armor where it shattered into a hundred pieces. | (II) and they broke their two spears, |
| (III) They then drew their swords and struck each other with blows that sliced through the shield-straps and completely split | (III) Then the two quickly drew their swords and struck at each other, while protecting themselves with their shields. They fought | (III) And so they had to draw their swords from their side. Now such fighting broke out that God himself would have been | (III) and unsheathed two swords, and smote each other. |

26 For a longer discussion of the combat scenes in the four texts mentioned here, and further versions of the *Yvain* theme, see Bein (1998). Bein's article is one of the few that deal explicitly with the combat scenes of chivalric literature. However, his focus lies mostly on the implications of the different depictions of violence, rather than how the texts deal with martial technique – in other words, on the wounds a sword inflicts, not on the way it is swung.

27 Transl.: Kibler and Carroll (1991)

28 Transl.: Blaisdell, Foster W. Jr. and Kalinke (1977)

29 Transl.: McConeghy (1978)

30 Transl.: Jones and Jones (1957)

| | | | |
|---|--|---|--|
| <p>the bucklers, both top and bottom, so that the pieces hung down and were useless to cover or defend them. Their shields had so many holes that their bright swords struck directly on their sides, their breasts, and their flanks.</p> | <p>with such great eagerness and ardor that the shields were split and fell to the ground. They had so cut them into small pieces that it was no longer possible to use them for protection. Then the swords came down on shoulders and arms, on legs and loins.</p> | <p>proud to see such a battle take place before him. The shields which each man held up in his defense bore the brunt of the blows as long as they lasted. But soon they were hacked to pieces by the swords and were useless to the men.</p> | |
| <p>(IV) They tested one another cruelly, yet they stood their ground like two blocks of stone [...] They had no wish to waste their blows and delivered them as accurately as they could. Helmets were dented and bent, and links of mail flew from their hauberks, amid much loss of blood. [...] Throughout they fought most honourably, for they never struck at or wounded their horses at all, nor did they deign or desire to. They remained on horseback throughout and never fought on foot, and the battle was more splendid for it.</p> | <p>(IV) So eagerly and bravely did they fight that neither gave ground to the other. They sat as firmly as if they were stocks or stones. [...] they paid such close attention to where [their blows] fell that their helmets split and the rings of their coats of mail flew up in the air. [...] In one thing, however, they behaved like courteous knights – neither wished to strike or injure the other's horse. Both remained mounted the whole time.</p> | <p>(IV) I could compose a marvelous fight for you, except that I prefer not to do so for the following reasons. The only people who could substantiate my story would be the two knights themselves. Since there were no witnesses, how could I tell of how this man struck or that man thrust? One of the men was killed. He could relate nothing of the fight. On the other hand, the man who was victorious was such a gentleman that he would have been most reluctant to boast of his strength and courage from which I would be able to measure the quality of their thrusts and blows. But I can assure you of this: Neither man showed any cowardice. Many blows were exchanged</p> | <p>(IV) [-]</p> |
| <p>(V) In the end, my lord Yvain shatters the helmet of the knight, who was stunned and dazed; and never having suffered such a savage blow before, he was terrified. For under the coif it had split his head down to the brain, so that the links of the shining hauberk were stained with brains and blood, which caused him such intense pain that his heart almost failed him. If he then fled, he had a good reason, since he felt himself mortally wounded and any further resistance would</p> | <p>(V) Finally Sir Íven cut into the knight's helmet with such a great blow that his opponent acted as if he had lost his senses. The knight was terrified because he had never before felt such a blow. His helmet was cracked and his mail hood broken. The sword had cut into his skull. When Íven pulled the sword back, all the mail hood was covered with blood and brains. The knight was certainly not to be reproached for fleeing now, because he felt himself mortally wounded.</p> | <p>(V) before the intruder finally struck the host a blow through the helmet, cutting to the very life of him. And when the lord felt the gravity of the fatal wound, it was not cowardice, but the pain of the approaching death that caused him to turn and flee. (1004-55)</p> | <p>(V) And thereupon Owein struck a blow to the knight through his helmet and the mail-cap and the linen cap of Burgundian linen and through the skin and the flesh and the bone until it wounded the brain. And then the black knight knew that he had received a deadly blow, and turned his horse's head and fled. (270-76)</p> |

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| have been quite senseless. (815-75) | There was no use in defending himself any longer [...] (Ch. 3) | | |
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A first, seemingly obvious observation, that needs mentioning nonetheless: All four text deal with knightly combat in its archetypical form, which is mounted on horseback, in full armour, and with lance, sword, and shield. Hartmann's version sticks out for its narrator comments, giving *Îwein's* motivation for his eagerness to fight, and judging the beauty of the fight, which would have pleased God himself. But most noteworthy is his rather unusual way to deal with combat: by not telling it at all. Hartmann's strategy of storytelling, in which “[...] nahezu jede Form von blutigem Detailrealismus wird vermieden” (Bein, 1998, p. 46), reaches its climax in the author's explanation why he would not compose an entertaining fight, although he surely could.³¹ The Kymric text refers the whole fight in a few sentences. It mentions the basic ingredients of chivalric mounted combat – jousting, breaking of lances, exchange of sword blows, wounding the opponent –, but it is not interested in the details of the fight, the only exception being the list of materials cut by *Owein's* decisive blow. Thus, both *Îwein* and *Owein* show ways to describe knightly combat with a minimum of information on combat technique, and on the bloody consequences such fighting has on the human body.³² Which literary intentions their authors had in mind are fascinating questions for themselves, but not to be answered here. Important for our research is the fact that there was obviously not only one, but several ways to transform mounted fighting into text. Of course, these different options depended on literary tradition and individual creativity available to an author, and were not a menu to chose from freely. The author of *Ívens saga* could have designed combat hardly as radically reduced as Hartmann did. But on the other hand, the Old Norse translator proved that he was well capable of altering the text, and mostly by omitting those parts he did not deem interesting, or fitting for his own or his employer's agenda:

Was die inhaltliche Seite anbelangt, so ist am auffälligsten die Kürzung des Textes gegenüber der französischen Vorlage, vor allem im Bereich von deskriptiven Passagen und psychologisierenden Betrachtungen. [...] [S]ie findet sich auch in den anderen norwegischen Versionen der Werke Chretiens de Troyes. (Simek, 1982, p. 100)

31 One cannot help but contemplate how strange Hartmann's attitude would have seemed to one of his saga-writing Icelandic colleagues.

32 “Hartmann [...] geht mit den Kampfszenen ziemlich frei um; er erweitert oder strafft, verschiebt Einzelheiten zwischen den Episoden und erzählt insgesamt weniger konkret; er mildert die Grausamkeiten und legt größeres Gewicht auf den rituellen Ablauf und seine didaktische Vorbildlichkeit.” (Huber (1996, p. 62))

Had it been the translator's intention, he could have shortened the combat scenes to a length in which they would have looked like those of *Owein*. But he did not. Instead, he made sure that all combat details of the French original were to be found in his version, too – mighty sword blows, destruction of armour, and the rather disgusting splattering of the defeated knight's brain. The Old Norse text even includes the knights' caution not to hit each other's horse. When mounted combat was a *novum*, the terms of its proper conduct were of course of interest to an Old Norse audience. Therefore, the Old Norse Íven and his enemy remain on horseback throughout the whole fight, which is at this time unusual for the North, but in line with Yvain's chivalric way of fighting.³³

b) The battle against Count Aliers

The second scene to be discussed includes a mass battle, where Yvain is pitted against countless enemies:

| <i>Yvain</i> | <i>Ívens saga</i> | <i>Íwein</i> | <i>Owein</i> |
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| (I) My lord Yvain [...] struck into the thick of the press. He hammered a knight's shield with such | (I) As soon as they met, Íven thrust his lance through a knight and hurled him to the ground | (I) [-] | (I) [-] |

³³ Instead of the parallels between *Yvain* and *Ívens saga*, which are most evident when comparing the two texts with the German and the Kymric version, Kretschmer (1982, pp. 58–59) sees a difference in the way mounted combat is represented: “Zwar wird auch in der *Ívens saga* erwähnt, dass die Kämpfer nicht von ihren Pferden steigen, doch enthält sich der Übersetzer jeglichen dem altfranzösischen Original vergleichbaren Kommentars [...]. Dies mag nun nicht allein darin begründet sein, daß die Figur des Erzählers in den Werken der altnordischen Prosa kaum in den Vordergrund tritt, sondern vor allem auch darin, daß die Reiterei und damit der Kampf zu Pferd im Norden eine nur untergeordnete Rolle spielten. Ein dem Original vergleichbarer Kommentar an dieser Stelle hätte demnach den altnordischen Publikumsgeschmack verfehlt. Diese These läßt sich durch eine Beobachtung an der Szene stützen, in der gegen Ende des *Yvain* der Titelheld und Gauvain gegeneinander kämpfen, ohne sich dabei allerdings zu erkennen. Die altnordische Übersetzung berichtet, daß beide Ritter so verwundet und erschöpft waren, daß ‘sie deshalb von den Pferden steigen mussten’ [...]. Dieser selbständige Zusatz des Übersetzers hat keine Entsprechung im Original: dort steigt Yvain erst nach dem Kampf und nach der Erkennungsszene vom Pferd [...]. Eine ebenfalls zu diesem Aspekt gehörende Textstelle bietet die *Ívens saga* an der Stelle, wo der Protagonist dem Löwen im Kampfe gegen die Schlange zu Hilfe kommt. Während Yvain mit gezogenem Schwert der Schlange entgegen r e i t e t [...], wird in der Übersetzung betont, daß Íven vom Pferd steigt und es anbindet, damit die Schlange diesem keinen Schaden zufügen kann [...]. Die letzten Textbeispiele haben angedeutet, welchen Stellenwert im höfischen Roman der Kampf zu Pferd einnimmt, der ein Charakteristikum und eines der Privilegien des Rittertums war, und dem der höfische Dichter daher auch einen ästhetischen Reiz abgewinnen konnte. Das Fehlen der sozialen Voraussetzungen und die spezifischen topographischen Verhältnisse haben dagegen die Übersetzer veranlaßt, von ihren Vorlagen abzuweichen.” Kretschmer's observation is not precise. In the fight of the two friends Íven and Gawain, they do indeed dismount, but only for a short time. To resume fighting, the saga clearly states that *riddarar ok hlupu upp*. Kölbing (1898, XV, 4) I would draw a conclusion opposite to Kretschmer's: Dismounting the horse for combat was what an Old Norse audience was familiar with, and is reflected, e. g., in the dragon fight of *Ívens saga*, where an uncertain fight against an unknown enemy awaits the hero. However, it was the author's general intention to arouse fascination with the new martial technique of fighting on horseback, which is the mode of fighting the saga uses when ‘proper’ knights clash. For more of Kretschmer's thoughts on mounted combat, see his footnotes 1,2,3 and 1,2 in Kretschmer (1982, pp. 58–59).

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| <p>force that I think he knocked knight and horse down together in a heap. This knight never arose again, for his back was broken and his heart had burst within his breast. (3152-61)</p> | <p>dead. In that charge he killed ten knights. [...]</p> | | |
| <p>(II) See now how he proves himself: see his prominence in the battleline; now see how he stains his lance and naked sword with blood; see how he pursues them; see how he drives them back, how he charges them, how he overtakes them, how he gives way, how he returns to the attack! But he spends little time giving way and much in renewing the attack. See what little care he has for his shield when he comes into the fray: how he lets it be slashed to pieces; he doesn't take the least pity on it, eager as he is to avenge the blows that are rained upon him. If the whole Argonne Forest were felled to make lances for him, I don't believe he'd have a single one left this night [...] And see how he wields his sword when he draws it! (3212-34)</p> | <p>(II) See [...] how this knight proves himself all alone before the rest, and how his armor is completely stained with the blood of the ones he has killed. See how he rides through their host! Íven's shield was so completely cut to pieces that nothing was left. Upon each of those who struck any blow at him he took vengeance so swiftly and valiantly that no one was eager to strike at him again. He lulled his opponents into such a deep sleep that none of their companions were able to awaken them. When his shield had become useless to him, he still broke lance after lance on his enemies so that it amounted to a good ninety before the evening came. What he accomplished with his lances meant great destruction of life for his enemies. Between the time that he broke one lance and got another, he used his sword. [...]</p> | <p>(II) [T]hey watched the stranger rush headlong toward the enemy, demonstrating great bravery. [...] [H]is bravery and his alone drove the enemy into a hasty and disorganized retreat back to ward a ford. There they regrouped their forces and the fight was on. Here blow, there thrust! Now who could ever count up all the lances shattered by Sir Iwein in the fight? He struck and thrust as did all his men until the opponents had to retreat pell-mell across the ford, taking many casualties and leaving victory with Iwein's side. The majority of the men who did not turn and flee were cut down without compunction and the few remaining were taken prisoners. (3716-747)</p> | <p>(II) [-]</p> |
| <p>(III) The chase lasted a long time, until finally those who were fleeing grew weary and their pursuers cut down and eviscerated all their horses. The living rolled over the dead, killing and slaying one another in an ugly encounter. (3264-70)</p> | <p>(III) The earl took to flight then, along with all those of his host who still remained alive. Sir Íven and his knights pursued the fleeing host and slew their enemies.</p> | <p>(III) So it was that the Count's men were captured or killed with boldness and dispatch. (3759-61)</p> | <p>(III) [-]</p> |
| <p>(IV) And Count Aliers fled on with my lord Yvain in hot pursuit. [...] The Count was caught at this</p> | <p>(IV) The earl fled, but Íven pursued him [...] Sir Íven seized him, raised his sword, and intended to kill</p> | <p>(IV) Still the count fought on with a small band of men and no one could say that he did not put up a</p> | <p>(IV) And Owein proceeded through the two foremost troops, till he encountered the earl. And Owein</p> |

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| spot, and nothing could help him now. Without much discussion my lord Yvain accepted his surrender, for once he had him in his hands and they were alone, one against one, there was no escaping, no evasion, no means of defence. (3271-85) | him. Asking for quarter, the earl surrendered himself into Íven's power, because he could neither defend himself nor escape. After that Íven led the captive earl behind him. (Ch. 10) | valiant fight [...] he was forced to retreat and he fled [...] [H]e took him prisoner and accepted his promise to return as a prisoner and to surrender himself. (3762-78) | dragged him from his saddle, so that he was between him and his saddlebow, and he turned his horse's head towards the castle. And whatever trouble he had, he brought the earl along with him till he came to the castle gate where the squires were waiting for him. (647-51) |
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The *Owein* version of the battle is so condensed there is not much left to compare. But it is noteworthy that it does not recount any bloodshed at all. *Owein's* enemies surely did not let him ride through their lines without resistance, but we read neither of sword blows, nor of breaking lances. Even capturing the earl is accomplished by simply pulling him off his horse. Instead of dealing wounds, *Owein* treats him like an unruly child. The two versions most closely related are, again, the French and the Old Norse one. Both include a first attack of Yvain the other two texts do not relate, and both share the same physical details of the fight. In Hartmann's text, it is *Îwein's* bravery, his inner quality, that drives the enemy to retreat,³⁴ whereas both *Yvain* and *Íven* translate the hero's bravery into visible, dynamic violence. Only in these two texts, there is blood flowing (not too little) and destruction of equipment. On the other hand, only *Îwein* knows the option to capture fleeing enemies, instead of slaughtering them. A remarkable difference between the French and the Old Norse text, and surely no coincidence, is the omission of Yvain's brutal dealing with his enemies' horses, which he "eviscerated". What was not appropriate in single combat against the Keeper of the Fountain should now be an allowed tactic of warfare? The Norse translator eliminated this contradiction from his text.³⁵ He also let out some gruesome details what combat does to the victims – the broken back and bursting heart of Yvain's first enemy, and the mass of injured and dead bodies mingling on the ground – as if he wanted to spur the lust for battle, not the fear of its horrors. Like in the first scene discussed above, manner of fighting and armament of French, Old Norse, and German version follow the characteristic outline of knightly mounted combat with lance, sword, and shield.

34 See Brunner (1996) for a comparison between Chrétien's and Hartmann's depiction of war.

35 The Old Norse translator is also compassionate towards Íven's horse in the fight against the dragon: *Hann steig af hesti sínum ok batt hann, at eigi skyldi ormrinn granda honum*. Kölbing (1898, X, 26) Maybe he simply liked horses? Compare Mondschein (2011, p. 115).

c) Yvain versus his friend Gawain

The third scene to be compared is the episode of the two friends fighting against each other in judicial combat, unaware of each other's identity. It does not appear in *Owein*.

| <i>Yvain</i> | <i>Ívens saga</i> | <i>Íwein</i> |
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| <p>Since they did not recognize each other, the two knights drew back for the charge. When they met, their lances shattered, though they were stout and made of ash. Neither knight spoke to the other, yet had they spoken, their meeting would have been quite different! (6106-6112)</p> | <p>Now the two knights rode at each other. When they came together, the stout lances they were holding both broke. Neither said a word to the other.</p> | <p>Their horses charged with great speed. They lowered their lances, neither too early nor too late, and pressed them firmly to their chests, keeping them perfectly steady. They neither raised them too high nor let them sink too low, but held them exactly where they were supposed to be. It was the intention of each man to drop his adversary to the turf, which explained why the lances hit their mark at the point where the shield and the helmet meet, for this is one's target, if one knows how to unhorse one's opponent. The truth of this was plain, for each man was thrown back so violently that neither of them had come so close to falling without its actually happening. The only reason either of them remained in the saddle was that their lances had given away; they had come charging at one another with such savage force that the shafts splintered into a hundred pieces. [7075-7103]</p> |
| <p>But now the two friends were striking and injuring one another. Their swords gained no value, nor did their helmets or shields, which were dented and broken. Their blades were chipped and dulled, and they dealt such mighty swipes with the sharp edge, and not the flat part, and struck such blows with the pommels on noseguards, necks, foreheads, and cheeks, that they were all black and blue where the blood gathered beneath the skin. And their hauberks were so torn and their shields so battered that neither knight escaped unharmed; they struggled so hard that both were nearly out of breath. The combat was so heated that all the jacinths and emeralds that decorated their helmets were knocked loose and crushed, for they pummeled their helmets so hard that both knights</p> | <p>They immediately drew their swords and struck at each other in so violent an attack that no one had ever seen such a duel by two men. The crashes from their blows were so great that when steel met steel it could be heard for four miles around. Their shields were badly cut then, their helmets broke, and their coats of mail split. Both were wounded and tired, and they finally had to dismount from their horses.</p> | <p>Then came charge after charge, and every lance provided them was shattered. If they had reverted to swordplay on horseback, something they did not want to do, it surely would have meant the death of the poor beasts. It was out of concern for their horses that they shunned this crude tactic and fought it out on foot. The horses had done nothing to them, and so they took the punishment themselves. [...] The armor protecting their bodies was free from attack. The swords, however, were not allowed to rest. They were very free with each other's shields and bore them no love. Each was thinking 'What good are my efforts? As long as he carries a shield before him, he is safe.' And they set about carving the shields. But never did they think to direct</p> |

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| <p>were stunned and had their brains nearly beaten out. Their eyes gleamed, with square and mighty fists, strong nerves, and hard bones, they dealt wicked blows to the face as long as they were able to grip their swords, which were most useful in their vicious hammering. Wearied after a long struggle, with helmets caved in and hauberks ripped asunder from the hammering of their swords and with shields split and broken, they both withdrew a little to let their muscles rest and catch their breath again. (6117-6156)</p> | | <p>their blows anywhere below the knees where the shields did not protect them. I could never begin to count the number of mighty blows which they delivered without demanding collateral or arrurances. Yet payment was received on the spot. (7113-7146) The shields which they were forced to put up as collateral for their lives were swiftly hacked to pieces from their grasp. And then they had nothing left to offer as security except their bare armor, which was pledged then and there. Nor were their bodies held in reserve. They, too, were given over as security and quickly cashed in. The helmets had been deeply slashed in many places, and the chain mail had turned red with the blood of the many wounds each man had incurred in those few moments, none of which, however, cut to the life of him. (7219-7234) The fight had drained them of their strength and they were so exhausted that they decided that it would bring them nothing but disgrace if they continued, and so they stopped fighting. (7242-7246)</p> |
| <p>But they did not stop long, and soon each rushed upon one another more fiercely than before. (6157-6159)</p> | <p>[...] the two knights jumped on their horses and fought twice as fiercely as before.</p> | <p>They jumped to their feet and rushed at one another again. [...] Compared with the battle that now raged, the first was nothing. If their blows were mighty before, they were now not only mightier, but also more numerous. (7251-7260)</p> |
| <p>The battle was so even that there was no way to determine who was getting the better, or who the worse. Even the two who were fighting, purchasing honour by their suffering, were amazed and astounded; they fought on such equal terms that each one wondered greatly who could withstand his onslaught with such bravery. (6196-6205)</p> | <p>It seemed strange to everyone that the two were so evenly matched.</p> | <p>There were many experienced fighters watching the struggle, and yet none of them was so knowledgeable or so discriminating that [...] he could truly not have decided for either; such an equal battle was never seen. (7261-7272)</p> |
| <p>They had fought so long that day was fading into night, and both knights had weary arms and sore bodies. Their warm blood bubbled</p> | <p>They had been fighting for so long now that the day began to turn into evening and the light dimmed. They were so tired by then that their arms</p> | <p>The valiant knights had now brought the long day to an honorable conclusion, having dealt one another many mighty blow. Their lives still</p> |

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| <p>out from many wounds and flowed beneath their hauberks. It was no wonder that they wished to desist, for they both were in great pain. At least the two ceased fighting. (6206-6214) [...]</p> | <p>could no longer raise their swords. It was so hot that the blood boiled in their wounds. Neither desired to fight any longer, because darkness was coming on them. Each now feared the other greatly, for their helmets were cut away completely. They both stopped.</p> | <p>hung in the balance as night approached and it began to grow dark. Darkness, then, separated them. But it was also true that each man had come to appreciate his opponent's fighting ability, so that by this time they had enough of one another. (7342-7353)</p> |
| <p>“You know how to strike good blows and make them count!” (6146-6247)</p> | <p>“Never did I think I would meet the knight who could deal me so many great blows.” (ch. 15)</p> | <p>“Had it [the day] allowed but three more blows to fall, they would have brought you victory and taken life from me.” (7406-7408)</p> |

Hartmann's intention is evident: to separate the fighting from its inherent violence. His version is by far the longest of all three, and interspersed with his comments and metaphors. He stresses the the complex skill necessary to be an accomplished joust, not the raw physical quality of the action. He plays for dozens of verses with the metaphor 'dealing blows in combat' ~ 'loaning money'. And he focusses on the destruction of weapons, not on their effect on the body. (Bein, 1998, p. 49) The weapons with which the two friends hack at each other are potentially lethal, and yet, Hartmann tries to picture the most amiable combat scene possible. This goes so far that the opponents even avoid striking low, under one another's knee, where the chance of finding an opening would be considerably higher. In this context, the dismounting (to spare the horses the danger of getting injured, as the text suggests) can be interpreted as a further sign of the knights' benevolent character, and of the combat's ritualized quality. In an earnest fight, no warrior would willingly forsake the advantage of being on horseback. Only once does Hartmann mention the injuries the friends inflict to each other, reassuring the reader at the same time that they pose no real threat: “the chain mail had turned red with the blood of the many wounds each man had incurred in those few moments, none of which, however, cut to the life of him.” (7230-7234) The reasons for Hartmann's “programmatische Ausblendung” (Bein, 1998, p. 51) of all bloody details in his text are not to be discussed here.³⁶ Important in our context is simply that he *did* avoid them, demonstrating a fundamentally different approach towards literary combat description than both Chrétien and the Old Norse text.

Chrétien's original model of the fight is considerably shorter than Hartmann's version, and more action-packed. While the scene in *Ívens saga* is a further condensation, its mood

³⁶ See Bein (1998, p. 55): “Es mag sein, daß Hartmann der Gedanke an Blut 'unangenehm' war (Brunner) - ich würde eher meinen, daß Hartmann die grausamen Elemente in Chrétiens Roman mit Blick auf die symbolische Dimension des Textes eliminiert und damit einen weiteren Schritt in Richtung auf die Fiktionalisierung des Genres getan hat.”

resembles that of the *Yvain*. The fight is direct, physical, and violent. Arms and armour are destroyed. This is similar to *Îwein*, but the wounds are described with much more drastic words, as “the warm blood bubbled out from many wounds” in the French text, and even “boiled in their wounds” in the Old Norse. Here, the reader witnesses the blood flowing and pictures the leaking wounds before his inner eye, whereas Hartmann uses the image indirectly. However, *Ívens saga* does omit some lines that further describe the knights' suffering (“they were all black and blue were the blood gathered beneath the skin” (6128-6129); “purchasing honour by their suffering” (6200)). On the other hand, the Old Norse text adds the dimension of sound, to make the fighting even more impressive (“The crashes from their blows were so great that when steel met steel it could be heard for four miles around.” XV, 2). It seems that the translator wanted to keep the physical intensity of the fighting, while at the same time protecting his hero(es) from too much harm. Thus, his version stands between the French and the German one, though it is a lot closer to Chrétien's concept of combat. We can only wonder how the translator would have dealt with Hartmann's technical description of jousting, had he known the text, but this question has to remain unanswered.

d) Conclusion

Hartmann von Aue's *Îwein* and the Middle Kymric *Chwedyl Jarlles y Ffynnon* prove that chivalric literature had means to design combat scenes very different from those used by Chrétien de Troyes in his *Yvain*. While the Old Norse translator showed no hesitation to omit parts that he, or his intended audience, was not interested in, he decided to transfer Chrétien's descriptions rather directly into his text. Knightly combat was obviously one of the chief interests of the Norwegian social stratum in which the translation of continental chivalric literature was commissioned.

The basic characteristics of knightly combat as *Ívens saga* (in the vein of *Yvain*) portrays it are: mounted fighting; use of the knightly weapons lance, sword, and spear; aesthetic of physical force (powerful blows, destruction of weapons and armour); colourful descriptions of severe injuries. On the following pages, we will see how all these elements are also used and further developed in the original *riddarasögur*.

3.2. Old Norse renderings of southern martial techniques: the original *riddarasögur*

Once the Icelanders started writing the original *riddarasögur* as their own versions of knightly romances, they seem to have singled out the typical mode of knightly combat as a constituting element of this kind of literature. When the important characters of these stories clash, armed conflict is mostly conceptualized as a one-on-one business: jousting with lances, followed by swordplay on horseback or on the ground. When they are pitted against a multitude of nondescript henchmen in open battle, the *riddarasögur*'s heroes are so overwhelmingly superior that they walk – or ride, for that matter – through the enemy lines like the reaper through the harvest. As we will see, this 'knightly mode of combat' is very unlike the combat scenes of the other genres to which an Icelandic audience was accustomed. We may assume that, stereotypical as it was, it contributed to no small extent to the attractiveness of the new genre.

Perfect examples for the 'knightly mode of combat' can be found in *Rémundar saga keisarasonar*. The oldest fragments of *Rémundar saga keisarasonar*, AM 567 4to II and AM 567 4to XIXg, are commonly dated to the 14th century. The extensive saga is one of the earliest examples of an original *riddarasaga*, and draws heavily on the themes of foreign chivalric literature. While the exact relation to French texts like *Le Petit Artus de Bretagne* is hard to reconstruct, the use of parallel narrative elements is evident (Schlauch, 1929, pp. 189–202), and the influences that some *riddarasögur* translated from Old French had on *Rémundar saga keisarasonar* can be demonstrated easily: *Tristrams saga ok Ísondar*, *Elis saga ok Rósamundu*, *Karlamagnús saga*, *Clari saga*, *Bevers saga* can be made out as models, while *Piðreks saga*, *Stjórn*, *Lucidarius*, *Trójumanna saga*, and *Alexanders saga* must have been known to the author. (Glauser & Kreutzer, 1998, p. 421) Important for our discussion, *Rémundar saga keisarasonar* not only draws on foreign themes, but also mirrors foreign ways to describe combat. To explain how the 'knightly mode of combat' works, a closer look on the saga shall be taken.

a) Physical force and social hierarchy

Rémundr grows up as the son of Ríkarðr, the emperor of Saxland. As it befits a knightly hero, Rémundr is of fair complexion, well learned and mannered, and beloved by friends and family. Still young in years, he asks his father for a master to be trained in the martial

skills of a knight.³⁷ In medieval Europe, such skills were identified as *artes theatrica*, or *hofekunst* in Middle High German. (Haage & Wegner, 2007, p. 256) They were a part of courtly life, and included wrestling, fencing, riding, and jousting, among other things:

Dy hofekunst hat undir er dry houpthantwerg. Daz erste die vechter, und ist eyn houpthantwerg und hat vel andir hantwerke undir em alz di schermer, renger, sprenger, ryter, stecher, schutzcen unde derglichin. (Rondi, 1950, p. 250)

Rémundr proves to be a quick learner of the *artes theatrica*. Soon, he excels in combat, namely in one skill: *Þó var sú ein, at langt gekk fram yfir allar aðrar, þat var burtreið, því (at) í því landi gat engi fyrir honum í sǫðli setit, ok svá gat ok engi honum or sǫðli komit.* (Broberg, 1909, p. 5 / ch. 1) Martial skills are fundamental both for the hero, and for the saga's course. Rémundr's introduction is followed immediately by his first chance to prove himself. In honour of twelve princes that arrive at Ríkarðr's court, a tournament is held. Berald, son of the king of Frakkland, has the upper hand against his competitors, until Rémundr joins the game:

Nú ríðr hvárr ǫðrum í gegn, ok leggjr Berald í skjöld keisarasonar, sem honum var hægast, ok brast skaptit í sundr í tvá parta. En junkari Rémundr sat svá fast, at hann bifaðiz hvergi, heldr tók hann sinni hægri hendi til konungssonar ok hóf hann burt ór sǫðlinum. Ok sem hann hafði sýnt sinn frábæra riddaraskap, þá setr hann konungsson aprt í sǫðulinn sem hógligast. (Broberg, 1909, p. 9 / ch. 3)

This scene's purpose is obvious: It displays Rémundr's absolute superiority. In a test of martial skills, not even the best of his opponents stands a chance against him. At the same time, the scene constructs a social hierarchy that is plain to see for the audience, both within and outside the saga.³⁸ Even though the feat of lifting a (fully armed) opponent out of his saddle one-handedly might be a fantastic exaggeration,³⁹ it is set in a surrounding that emphasizes the noble culture of Rémundr's world. Here, if men want to pit their strength against each other, they do not play a round of *glíma* like in the *Íslendingasögur*, but adhere to proper knightly behaviour.

The protagonists of the saga demonstrate their belonging to a social elite by the use of the appropriate combat technique, and they keep doing so when they leave they

37 For information on the martial education of young nobles in the High Middle Ages, see Fenske (1990, pp. 68–82).

38 Otherwise very precise in her analysis of *Rémundar saga keisarasonar*, Barnes (2014, p. 126) describes the young Rémundr of the saga's beginning as “self-absorbed” and identifies his development as a “quasi-apotheosis from dysfunctional ‘courtly’ knight to world renowned crusader and saviour of western Europe”. (Barnes (2014, p. 140)) To me, it rather seems that only because Rémundr is highly functional in the courtly context of his youth, he can become functional on a wider, almost global scale.

39 An exact parallel can be found in *Ectors saga: enn þæ þeirra hestar renduzt hiæ greip Ecto(r) til Apriua(ls) ryckiandi honum upp ur sodlinum rijdanndi med hann wm uöllinn langa stund setiandi hann sijdann aptur ij sinn sódul med mikilli heuersku.* Loth (1962, p. 88 / ch. 3)

tournament field and engage in serious fighting. Rémundr has to use his combat skills for the first time in earnest when he is attacked by the troll-like Eskupart, son of king Agaménon of Tartaría. Eskupart is of awe-inspiring physique, well armed, and so enraged that he will not allow Rémundr to don his armour before engaging the fight:

Þá segir Rémundr: 'Þat er újafn leikr með okkr, þar sem þú ert brynjaðr bæði til handa ok fóta, en ek hefði hér öngvar hlífar nema skjöld ok sverð; ok muntu eigi vilja berjaz við hlífarlausan ok göra þér þá minnun, svá mikill garpr sem þú þykkiz vera.' (Broberg, 1909, p. 36 / ch. 8)

This refusal to grant Rémundr a chance to don his armour shows Eskupart's ferociousness, a clear breach of chivalric etiquette. But his lack of manners goes only so far; instead of making use of the element of surprise to finish Rémundr right away – as would be, one might think, appropriate for a terrible villain –, Eskupart chooses the mode of combat that suits his status as a knight, and that suits the saga's mood. It is a mode that still resembles a game – the ritualized contest of a tournament –, no matter how grave the consequences might be: *'skulu þér allir niðr setjaz ok sjá á leik okkarn'* (Broberg, 1909, p. 37 / ch. 8), Rémundr says to his companions. Given enough time by his enemy to speak with his friends, to take up his weapons and mount his horse, Rémundr readies himself for the fight. Then the opponents clash:

Nú keyra þeir saman sína hest með sporum, ok riðr hvárr qðrum í mót með svá skjótri rás, at varla mátti auga á festa. Eptir þat kómu þeir saman með harðri samkomu, svá (at) hvártveggja burtstong brotnaði í sundr, en hvárgi kom qðrum af baki eða í sundr þeira gerðum eða af hestunum. Nú bregðr Eskupart sínu sverði ok hogggr til keisarasonar með miklu afli ok sniðr hans skjöld niðr í gegnum. Nú hogggr junkeri Rémundr með sínu góða sverði, en Eskupart bregðr fyrir sik sínum sterka skildi. Hann var þykkir ok þungr, svá (at) einn ulfaldi mundi eigi meir orka. Hann var settr með sterkum járnsblám. En svá sterkr sem hann var, þá beit Nqðrubítr [Rémundr's sword] hann niðr í gegnum í mundriða, svá (at) í sðulboga nam staðar. [...] Nú hogggr Eskupart ok reiðir hátt sverðit. En junkeri Rémundr bregðr við Nqðrubít. Koma nú saman sverðin yfrit hart. Tekr nú Nqðrubítr oddinn framan af sverði Eskuparts, ok berr svá af keisarasynti hoggit, ok var varð hann eigi sárr. En oddrinn af sverði Eskuparts fló í lopt upp ok kom niðr í hqfði Rémundi. [...] Nú hogggr Rémundr í annan tíma með sínu sverði ok kemr í hjálminn, beit hjálminn ok hausinn, hálsinn ok herðarnar, bók ok brynju niðr til beltis, ok fell hann niðr af hestinum dauðr til jarðar. (Broberg, 1909, pp. 38-41 / ch. 9)

Combat scenes like this have shaped modern Europe's ideas about medieval fighting. Even a well-informed fencing historian like Egerton Castle wrote: “The rough untutored fighting of the Middle Ages represented faithfully the reign of brute force in social life as well as in politics. Those were the days when strength was lauded more than skill.”

(Castle, 2003, p. 5) Any cursory glance at the European fencing manuals from 1300 on will reveal that this is simply wrong. (Wetzler, 2012) Medieval fencing will be discussed in chapter 7.2; at the moment, it suffices to know that the brave, mutual exchange of blows Rémundr and Eskupart demonstrate is the exact opposite of what was indeed taught to the students of sword fighting. For the latter, the aim was to counter the opponent immediately, and to finish the fight as quickly as possible. Yet, even though Rémundr is highly trained in the knightly arts, he seems to know nothing of this fundamental aspect of sword play. Neither do his enemies throughout the saga. It may be that the author of *Rémunds saga keisarasonar*, or the literary models after which he formed the combat scenes, had no understanding of sword fighting at all – but this seems unlikely. Training in fencing was so widespread in the High Middle Ages (Anglo, 2000), that we can assume he had at least enough knowledge of the matter to understand his own descriptions as completely unrealistic. And yet, he preferred to design them in exactly this way.

The fight between the hero and Eskupart serves as a model for all personal combat that follows in the text. In *Rémundar saga keisarasonar*, the fundamental (aesthetic) quality of all martial deeds is physical might. Technical finesse or swift moves are of no interest – everything that is done, is done with maximum force. When Rémundr and his companions encounter a band of foreign warriors, one of them a giant, insults are shouted back and forth, resulting in the saga's second fight:

Nú ríðaz þeir ákafliga hart með harðri samkómu, svá at bæði skoptin brotnuðu í sundr, en hvárgi kemr qðrum af baki. Þá bregðr Rémundr sínu sverði ok hoggv á oxlina vinstri, en sverðit sneið oxlina ok brjóstit, ok hægri síðuna ok út í gegnum fyrir ofan mjöðmina, ok fellu þá báðir hlutirnir til jarðar. Varð þá ofrmikill dynkr, svá at þaut í vellinum.
(Broberg, 1909, pp. 67-68 / ch. 16)

How forcefully the knights clash is stressed by the terrible noise they make. The similarities to the first fight are obvious: hard riding, heavy onslaught, bursting of the spears, killing of the enemy by cutting his body in half. What is different is the lack of an exchange of sword blows in the second fight. The giant is not important enough for the saga to pose a real threat to Rémundr – we do not get to know his name, and he is disposed of quickly.

While the fight against the giant is a chance for the *keisarason* to demonstrate his power – *En er félagar hans sjá þetta, slær yfir þá ótta miklum, því at slíkt hogg sá þeir aldri fyrr.* (Broberg, 1909, p. 68 / ch. 16) –, the next fight shows his gentleness and chivalry. Now, Rémundr rides against Akillás, Prince of *Affrika*, the leader of the foreign warriors:

Ríðr nú hvárr qðrum í mót. Setr Akillás sitt spjót í skjöld junkera Rémundar svá fast, at festi í skildinum, en keisarason sat svá fast, at hann bifaðiz hvergi fyrir þessu lagi. En hann tók sinni hægri hendi til Akillás ok brá honum burt ó sððlinum ok hleypti svá með hann um rjóðrit, ok síðan eptir lítinn tíma setti Rémundr hann aptr í sððulinn með þllum sínum búnaði. (Broberg, 1909, p. 70 / ch. 16)

Akillás recognizes that nobody can compare with Rémundr in *aflí ok riddaraskap*. (Broberg, 1909, p. 70 / ch. 16) He invites Rémundr and his companions to his father's court, and they become friends.

Knightly combat is a game best played by two – and a game so fundamental to the world the *riddarasögur* describe, that it transcends the sphere of mere fighting. An unclear social hierarchy between two noblemen is an unbearable situation for the genre's feudal worldview, and knightly combat is a basic means of communication for them. No matter whether the opponent will be killed with a sword or lifted from his saddle on an extended arm: If he is friend or foe can only be decided after lances have burst. In both cases – even if both knights leave the combat ground alive and as allies –, a social order has been constituted. One man now stands above the other, in terms of martial skills and social prestige, and this hierarchy will not be questioned for the rest of the text. There is no rematch in a *riddarasaga* (of course, most of the times because one of the opponents is dead, anyway). After Rémundr puts Akillás back on his horse, the *keisarason* makes an arrogant remark on his opponents skills: '*sá kunni lítit at riddaraskap, er þér kenndi.*' (Broberg, 1909, p. 71 / ch. 16) In the mindset of an *Íslendingasaga*, an insult like that might easily result in yet more bloodshed. Not here. Akillás does not even answer, now that the hierarchy between the two princes has been established.

Rémundar saga keisarasonar is remarkable insofar, as it provides an unusually pure example of the 'knightly mode of combat'. Whereas it is common for other original *riddarasögur* to have their heroes pitted against various kind of semi- or inhuman monsters (trolls, beastmen, dragons, etc.), all fighting in this saga is done between knights, that is, between humanoid warriors that follow the 'knightly mode of combat'. The killing of two lions is the only exception. This deed, however, is not described in much detail, as if the author felt compelled to include a 'lion scene' to prove his awareness of the motif, without much interest in it:

Er svá sagt, at Rémundr høggr til dýrsins með sínu sverði, Nqðrubít, ofan á milli eyrnanna svá mikít hogg, at niðr sniðr millum kjálkanna, svá at sverðit nam staðar í jorðu. Eptir þetta gørt gengr Rémundr til sinna kumpána. Hafa þeir ok þá sigrat hit minna dýrit. Váru þetta hin mestu þrekvirki. (Broberg, 1909, p. 117 / ch. 22)

Rémundr's first two opponents may be described as terribly tall and strong, as giants. But this is nothing more than the author's obedience to the genre's aesthetic principles. While the hero is the beautiful epitome of everything courtly and chivalrous, his enemy has to be ugly, misshapen, or of otherwise terrible nature, physically or morally. (Glaser, 1983, pp. 186–191) Of course, the stronger the enemy, the greater the fame of defeating him. But no matter their outer appearance, Eskupart and the nameless giant in service of Akillás still fight like knights should fight: on horseback, with lance, sword, and shield. There is not a single variation to this iconic set of knightly close quarter weapons in the whole saga. Neither maces, nor hatchets, nor anything else from the wide array of medieval weaponry are being used.⁴⁰

By wielding the standard set of knightly weapons in the proper way, even the heathen enemies can express their belonging to the same social stratum of which the hero is a part. They are the 'Other' that has to be subdued, but they are not entirely alien. Indeed, the enemy can be just as beautiful as the hero's side:

En svá var skipuð fylking tartarakonungs, at í miðri fylking stóð hans höfuðmerki. Þar var um búit ágætliga vel með miklum hagleik, því (at) undir merkinu stóð einn orrn, gørr með hvítum marmara, unninn með undarligum hagleik. Einn ari, yfirvættis vænn, sat upp á stonginni, gørr af brendu gulli. (Broberg, 1909, pp. 293-294 / ch. 59)

Once beheaded on the battlefield, the heathens' souls may be dragged to hell. And yet, their knightly mode of combat brings them honour and provides fame beyond death: *En svá lýkr þessu einvígi, at Máris konungr lætr sitt líf við góðan orðstír. Viðföruull var særðr mǫrgum sárum, svá segjandi, at hann hafi við öngvan riddara fræknara átt.* (Broberg, 1909, p. 297 / ch. 59)

This proves that the connection between the good, the true, and the beautiful is not absolute for the saga author. Several ideological layers can overlap, yet exist independently from each other. The code of knighthood has a worth in itself, and is, in *Rémundar saga keisarasonar's* perspective, not the exclusive possession of the Christian faith.

40 Long distance missiles not taken into account.

b) The four building blocks

What exactly defines the 'knightly mode of combat' in *Rémundar saga keisarasonar*, on a technical level? It consists mainly of a combination of a few narrative building blocks, all of which are highly formulaic and repetitive. Depending on the length and the intensity the author intends for a combat scene, different combinations of the following can be found:

(i): mounted attack with the lance

(ii): mounted close quarter fighting with sword and shield

(iii): close quarter fighting with sword and shield on foot

These building blocks define the duel-like one-on-one fights throughout the saga. Beyond that, a fourth format also needs to be discussed:

(iv): mass battle

(i): Mounted attack with the lance

The mounted attack with the lance is the knightly combat manoeuvre *per se*. Historically, it depended on the use of the stirrup, to give the rider enough stability to absorb the impact of a target being hit. A large amount of training is needed to successfully apply this manoeuvre – on the basis of a solid skill in horse riding, the aiming with the lance and shock absorption have to be learned. Thus, as stated before, by being able to fight in this manner, a saga character proves his belonging to a class that can afford to spend money (for horse and necessary equipment) and time to provide sufficient training.

Rémundr, his companions, but also his enemies do have these resources. Consequently, most of the times their fights start with a spurring of their horses, and clash in full speed. The description of Rémundr's fight against Eskupart, quoted before in full length, is imitated in countless scenes throughout the saga, in some cases word by word.

- Rémundr vs. Eskupart: *Nú keyra þeir saman sína hest með sporum, ok ríðr hvárr qðrum í mót með svá skjótri rás, at varla mátti auga á festa. Eptir þat kómu þeir saman með harðri samkomu, svá (at) hvártveggja burtstong brotnaði í sundr* (Broberg, 1909, p. 38 / ch. 9)

- Rémundr vs. the giant in service of Akillás: *Nú ríðaz þeir ákafliga hart með harðri samkómu, svá at bæði skoptin brotnuðu í sundr* (Broberg, 1909, pp. 67-68 / ch. 16)
- Rémundr vs. Jonater: *Hann ríðr nú á móti Rémundi ok legggr sínu spjóti í hans skjöld með svá miklu afli, at festi í skildinum, en eigi gekk þó í gegnum.* (Broberg, 1909, pp. 109-110 / 21)
- Rémundr vs. Geiraldús:

Nú hér eptir tekr hvárr við sinni burtstong ok halda báðir til lags. Junkeri Rémundr ok Geiraldús konungsson keyra nú sína hesta við sporum, hvárr qðrum í mót, ok finnaz með svá harðri samkómu, at vesqlum monnum er úmöguligt at trúa. Er svá sagt, at Rémundr legggr sinni stong í skjöld konungssonar með svá miklu afli, at skaptit brast í sundr, en brotin flugu langt á völlin. En konungsson fell eigi af sínum hesti, heldr setti hann sína stong í skjöld Rémundar, svá (at) festi í skildinum. En junkeri Rémundr sat svá fast, at hann bifaðiz hvergi ok eigi skjöldrinn, sem hann helt á, en skaptit var svá traust, at þat brast ekki. (Broberg, 1909, pp. 184-185 / ch. 34)

The saga contains many more examples for this combat method.

Remarkably, only in five scenes a combat is decided by the first onslaught. Of these five scenes, two describe jousts at a tournament:

- Víðfqrull and Berald vs. two knights from Sikiley: *Verða þar nú hrøð viðskiptin ok eigi lqng, því at Sikileyjar riddarar steyptuz þegar í fyrstu atreið háðuliga af sínum hestum.* (Broberg, 1909, p. 182 / ch. 33)
- Rémundr vs. Íron: *En Rémundr setti sitt skapt í skjöld Írons svá fast, at hann hraut langa verqlð af hestinum ok kom svá hart niðr, at hann lá langa stund í úviti.* (Broberg, 1909, p. 357 / ch. 70)
- In the third case, Rémundr rides against the leader of the eleven knights. They are companions of his, but do not recognize him at first. Of course, the author has to find a way to demonstrate Rémundr's superiority without having him killing his friends:

Ríðr sá, sem fyrir þeim var, móti Rémundi, leggjandi sínu spjóti í hans skjöld með svá miklu afli, at spjótskaptsbrotin flugu langt aptr yfir hqfuð honum, en Rémundr sat svá fast, at hann bifaðiz hvergi fyrir þessu lagi. En Rémundr skaut sínu stinna skapti í hans skjöld svá hart, at hann kom fjarri niðr hestinum ok hqfðinu vissi niðr en fótunum upp. (Broberg, 1909, pp. 219-220 / ch. 42)

Only two life-or-death fights are decided by the attack with the lance. They take place in Rémund's final battle, fought to regain his empire from the heathen usurpers:

- Berald vs. Gadal: *Nú tekr Berald þetta at líta ok keyrir sinn hest sporum ok riðr í mót Gáðal, leggjr sínu spjóti framan í skjöldinn með svá miklu afli, at gengr í gegnum skjöldinn ok þréfalda brynju, svá at í hjarta nam staðar, ok steyptiz heiðinginn dauðr til jarðar.* (Broberg, 1909, pp. 285-286 / ch. 58)
- And, directly thereafter, Rémundr vs. King Ménon: *junkerí Rémundr riðr sinum hesti fram, leggjandi sínu spjóti í skjöld Ménonis ok í gegnum skjöldinn ok brynjuna fyrir útan rifin. [...] Því kom hann fjarri niðr hestinum.* (Broberg, 1909, p. 289 / ch. 58)

Most of the time, lances break or get stuck in a shield, and the riders remain in the saddle to continue the fight from there, which leads to (ii): *mounted close quarter fighting with sword and shield*. We have seen examples for this in Rémundr's fight against Eskupart, and in his killing of the giant companion of prince Akillás.

In the few cases where the opponents are almost equal in skill, both are pushed from their horses:

- Berald vs. Jáson af Nínive:

Nú reiða hváirtveggju alþingis sín sterku spjót, takandi hvárr í annars skjöld, leggjandi hvárr með sínu afli, svá at allr þeira reiðingr dugði þeim eigi meira en ein basttaug. Ok því fara þeir báðir apr af hestunum ok koma standandi niðr, þegar í stað sverðunum fimliga bregðandi. (Broberg, 1909, pp. 254-255 / ch. 51)

- A similar fight between Víðföruull and King Josía af Atacúsía follows on the spot:

Leggr hvárr til annars með sínu spjóti, svá (at) af gengu báðir eptri bogarnir sǫðlum þeira, en allr þeira reiðingr dugði þeim eigi meirr en brunnit hálmstrá. Ok því hrjóta þeir báðir langt apr af sínum hestum með sǫðlunum ok koma standandi á jörðina. Nú rykkja þeir út sínum sverðum. (Broberg, 1909, pp. 256-257 / ch. 52)

Of course, no opponent is ever able to push Rémundr from his horse. If he leaves the saddle, then by his own decision: *Nú kastar Rémundr sínu spjóti, en tekr í skjöld Klibáni konungs, léttandi honum burt ór sǫðlinum, kastandi honum háðuliga á vǫllinn. [...] Nú stígr Rémundr af sínum hesti, ok hefz þar upp hit sterkasta einvígi.* (Broberg, 1909, pp. 259-260 / ch. 53)

Once on the ground, the combatants get a chance to further display their martial skills, by (iii): *close quarter fighting with sword and shield on foot*.

(ii): Mounted close quarter fighting with sword and shield

Attacking an enemy with sword and shield while on horseback is the most common way in *Rémundar saga keisarasonar* to finish a fight. As we have seen before, nothing of the technical intricacy so typical for medieval swordplay is reflected in the text. All attacks are dealt out with maximum power, or, to put it another way, with brute force. It is significant that there is not one single example in the saga for a thrust with a sword. Continental fencing manuals and the very design of the high medieval sword attest to the importance of the thrust in sword fighting. (Clements, 2007) Yet, the text seems to know nothing of this fact (unlike the *Íslendingasögur*, which provide countless examples for thrusting with a sword). Again, this is due to the aesthetic premises behind the 'knightly mode of combat'. The characters of *Rémundar saga keisarasonar* can be considered rather one-dimensional, without subtleties and defined only by their power, and the same is true for their way of fighting.

The sword blows dealt in this way do not only result in injury, but in dismemberment. Whenever a sword strikes home, heads and hands are chopped off, or enemies are cut clean in half, diagonally or vertically. Sometimes, the blows even bisect the horse beneath the rider. There is hardly any exception to this principle throughout the whole saga. Shields provide protection only for a short while, until they are hacked to pieces. And body armour proves utter useless against Rémundr's (and his companions') strikes. It has been pointed out that in the *Märchensagas*, the hero's enemy is the representative of the chaotic outside that threatens the rightful world order. (Glauser, 1983, p. 193) In this perspective we can understand an enemy being hacked to pieces, instead of 'merely' being killed, as appropriate or even necessary reaction to this threat: The chaos must be completely physically annihilated.

(iii): Close quarter fighting with sword and shield on foot

In the few occasions where a fight is continued on foot, the mode of combat remains as described before, under (ii). One might assume that the additional freedom a fighter has

when moving on his own feet, compared with sitting in a saddle, would result in a more technical way of fighting. But it does not. Again, decisions come from the powerful blows that are dealt back and forth until one of the combatants is not longer able to protect himself. The highly developed techniques that medieval martial culture held in stock for fencing in armour – often preferring wrestling moves to bring the foe to the ground, and to finish him there with the weapon – play no role in *Rémundar saga keisarasonar*.

(iv): Mass battle

Rémundar saga keisarasonar describes several mass battles. The numbers of participating warriors are just as exaggerated as the actual course of fighting. The descriptions share two characteristics:

a) The basis for individual action is laid out as de-personalized account of the chaos of combat. The order of the army lines before the battle, and the beauty of the warriors clad in armour, help to contrast and to highlight this chaos. Once the fighting starts, the air is full of arrows and missiles; limbs are severed and heads chopped off, and death is everywhere. Yet, the victims of combat remain faceless. The fate of individuals, of foot soldiers or random knights, is of no interest to the author: *Allir konungasynir dugðu ágætliga vel, því (at) svá margan mann felldu þeir, at seint er at telja. Hvat sem hverr þeira vann, má ek eigi greina, ok því vik ek sǫgunni til Ménonis hins mikla, hvat hann hefiz at.* (Broberg, 1909, p. 287 / ch. 58) The wounded bodies of men and beasts are woven into the tapestry of violence that is the background for the deeds of the heroes and their antagonists. The outstanding warriors of both sides, on the other hand, ride through the enemy lines without ever being threatened. Common soldiers, inferior in (physical and social) power cannot hope to harm them, and are killed by the hundreds:

Nú hefz hér hit harðasta stríð [...] Dregr Rémundr nú út sitt góða sverð, Nǫðrubít, ok hǫggr til beggja handa bæði menn ok hesta. Ok engi hjálmr né skjöldr stendz hans hǫggum heldr en eitt laufsblað. Ok því klauf hann hjálma ok hausa, hálsa ok herðar, búka ok brynjur, sǫðla ok hesta ok hvern, þann er hans sverð nær til, svá at á jorðu nam staðar. Viðfǫrull ok Berald hǫggva bæði menn ok hesta, steypa mǫrgum heiðingja til jarðar. Ok á lítilli stundu hafa þeir drepit c manna. (Broberg, 1909, pp. 99-100 / ch. 20)

Even when the author introduces an elite troop of especially fierce enemies, these warriors pose no real danger to the hero. Nor would he need to invent a new tactic to overcome them. They are slain like everyone else, by a hard ridden attack and mighty sword blows.

b) Details of combat are only provided where two enemies of equal status meet. In general, this is the case after Rémundr or one of his companions has spotted a warrior wreaking havoc among their own troops. What ensues is one-on-one combat, designed according to the three building blocks described before. Although surrounded by the chaos of a battle field, such a fight will never be disturbed from the outside – the two opponents ‘fight it out’ by themselves.

The narrative technique of contrasting a faceless mass of soldiers and the ‘zooming in’ on two outstanding fighters is of course no invention of *Rémundar saga keisarasonar*, but a fundamental feature of heroic storytelling. In European literature, it can be traced back to the battles of the *Ilias*. (Bowra, 1961, p. 53; Latacz, 1977, p. 45)⁴¹

c) Repetitiveness in combat manoeuvres and types of wounds

If we take a look at chivalric literature from other parts of Europe, it is evident how much the ‘knightly mode of combat’ of *Rémundar saga keisarasonar* is a direct offspring of foreign literary tradition. We have seen its ingredients, as described in the blocks (i) to (iv), also in the combat scenes of the *Yvain* that were discussed before. They can be found in many more texts, like, for example, in the *chansons de geste*. There, the descriptions of mounted attacks with a lance are repetitive to such an extent that it was possible to condense them into a ‘combat formula’:

Rychner distinguishes seven phases within the stereotypical epic descriptions of lance fights [in the *chansons de geste*], one, the spurring of the horse, two, the lance attack, three, the impact, four, the breaking of shields, five, the destruction of mail, six, the lance thrust through the body, and seven, the fall to the ground. (Reck, 2010, pp. 15–16)

Of the combat scenes in *Rémundar saga keisarasonar*, the aforementioned fights ‘Berald vs. Gadal’ and ‘Rémund vs. King Ménon’ follow this formula in all seven parts. In the other cases, where the sword is preferred over the lance to end a fight, the protagonists swing the blade just the way their French colleagues do:

Die Dichter der ChG [chansons de geste] kamen dem Geschmack ihrer Zuhörerschaft besonders entgegen, wenn sie ihre Helden Höchstleistungen an Kraft vollbringen ließen.

41 Latacz (1977, p. 45) raises the question if the hero of Homeric poetry has to be understood nonetheless as part of a larger military unit, similarly Czerwinski (1975), for medieval chivalric literature. Both show that, for their respective areas of research, the tactical importance of the mass is reflected in literature. This is not the case for the Icelandic texts, which might be due to narrative concepts, or a lack of experience with large scale military campaigning.

So berichten sie oft von sog. Schwabenstreichen,⁴² d.h. Schwertschlägen, mit denen nicht nur der Helm, Kappe und Panzerhemd des Gegners, sondern dessen Kopf und ganzer Oberkörper zerspalten werden. [...] In vier Zweikämpfen des Rol. [Chanson de Roland] wird die Wirkung dieses Schlages noch dadurch vergrößert, daß nicht nur der ganze Ritter sondern auch sein Pferd zerspalten wird. (Clausnitzer, 1926, p. 78)

Such blows are common in the *Rémundar saga keisarasonar*. More precisely, they are Rémundr's standard method of killing an enemy of high status (not taken into account here are tournaments or fights against later friends):

- Rémundr vs. Eskupart: Eskupart cut in half (vertically) (Broberg, 1909, p. 41 / ch. 9)
- Rémundr vs. the giant: giant cut in half (diagonally) (Broberg, 1909, p. 68 / ch. 16)
- Remundr vs. Roddan: Roddan and horse cut in half (vertically) (Broberg, 1909, p. 104 / ch. 21)
- Rémundr vs. Jónater: Jónater beheaded (Broberg, 1909, p. 110 / ch. 21)
- Rémundr vs. Sálater: Sálater and horse cut in half (vertically) (Broberg, 1909, p. 111 / ch. 21)
- Rémundr vs. King Klibánús: Klibánús cut in half (vertically) (Broberg, 1909, pp. 262–263 / ch. 53)

42 Since this work is written as a dissertation at the University of Tübingen, it is inevitable to quote the famous lines from Ludwig Uhland's poem *Schwäbische Kunde: Er trifft des Türken Pferd so gut, / Er haut ihm ab mit einem Streich / Die beiden Vorderfüß' zugleich. / Als er das Thier zu Fall gebracht, / Da faßt er erst sein Schwerdt mit Macht, / Er schwingt es auf des Reiters Kopf, / Haut durch bis auf den Sattelknopf, / Haut auch den Sattel noch zu Stücken / Und tief noch in des Pferdes Rücken; / Zur Rechten sieht man, wie zur Linken, / Einen halben Türken heruntersinken*. Emperor Frederick (Friedrich) I. Barbarossa hears of this deed, and has the knight come before him: *Er sprach: 'Sagt an, mein Ritter werth! / Wer hat Euch solche Streich' gelehrt?' / Der Held bedacht' sich nicht zu lang: / 'Die Streiche sind bei uns im Schwang, / Sie sind bekannt im ganzen Reiche, / Man nennt sie halt nur Schwabenstreiche.*' (Uhland (1815, p. 288)) Uhland's poem, in turn, is based on an incident referred by Byzantine historian Niketas Choniates that allegedly happened in 1190: "It is said that during this expedition inland, a certain German, huge in size and invincible, was left far behind by his countrymen. As he made his way on foot and at a slow pace, leading his exhausted horse by the reins, more than fifty Ismaelites collected around him, all mighty men who had also distanced their own ranks. Positioning themselves in a circle around him, they shot their arrows, but he took cover under his wide shield and, confident in the imperviousness of his weapons, continued joyfully on his way, as unshaken by the adversary's missiles as though he were a promontory or jutting rock. Finally, one of them announced that he would surpass his companions in deeds of courage. He set aside his bow as useless, and, unsheathing his long sword, he gave his horse free rein and fell upon the German and engaged him in near-equal combat. He smote him as though he were a mountain ridge or statue of bronze; the latter, drawing his heavy, huge, strong sword with his stout and heroic hand, struck the horse across the front legs and cut them both off more easily than one cutting the grass of the field. The horse fell on its knees still holding the rider propped up in his saddle, whereupon the German stretched forth his arm and brought the sword down on the middle of his head. The force of the blow and the intensity of the German resulted in such a wondrous cut that the smitten man was cleft in twain, and the blow, which cut right through the padded saddle, pierced the horse's back. The remaining Turks, terrified at the sight, no longer had the boldness to challenge him to single combat. The German, confident as a lion in his own strength, did not hurry on his way but walked at a steady pace to join his countrymen in their camp late that evening." (Magoulias (1984, p. 228 / ch. 414–415))

- Rémundr vs. nameless King A: King A cut in half from breast to saddle (Broberg, 1909, pp. 300–301 / ch. 59)
- Rémundr vs. nameless King B: King B cut in half from spine to groin (Broberg, 1909, p. 301 / ch. 59)
- Rémundr vs. Ménon: whole left side of Ménon's body cut of (Broberg, 1909, p. 307 / ch. 60)

In other words: With the exception of Jonater, who is 'only' beheaded, every time Rémundr kills an outstanding enemy, he makes use of a *Schwabenstreich*. Clearly, the author's intention is to underline the hero's role as the supreme warrior par excellence. We may assume that this is also the reason only few enemies are killed on first contact, with the lance. Piercing through the opponent, mainly done by the horse's speed, can hardly be as spectacular as cleaving him in half. Also, the aforementioned physical annihilation of the 'Other' has to be taken into account.

It is indeed possible to inflict tremendous damage to a human body with a single blow of a sharp weapon.⁴³ But even if bisecting an enemy is possible in theory, it has to be classified as literary exaggeration when Rémundr fulfils this deed routinely, as his standard combat move. Often, he uses the most demanding variation of such a cut, the vertical one. This means that he has to cut through the whole length of the enemy's body, through armour and flesh alike, and often including the horse. Falk notes:

Die Riesenhiebe, von denen die anord. Sagas wie auch fremde Sagen [...] so häufig berichten, gehen aber weit über das Bedürfnis hinaus und sind gewiß meist als Ausschmückungen der mündlichen Tradition anzusehen. [...] In den einheimischen Sagas wird selten, in den fremden um so häufiger ein Mann vom Scheitel bis zum Gürtel gespalten. (Falk, 1914, p. 46)

To describe this move, the saga recycles the same phrases over and over. The combat scenes are repetitive to an extent where a (modern) reader might find it hard to tell apart one battle from the other (and will often enough simply get bored). Rémundr bisecting Eskupart, Roddan, Salater, and King Klibanus is expressed in almost the same words:

- *Nú hoggur Rémundr í annan tíma með sinu sverði ok kemr í hjálminn, beit hjálminn ok hausinn, hálsinn ok herðarnar, búk ok brynju niðr til beltis, ok fell hann niðr af hestinum dauðr til jarðar.* (Broberg, 1909, pp. 38-41 / ch. 9)

⁴³ See chapter 7.3.a).

- *Rémundr høggr nú til hans með sínu sverði, kemr í hjálminn, sníðr hjálminn ok hausinn, búkinn ok brynjuna, sǫðulinn ok hestinn sundr í miðju.* (Broberg, 1909, p. 104 / ch. 21)
- *Rémundr reiddi sverðit ok hjó til Sálatars ofan í hjálminn [...] Hér með klofnar ll hǫfuðit ok hálsinn, búkrinn ok brynjan, sǫðull ok hestr sundr í miðju, svá at sverðit nam staðar í jǫrðu.* (Broberg, 1909, p. 111 / ch. 21)
- *Nú høggr Rémundr til Klibáni konungs með sínu sverði ofan í hjálminn ok sníðr hjálminn, hausinn, búkinn ok brynjuna sundr í miðju, en sverðit nemr í jǫrðu staðar.* (Broberg, 1909, pp. 262-263 / ch. 53)

The same list of body parts and armour pieces appears when Rémund fights his way through a large number of nameless henchmen:

- *Ok því klauf hann hjálma ok hausa, hálsa ok herðar, búka ok brynjur, sǫðla ok hesta ok hvern, þann er hans sverð nær til, svá at á jǫrðu nam staðar.* (Broberg, 1909, p. 100 / ch. 20)

Formulaic is also the action with which Rémund starts a battle:

- *Hleypr nú Rémundr á sinn hest, vekjandi fyrst þessa orrostu á þann hátt, at hann leggr sínu spjóti fyrir brjóst einum heiðingja, svá (at) yddi út um bakit.* (Broberg, 1909, p. 263 / ch. 53)
- *Hann ríðr fram í fylking frankismanna, leggjandi sínu spjóti fyrir brjóst einum góðum riddara, ok hratt honum dauðum af hestinum.* (Broberg, 1909, p. 285 / ch. 58)

So is the description of the battle's noise:

- *Nú hefz hér hit harðasta stríð með stórum brestum ok údæmiligum gný.* (Broberg, 1909, p. 99 / ch. 20)
- *Hefz hér hin snarpasta orrosta [...] með miklum gný ok ógurligu vápnabraki.* (Broberg, 1909, p. 107 / ch. 21)
- *Nú hefz orrostan með údæmiligum gný ok vápnabraki, ógurligum bumbuþyt ok lúðragangi.* (Broberg, 1909, p. 284 / ch. 58)

Countless other examples could be found. The formulaic construction of battle scenes in the original *riddarasögur* have been discussed by Astrid van Nahl and Jürg Glauser, and their observations fit *Rémundar saga keisarasonar* to a large extent:

Bei den Massenschlachten innerhalb der Riddarasögur folgen die einzelnen Kampfszenen bestimmten allgemeinen Aufbauprinzipien. Die Schlacht beginnt, indem zwei oder mehrere feindliche Heere aufeinandertreffen. Die Könige ordnen die Aufstellung ihrer Leute bis in die kleinste Einzelheit [...] Nachdem der Verfasser die harte Schlacht hat beginnen lassen, geht er gewöhnlich dazu über, aus dem Kampfgeschehen die Hauptgestalten der feindlichen Parteien herauszugreifen. Nachdem ihre äußere Erscheinung samt Schilden, Helmen und Pferden eingehend betrachtet ist, wendet sich der Autor jeweils ihren Zweikämpfen zu, solange, bis einer von ihnen unterliegt. Auch innerhalb dieser Zweikämpfe lassen sich in den verschiedenen Sagas immer die gleichen Aufbauprinzipien finden: So reiten die Helden zunächst aufeinander los, meist auf Pferden, manchmal auch auf Elefanten oder Kamelen, so lange, bis ihre Lanzen am Schild des Gegners zerschmettern. Dem Kampf zu Pferde folgen erbitterte Auseinandersetzungen zu Fuß. Mit Säbeln und vor allem mit den auf Island bekannteren Kurzschwertern und Äxten wird weitergekämpft, bis schließlich Handgelenke, Füße und Köpfe davonstieben, Schädel und Brust sich spalten. (van Nahl, 1981, pp. 53–54)

And Glauser:

Über folgende, feststehende Elemente entwickeln sich die großen Heeresschlachten in den Märchensagas: Vorgeschichte, (Anlaß zur Schlacht [...]), Vorbereitungen auf beiden Seiten, Nacht und Morgen vor dem Kampf, Beginn der Schlachthandlungen, Aufzug auf dem Kampfplatz, Ertönen des Schlachtsignals, Stärkeverhältnis der Gegner [...], Zusammensprall der Heeresformationen, Härte der Schlacht, Aufzählung der eingesetzten Waffenarten, Größe der Verluste, Zweikämpfe einzelner, namentlich hervorgehobener Krieger (diese werden nach folgendem Schema erzählt: Erblicken des Gegners, der großen Schaden anrichtet, Duelle zwischen den beiden Kämpfenden, zuerst zu Pferd, dann zu Fuß, mit den jeweils entsprechenden Waffen, harter Kampf bis zur Ermüdung, Tod eines der Kämpfenden), Dauer der Schlacht, schließliche Überlegenheit einer Partei, Flucht der Unterlegenen (eines Teils oder des ganzen Heeres), Verfolgung (Gefangenschaft, Bestrafung), Sieg und Siegesfeier. (Glauser, 1983, pp. 114–115)

It may be added that the saga author's desire for repetition results not only in (re-)using the same structures and phrases throughout the whole text, but also in grouping similar combat scenes closely together. For example, the text's only three fights to be fought on foot, the duels of Berald, Víðfǫrull, and Rémundr (Broberg, 1909, pp. 252-262 / ch. 51-53), follow each other without interruption. The same is true for the two only two encounters where outstanding antagonists are defeated on the first attack, with the lance. (Broberg, 1909, p. 263 / ch. 53)

Nevertheless: Schematic as the combat scenes may be, they are not assembled and written down randomly. By their behaviour and respective success in combat, the author distinguishes the characters from each other. We have seen that almost every time Rémundr kills an enemy with the sword, he cuts him into half. In contrast to this, his companion Berald – although an outstanding fighter himself – may cause terrible wounds,

but has a harder time bisecting the foe. Berald lacks that last pinch of power that makes the *überhero* Rémundr, and his sword gets stuck in the opponent's body: *Nú bregðr konungsson sínu sverði ok hæggr í hjálm hins heiðna, ok bítr sverðit hjálminn ok hausinn, svá at í tǫnnum nam staðar.* (Broberg, 1909, p. 268 / ch. 54)

Berald and Víðfǫrull, Rémundr's second important companion, show another, more dramatic flaw in their fighting. Several times, they receive wounds from the blows of their enemies:

- *Nú eiga þeir svá harða hǫggorrostu, ok veitir hvárr ǫðrum stór slǫg, ok báðum liggja við úhæfu.* (Broberg, 1909, pp. 255-256 / ch. 51)
- *Hæggr nú hvárr til annars með stórum hǫggum, [...] svá (at) báðir verða sárir [...] Nú reiðit Josías konungr ok hæggr til Víðfǫruls, veitandi honum mikit sár.* (Broberg, 1909, pp. 257-258 / ch. 52)
- *Víðfǫrull var særðr mǫrgum sárum, svá segjandi, at hann hafi við ǫngvan riddara fræknara átt.* (Broberg, 1909, p. 297 / ch. 59)

Such wounds never happen to Rémundr. The author makes careful use of the combat scenes to emphasize the differences between the characters; Rémundr is the best of all knights, and not even his closest friends can compare with him.

d) Composition principles of the 'knightly mode of combat'

The observations made so far allow us to define five underlying composition principles of the 'knightly mode of combat':

(I) use of *chivalric weaponry*: The foremost characteristic. Warriors are trained in and use the technique of mounted combat with a lance. Full body armour is a prerequisite and standard for the protagonists, while sword and shield are the dominant weapons for close quarter combat. Individual fighters are outstanding not because they are structurally different than others, but more perfect in the use of chivalric combat techniques. Even giants fight like knights.

(II) *aesthetics of force* and *physical annihilation* of the enemy: All strikes are executed with maximum force, the elaborate techniques of medieval fencing play no role. Consequently, the enemy is not just killed, but 'hacked to pieces'.

(III) tendency to *exaggeration*: Exaggeration shows in the *überpowerful* strikes mentioned in principle (II), and especially in the numbers of combatants - hundreds of enemies are killed, mass battle is standard and described in length.

(IV) *construction of social hierarchy* and the *perfect hero*: Fighting ability, martial prowess and social standing become a unity. Stratification of power is constituted by combat, even among later friends. Consequently, the hero is *de facto* invincible, and the saga's audience can rely on his superiority in all combat situations.

(V) *repetitiveness*: combat scenes are constructed by the use of a few standard building blocks, re-occurring situations and restricted vocabulary. Combat scenes may be grouped closely together in the saga according to similarities between them.

The 'knightly mode of combat' can be encountered in many texts. To provide some examples from outside *Rémundar saga ok keisarasonar*, two scenes from other sagas shall be listed, without a further in-depth analysis. The reader will easily see the parallels.

Flóres saga konungs ok sona hans:

Kastús konungr gengr þá at borginni með sinn her, ok tekz nú enu mesti bardagi, ok var mjög mannskæðr; ok var þat langa stund dags, at hvergi mátti sjá heiðan himin fyrir orvum ok spjótum; en gny ok vápnabrák ok lúðragang mátti heyra vel hundrað rasta, En með því, at margreifinn hafði fátt lið, þá hallaðiz bardaginn á hann. Riðr hann þá framm með miklu kappi, ok í þessi sinni framreið drap hann meirr en níutigi manna. Ok nú kom í móti honum merkismaðr Kastús konungs; sá hét Ótte. Hann drap hestinn undir margreifanum, ok greifinn hjó í mót til hans ok af honum hōndina, ok nam sverðit kviðinn, svá úti lágu iðrin, ok fell merkit. En margreifinn stōkk á þann hest, er Ótte hafði riðit, ok þeysir at Kastús konungi ok hjó í hans hjálm. Þat var svá mikit hōgg, at laufin með gimsteinunum flugu í burt á vōllinn, en konungrinn (fell i) óvit framm á sōðulbogann. Þá kom riðandi enn sterki Ábél ok leggr til margreifans svá hart, at hann fell af sinum hesti. Hann stōkk á fætr fimliga, ok gekk at einem marmarasteini ok settiz niðr, ok var þá sprunginn. (Lagerholm, 1927, pp. 135-136 / ch. 8)

Sigurðar saga þōgla:

Geck Ermedon kongs s(on) j gegnum fylcingar þeirra fostbræðra og drap huern þann mann er fyrir honum uard og hlod ualkostu til beggia handa. þar til er þeir hittuzt j bardaganum Vallterj kongs sonn og Ermedonn. uar þetta hōggva uitskipte hit hardazta og atsokn ækōf. Særdizt Vallterj miog og hiugguzt hans hlijfar allar þar til er hann fell nidur af sarum blodras og mæde. þetta lijtur Randuer ath Ermedon hefir fyrir komit Valltera og fer j moti Ermedon og hōggur til hans med sijnu goda suerdi j skiollidin og klyfur j sunndur nidur j gegnum mundrida suo at j jōrdu nam stadar. Ermedon kastar nidur skialldarbrotunum enn tuijhendir suerdit af mikille reide og hōggur til Randuers j skiollidin og hann j suundur og rennde suerdinu æ lærit ofanuert og reijst suo ofan yfir

hne. var þat mikít sar og uard þegar wuijgur. S(igurdur) kemur ath j þessu og ser sinn fostbrodur fallinn og uill eigi þat siæ enn halfu sijdur þola at se lengi ohefnt. þui höggur hann til Ermedons af mikille reide j hialminn og hann j sunndur og nam stadar j beine. war þat mikít sar. Hier j mot höggur Ermedon til S(igurdar) og j skiolldin og sunndur at endilöngu. enn blodrefillinn nam auxlinna og af axlar beinit og kiotit af handleggnum nidur at olboga. S(igurdur) sar miog. Hann brazt uid fast og hio til Ermedons med aulla afle. Kom hoggit æfotin fyrir nedan hne og af allan kalfan nidur j gegnum med hælbeinninu. enn uid sar þetta uerdr Ermedon suo æuar reidur at hann höggur til S(igurdar) suo akaft og leggur med suerdinu at S(igurdur) hefír eckj annat ath gera lengi dags enn hlijfa ser þar til at Ermedon gefzt fyrir mædi og blodras og gengr at S(igurdi) og gefur vp uopn sijn og sig sialfan æ hans ualld. S(igurdur) tok þuij uel 'og vil eg ath uid sueriunzt j fostbrædralag. og uerum allir saman Randuer og Vallterj'. Ermedon jatar þuij gladliga (Loth, 1963, pp. 178-180 / ch. 28)⁴⁴

The formulaic and repetitive nature of the combat scenes in *riddarasögur* like *Rémundar saga keisarasonar* has led to the opinion that they fulfil no purpose beyond entertainment by 'action'. Also, it has been maintained that they can be read independently from each other, as separate blocks without meaningful connection. (van Nahl, 1981, p. 57) A closer look on *Rémundar saga keisarasonar* has shown that this is not the case. As stated before, this saga is an exceptionally pure example insofar as every single fight in the text is defined by the 'knightly mode of combat'. But similar descriptions can be found in practically all the *riddarasögur*. If we set the scenes in relation to each other and look at them as pieces of a larger network, they have much to reveal:

Within the saga, they help to define the characters and establish a 'heroic hierarchy'. In respect to the saga's cultural context, their uniformity underlines the intention to establish a dominant code of behaviour, that is, chivalric ideology and martial prowess. It has been discussed

ob die Riddarasögur vornehmlich eine Unterhaltungsfunktion haben (so die Meinung Marianne E. Kalinkes) oder ob sie nicht vielmehr im Dienste der höfischen Erziehung stehen, also letztlich didaktisch ausgerichtet seien (letzteres die Auffassung Geraldine Barnes'). (Kramarz-Bein, 1999, pp. 79–80)

I agree with Susanne Kramarz-Bein's opinion: "Die Wahrheit dürfte hier - wie letztlich überall - in der Mitte zu suchen sein." (Kramarz-Bein, 1999, pp. 79–80), and I want to add: Entertainment and didactic intent are in no way mutual exclusive, and definitely not when it comes to knightly combat. A young, male, physically fit audience of high social standing

⁴⁴ We must note that in this scene none of the combatants remains unharmed. While this deviates from Rémundr's model, it stresses the equality of the fighters, who afterwards become sworn brothers – again, fighting is a means to establish social relationships.

surely was delighted to hear of the martial deeds in the *riddarasögur*. This joy in reception will have led to heightened motivation to train and fight in the knightly way of combat.

In an intertextual perspective, the scenes connect the saga to a dominant literary and socio-political trend of its time. Bibire pointed out that the original *riddarasaga* “rejects many if not most of the characteristics of European romance.” (Bibire, 1985, p. 68) This may be true in respect to narrative structure, ethical implications or the ideas of chivalric love. It is definitely not true in the light of the combat scenes. The ‘knightly mode of combat’ is the foremost expression for the fascination with continental chivalric culture and should not be read over carelessly. It links the original *riddarasögur* with the translated ones, and with European chivalric romance, forming a large corpus of, if you will, knightly military propaganda.⁴⁵ And it is so remarkably uniform that it can be easily set apart from other literary depictions of fighting.⁴⁶

The ‘knightly mode of combat’ is an obvious reflection of the saga's socio-political agenda. Human society is ordered in a strict hierarchy in which social status, martial skill, and God's favour are one and the same: “Die Überlegenheit [im Zweikampf] ist verquickt mit dem ‘Ansehen’ (*frægð*) des Ritters”. (Schäfke, 2013, p. 171)

In the light of the battle scenes, one can agree with Preben Meulengracht Sørensen when he understands the development of the *riddarasögur* as a result of the rise of a new social elite in Iceland, namely, the noble-made administrative in service of a foreign king. (Sørensen, 1977, pp. 151–152) And Glauser's remark on the translated *riddarasögur* is just as correct for a text like *Rémundar saga keisarasonar*:

The sagas of knights, both as individual texts and as a corpus, are an extremely interesting example of how a dialogue was conducted in medieval Scandinavia with a foreign culture that evidently held a certain fascination for the Scandinavian peoples. These sagas offer an abundance of illustrative material relevant to the questions of which elements of this new culture [...] people in the north were willing to accept, and which ones they would tend to reject. (Glauser, 2005, p. 382)

If we take into account to what extent the *Rémundar saga keisarasonar* deals with combat, it is quite obvious that chivalric warfare was one of the elements of European culture its

45 As Hasty (2002, pp. 44–45) pointed out regarding German Arthurian epics: “Chivalric aggression, or *gewalt*, does not lead in the direction of religious or moral systems of evaluation. It seems rather to represent in an almost realistic way the interests and priorities of historical knighthood. [...] One must consider the possibility that the moral or didactic element may not always have been as significant for medieval audiences as the pleasure involved in seeing a military way of life, with all its risks and rewards, represented in romance.”

46 This could also mean that *if* we want to define whether a given text is a *riddarasaga* or a *fornaldarsaga*, we should (among other criteria) check if the knightly mode of combat is applied.

author was fascinated with. As a new literary device, as a new military technique, but probably just as much as a solidification of a new model of society.

4. Appetite for destruction: The ‘adventurous mode of combat’

As we have seen, the ‘knightly mode of combat’ can be characterised as a very unrealistic way to depict fighting. But this does not mean that any unrealistic combat scene would fit into the ‘knightly mode’. There are fights in saga literature which are just as exaggerated, as concentrated on the superior hero, and as bloody as those in, e. g., *Rémundar saga keisarasonar*, but which nevertheless fall into a different category. This category shall be called the ‘adventurous mode of combat’.

The ‘adventurous mode of combat’ will be described by the fight scenes of *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana* and *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*. Both are rather short texts, hence the decision to take two sagas into account. The similarities between their combat scenes will strengthen the argument. We will start the discussion with *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*.

4.1. The saga of Egill the one-handed and Ásmundr the berserk-slayer

Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana dates to the 14th century and has been called a ‘viking romance’ (Pálsson & Edwards, 1985); it is transmitted in the manuscripts AM 343a, 4to; AM 577, 4to; AM 589 e, 4to; and BM Add 4874, 4to. The saga tells the story of Egill and Ásmundr, who, after a first hostile contact, become friends and travel to the realm of giants in search of two princesses that have been abducted by monsters. On their way, they meet the hospitable troll woman Arinnefja. Over a shared meal, the three take turns in telling their (rather bloody) *æfisögur*, their life stories.⁴⁷ The saga, despite being not very comprehensive, offers nine combat scenes for our analysis. A look at their personnel makes it apparent how much these scenes differ from those in *Rémundar saga keisarasonar*.

⁴⁷ The narrative structure of this storytelling within the story is quite interesting, but of no immediate concern here. For a discussion, see e. g. Jenson (2003).

a) Two non-chivalrous princes

The saga's main characters Egill and Ásmundr (as well as Ásmundr's blood brother Árán) are both the sons of kings. However, their upbringing, skipped over in a few words, does not make them knights. Ásmundr may be trained in some skills (one might assume, the necessary skills of a warrior), but there are no references to courtly culture as such:

Óttarr hét konungr. Hann réð fyrir Hálogalandi. Sigríðr hét drottning hans [...] Þau áttu einn son. Sá hét Ásmundr. Hann var mikill vexti. Vandist hann við íþróttir, ok þá hann var tólf vetra, þótti hann af betra öllum þeim, sem þar váru. (Jónsson, 1954, p. 334 / ch. 6)

Hringr hét konungr. Hann réð fyrir Smálöndum. Ingibjörg hét kona hans. [...] Þau áttu tvau börn. Egill hét sonr þeira, en Æsa dóttir. Egill óx upp með hirð föður síns, þar til at hann var tólf vetra gamall. Hann var mikill fyrir sér ok óstýralátr, kappsamr ok ódæll. Hann lagði lag sitt við drengi ok lagðist út á skóga at skjóta dýr ok fugla. (Jónsson, 1954, p. 342 / ch. 9)

Important for the saga is that both Egill and Ásmundr grow up as young men who can and do rely on their own strength. The etiquette and technicalities of chivalry, on the other hand, are of no concern to them.⁴⁸ Similarly, the opponents and companions they encounter during the the story do not belong to the chivalric cosmos: vikings, berserks, undead, and, most of all, giants do the fighting.

The saga's first combat scene describes the first meeting of Egill and Ásmundr, and how they become friends. Egill bursts into the story: Heavily wounded, a warrior enters King Hertryggr's hall, where Ásmundr is staying as a guest. Just before he dies, the warrior tells bad news of five ships plundering in the kingdom under the command of Egill Einhendi, and the terrible battle he fought against them. Egill is no ordinary foe: *En Egill þessi hefir aðra hönd ok er kallaðr Egill Einhendi, ok vinnr hann meira sigr með þeiri, sem af er. Er*

48 Bampi (2012, p. 286) has applied Even-Zohar's polysystem theory on *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*, and he notes that in the episode of Ásmundr and Árán, the saga enters realms typical for the *riddarasaga*: “Even if the author of the saga derives the episode of Árán's awakening in the mound from an orally circulating legend, he clearly relates the figure of Árán to a fictional world which is different from the one of the *fornaldarsögur*: it is a world largely made up of traditional Norse cultural elements, which however are isolated and deprived of any organic relationship with each other. This world is characterized by an abstract geography where it is impossible to recognize the position of the different lands and the route one has to follow in order to move from one place to another: in short, it is the world of the original *riddarasögur*. The very presentation of Árán marks the switch, and activates a different horizon of expectations in the audience: not only is he shown in a space outside space - in an unknown wood where Ásmundr has been guided by a mysterious and elusive hare - but his own name, the name of his father (Róðián) and the name of his land (Tattaríá) clearly refer to a world that is alien to the traditional lore of Scandinavia.” This may be true, but it only concerns the outer appearance of Árán and his homeland. The wondrous, exotic names remind the audience of *riddarasögur*, but in quality, Árán is not a *riddari*. He is an example of the noble warrior class that preceded knighthood, knowing neither how to apply proper knightly military technique, nor explicitly adhering to chivalrous modes of combat. Therefore, even though the Árán episode plays with motifs of the *riddarasögur*, it does not really switch between (postulated) genres.

þar búit um eitt sverð, ok er þat dverga smíði, ok er því læst at fyrir ofan úflið, en hans högg standast engir menn. (Jónsson, 1954, p. 328 / ch. 3) This description already hints at the mode of the following combat scenes – exaggerated, unrealistic, and touched by the supernatural. The saga's audience can look forward to be amazed. Indeed, the intention to amaze lies, as we will see, at the core of this mode of combat.

Terrible as Egill may be according to the dying warrior's words, Ásmundr immediately sets off to meet him and give him *sverð mót öxum*. (Jónsson, 1954, p. 328 / ch. 4) The words they speak at their first meeting are far from the boasting and threatening one might expect, and lay the ground for their later friendship. Already at this point, Egill suggests becoming sworn-brothers, which Ásmundr refuses. But they manage to restrict the violence between their two parties. Instead of having their men killed in an all-out battle, they decide to fight a duel. Technically, this duel relies on basic martial skills and equipment: swords (or sword-for-hand, in Egils case), shields (several are split) and helmets are mentioned, in the end the fight turns to wrestling and goes to the ground. There is no indication for body armour, and neither horses nor lances are used. The chivalric method of combat plays no role here. As Pálsson and Edwards put it: “The viking warriors keep hacking at one another with heavy sharp-edged swords, or even with wooden clubs, but the stylized hero of romance tilts on horseback and wields the chivalrous lance.” (Pálsson & Edwards, 1970, p. 98)

Even though the two young men are trying to kill each other, the fight lasts until the evening, when it comes to a halt without a decision. The two parties sit together for a drinking feast and sleep soundly without hostilities until the next morning, when the duel is resumed. Again, they fight until *sól er komin í útsuðr* (Jónsson, 1954, p. 330 / ch. 4), and only very slowly Egill gets the upper hand. So, instead of fencing with sword and shield, Ásmundr changes his tactics and wrestles Egill to the ground. There, the saga claims, the latter's sword-for-hand is of not much use. Yet, Ásmundr spares his life, and they become sworn-brothers.⁴⁹

49 Reuschel (1933, pp. 75–76) called fights like this *Olivierkampf*: “Im Hinblick darauf, daß es [this motif] auch außerhalb des Nordischen vorkommt, verdient es nach der bekannten Szene in der Chanson de geste von Girard de Viane auch den Namen ‘Olivierkampf’. Die beiden Helden treffen sich gewöhnlich auf einer Wikingerfahrt. Sie geraten aneinander und kämpfen zusammen. Sie erkennen jedoch die Tüchtigkeit des andern, beenden den Streit und schließen sich nun als Freunde zusammen. [...] Dieses Motiv hat Festigkeit in der Fas. [fornaldarsaga]. Es ist eine kleine Erzählungseinheit, die ziemlich beliebig in den Gang der Geschichte eingeschoben werden kann. Bestimmte Verknüpfungen nach vorn und hinten verlangt es von sich aus nicht.” See there for a further discussion of the motif.

The scene is not concerned with plausibility. It is difficult to imagine how two men, armed with swords and willing to kill each other, should fight for one and a half days without bringing the duel to an earlier end – not to mention the physical demands of such an activity. Especially Egill seems to find their business highly amusing. Two times he calls their fight a *leikr* (Jónsson, 1954, pp. 329-330 / ch. 4), even though *sýnist æ sem þeim sé dauðinn vís, sem til er höggvit.* (Jónsson, 1954, p. 330 / ch. 4) And when Ásmundr has thrown him down and is running for his sword, Egill *lá svá kyrr sem hár hans væri skorit.* (Jónsson, 1954, p. 330 / ch. 4)

There is an air of irony to the whole scene, and it is obvious that its main purpose is to bind the two heroes together in friendship. Parallel to *Rémundar saga keisarasonar*, fighting is here the dominant means to establish social relations between members of the warrior class, if they are not embedded in an already existing social setting (e. g., the court of a king). The uncertainty who of two men is the better fighter seems unbearable. Even to become sworn-brothers, swords have to be crossed. And yet, in *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*, the fight still leaves room for ambiguity. For *Rémundar saga keisarasonar*, this would be inconceivable. Who, in the end, did really show superior fighting skills? Egill loses, but seems to do so voluntarily, and Ásmundr admits: *'Engum manni ertu líkr, Egill.'* (Jónsson, 1954, p. 330 / ch. 4) This openness is necessary to establish Egill and Ásmundr as friends on equal levels, and finds its parallel in the wrestling match between Ásmundr and Árán told later in the saga. Unable to decide who of them is the stronger, they become sworn-brothers before their contest can escalate: *'Ekki skulum vit vápnaskipti prófa, því at þat verðr skaði okkar beggja'*, Árán says. (Jónsson, 1954, p. 335 / ch. 6)

b) Heroes vs. vikings and berserks

The duel between Egill and Ásmundr, and the wrestling match between Ásmundr and Árán are the first two fights the saga describes. They lay the ground for the following action and are insofar different from all other combat scenes found in the text as they end with peace, not with bloodshed and death. Of the other seven combat scenes, fought with all homicidal (or monstrial, for that matter) intent, three describe conflict with mortal men, some of them berserks. They shall be discussed first.

Before his meeting with Egill, young Ásmundr (as he tells in retrospective) travels with his sworn-brother Árán to meet Árán's father, King Róðián. They have to hear that Róðián was killed by two brothers from *Blökkumannaland*, Bolabjörn and Vísinn, and that much of the country was laid waste. Heroes that they are, they immediately set off for a counterattack. The ensuing combat is an outstanding example of the dramatic design of such a scene, it shall be quoted here in full length:

Árán hljóp á skip til Bolabjarnar ok ruddist um fast, ok hrökk allt undan honum. Bolabjörn réðst mót honum. Árán hjó til hans í beran skallann, en sverðit beit eigi, en duftit hraut ór skallanum, ok stökk verðit sundr undir hjöltunum. Bolabjörn hjó í mót í skjöldinn Árans ok klauf hann at endilöngu, ok fekk Árán sár mikit á bringuna. Stokklaust akkeri lá á þilfarinu, ok greip Árán þat upp ok rak í höfuð Bolabirni, svá at flýit sökk, ok kippti Árán honum út af borðinu, ok sökk hann til grunna. Vísinn hljóp á skip til Ásmundar ok skaut at honum tveim kesjum í senn. Ásmundr skaut skildi fyrir aðra, ok hljóp hún í gegnum skjöldinn ok í handlegg Ásmundar fyrir framan olnbogann, svá at í beini stóð. Aðra kesjuna tók Ásmundr á lofti ok skaut aftr á Vísinn ok hæfði í ginit á honum, svá at út gekk um hnakkann ok upp á mitt skaftit. Spjótit hljóp í siglutréit, svá at langt gekk upp á fjöðrina, ok hekk Vísinn þar dauðr. Eftir þat gáfust víkingar upp, en Árán lét höggva alla fyrir borð. (Jónsson, 1954, pp. 337–338 / ch. 7)

The action here is set on a fast pace. The back-and-forth exchange of attacks is described move by move in short words and in a way which is both exaggerated, yet comprehensible. The scene hints at the supernatural – although Bolabjörn is not explicitly called a *berserkr*, he possesses the typical *berserkr* quality that no steel weapon can cut him. Luckily for Árán, the broken anchor is at hand.

This way of fighting is very different from the ‘knightly mode of combat’. The enemy is slain by any means possible, and when the sword breaks, an improvised weapon will do. In a similar fashion Egill had finished off the *berserkr* Glammaðr in his youth. Glammaðr possesses a magical weapon, a *kjörvápn*, *einn brynþvara* (Jónsson, 1954, p. 346 / ch. 10) that can kill any opponent as soon as his name is known. Yet, the weapon is of not much help against Egill. With the broken shaft of his spear, he knocks the *berserkr* overboard, and man and halberd sink down into the sea. Thus, two times in the saga a broken wooden device is used to kill a berserk and send him to drown. However, the author plays with the motif and creates some variation, instead of a mere repetition.

Non-chivalrous violence, usage of the tools at hand and the element of surprise are also the means by which Ásmundr defeats the berserks Hrærekr and Siggeir. They have taken him captive, but he can cut his ropes on a piece of metal. He then takes his revenge:

Kom honum nú í hug at glettast nokkut við berserkina [...] Ferr hann nú til tjalds þess, sem þeir sváfu inni, ok fellir á þá tjaldit. Þeir spruttu upp, sem inni váru, ok varð þeim ógreið útgangan, því at tjaldit flæktist fyrir þeim. Ásmundr hjó í höfuð Hræreki ok klauf niðr í jaxla. Siggeir komst út ok vildi hlaupa í skóginn. Ásmundr hljóp eftir honum. Siggeir drap fæti, en Ásmundr hjó eftir honum á hrygginn fyrir neðan þat, sem hann var mjóstr, ok tók hann þar sundr. Síðan fór Ásmundr í skóginn. Drepit hafði hann tíu menn með berserkjunum. (Jónsson, 1954, p. 340 / ch. 8)

We are not told what kind of weapon Ásmundr uses. Maybe the author wanted to avoid the contradiction how two berserks – given that the audience most probably supposed them to be invulnerable against steel, too – could be cut to pieces, and just stated the fact that they were.⁵⁰

It is noteworthy that the heroes are neither invulnerable nor invincible. They are wounded, get taken captive and may be forced to flee – *Sá Egill þá ekki annan sinn kost en at flýja.* (Jónsson, 1954, p. 347 / ch. 11) –, things that would never happen to someone like Rémundr keisarason.

So far, one might argue that these combat scenes are not very extraordinary. They are definitely unlike the ‘knightly mode of combat’ that *Rémundar saga keisarasonar* presented, they tend to include supernatural elements, are well designed and in some ways exaggerated. And they show the intent to entertain by variation, to always present something new. But still, they are not so far from the fights of, e. g., Egill Skallagrímsson.

The reason for this is that the fights discussed are fought against humans. Combat scenes in *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana* reach their climax of exaggerated, detailed violence when fighting takes place against or in the realm of the supernatural.

c) Heroes vs. undead and giants

Of the nine combat scenes of *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*, four include giants as combatants, while one is fought against a *draugr*, a revenant (the latter being the undead corpse of Ásmundr's friend, Árán).

⁵⁰ Schjødt (2011, p. 284) connected the scene to the concept of the cultic Germanic *Männerbund*. To him “it seems likely that what is at stake here is a vague memory of some legendary hero who had a special relation to Óðinn during an initiation which made him an Odinic hero – an initiation which consisted in ‘killing’ one or more *berserkir* who would sacrifice him.” Schjødt's arguments for this assumption are weak at best. To me, there is no convincing reason why one should assume a subconscious religious layer to the scene, which is using stock motives of Old Norse literature to entertain by action. As Reuschel (1933, p. 68) already wrote: “Wohl lässt das anerkannte, antiquarische Interesse der Sagaerzähler die Möglichkeit offen, daß die Berserker in tatsächlichen älteren Kulturverhältnissen oder im Volksglauben ihre Wurzel haben. Für uns kann diese Seite der Frage keine Rolle spielen. Alle Deutungsversuche, mögen sie nun auf Kultur- und Literaturgeschichte zielen, müssen aber mit der Tatsache rechnen, daß die Berserker für die Fas. [fornaldarsögur] jedenfalls nichts anderes sind als stehende Figuren der Erzähltechnik. Man darf sie hierin getrost mit den Riesen und Zwergen der mittelhochdeutschen Heldenepen vergleichen.”

A short while after their battle against Bolabjörn and Vísinn, Árán suddenly dies, for no obvious reason. Remarkably, the author misses the chance to have Árán killed just a few lines before. Nor do we read that Árán dies later of the wounds he suffered from Bolabjörn, as we might if this was an *Íslendingasaga*. The image of the victorious hero was obviously more important than an elegant story line. According to the oath they had given each other, Ásmundr follows Árán into his grave mound, to sit there for three nights. This does not end well. The corpse rises every night, first to devour his own hound and hawk, then his horse, and finally to attack his sworn-brother:

Ina þriðju nótt tók Ásmund at syfja. Varð hann þá eigi fyrr varr við en Árán greip í eyrun á honum ok sleit þau af honum bæði. Ásmundr brá þá saxi ok hjó höfuð af Áráni. Tók hann síðan eld ok brenndi Árán at ösku. (Jónsson, 1954, p. 338 / ch. 6)

Árán has turned into a monster that reminds the modern reader of a zombie movie; the saga describes how he *tók á tannagangi miklum ok át hestinn, svá at blóð fell um kjafta honum*. (Jónsson, 1954, p. 338 / ch. 6) This new state of being is reflected in the way he attacks Ásmundr on the third night. Even though buried with full armour, Árán does not use a weapon. Instead, he grabs for his friend's ears and tears them off. Ásmunds reaction is prompt and practical, and he dispatches the *draugr* the same way Grettir did with Glámr, by cutting off his head.

Relying on the body as a weapon and tearing the opponent to pieces are characteristic for the saga's supernatural combat scenes.⁵¹ Mutilation becomes a standard, as Donald Fry pointed out: “The plot is a wild one, even for *Fornaldarsögur*. But certain images unify the work, especially gold rings, head wounds, and amputation.” (Fry, 1977, p. 65)

Amputations or mutilations take place in all five supernatural combat scenes:

Ásmundr vs. *draugr* Árán (as quoted above):

- Ásmund's ears torn off
- Árán's head cut off

Egill vs. the giant of the goat cave:⁵²

51 Compare the “mythisches Ringen” as a mode of unarmed combat between hero and monster, where the hero's body becomes total *Körper*, and the monster's total *Leib*; see Wetzler (2014a, pp. 379–382).

52 For a discussion of the motif of the blinded giant, see Fry (1977).

- blinding of the giant: *Síðan bindr Egill jötuninn ok tók einn tvíangaðan flein ok rekr í bæði augun á jötningum, svá at þau liggja út á kinnarbeinunum.* (Jónsson, 1954, p. 345 / ch. 10)
- Egill's ear cut off: *En er jötunninn fann, at hann tók í hringinn, þá kippti hann at sér ok hjó til Egils ok af honum eyrat it hægra.* (Jónsson, 1954, p. 346 / ch. 10)
- giant's hand cut off: *Egill hjó af jötningum höndina hægri ok náði hringnum.* (Jónsson, 1954, p. 346 / ch. 10)

Egill vs. the wrestling giant

- Egil's hand cut off: *Egill hjó til jötunsins, ok kom á öxlina. Jötunninn snaraðist við, ok renndi sverðit ofan eftir handleggnum ok tók ór aflvöðvann, ok var þat svá mikit stykki at einn maðr mundi eigi meira lyfta. Jötunninn hjó til Egils, ok kom á höndina við úfljóðinn ok tók af. Fell á jörð bæði höndin ok sverðit.* (Jónsson, 1954, p. 347 / ch. 11)

Egill vs. the giant Hildir

- Hildir's nose cut off: *Saxit kom á nef jötuns ok tók af nefit, ok var þat svá mikit stykki, at þat var nóg klyf.* (Jónsson, 1954, p. 359 / ch. 15)

Ásmundr vs. Gaut⁵³

- Gaut disembowelled: *blóðrefillinn kom á brún Gauts, reist niðr í augat ok niðr allt kinnbeinit ok viðbeinit ok reist niðr alla bringuna ok tók sundr rifin. [...] iðrin flæktust um fætr honum, ok fell hann dauðr niðr.* (Jónsson, 1954, p. 360 / ch. 15)

As a final act of violence, the sworn-brothers kill the already wounded giant Hildir; not with their weapons, but with raw strength. The body of the hero (or, in this case, the bodies of the heroes) is pitted against the demonic enemy, to physically destroy him:⁵⁴ *Ásmundr*

⁵³ To avoid misunderstandings: the fights Egill vs. Hildir and Ásmundr vs. Gaut are both part of one larger scene, therefore the total of nine combat scenes.

⁵⁴ Again, compare Wetzler (2014a, pp. 379–382).

greip undan Hildi báða fætrna, en Egill helt í höfuðit, ok brutu þeir hann ór hálsliðunum, ok urðu þat hans ævilok. (Jónsson, 1954, p. 360 / ch. 15)

In terms of detailed mutilation, the saga's climax is marked by the troll-woman Arinnejfa's *æfisaga*. To redeem herself after a failed assassination attempt, she has to retrieve three magic treasures from the underworld. Even before the beginning of this trip, she has her thigh-bones and three ribs broken by Ingibjörg, daughter of the earl of Gotland and later mother of Egill. But things go from bad to worse for her:

Nú fór ek í undirheima, ok fann ek Snjá konung [...] en drottningu hans var búinn eitrdrykkir í tólf tunna bikar, ok drakk ek þat fyrir hennar skyld, ok hefi ek síðan haft nokkurn lítinn brjóstsviða. Þadan fór ek í Lúkánusfjall. Þar fann ek þrjár konur, ef svá skyldi kalla, því at ek var barn hjá þeim at vexti. Þær höfðu taflit at geyma. [...] Hljóp þá ein á mik ok greip í mitt hár ok reif af mér öðrum megin reikar ok þar með alla vangafilluna ok eyrat it vinstra. Varð hún mér harðtæk. Ek stóð eigi fyrir, ok rak ek fingrna í augun á henni, ok krækti ek þau bæði ór henni. Snera ek henni þá til sveiflu, ok festi hún fótinn í bjargrifu, ok sleit ek hana ór augakörlunum, ok skildi svá með okkr. Onnur hljóp nú at mér ok rak hnefann á nasir mér ok braut í mér nefit, ok þykkir þat nokkur lítil lýti á mér síðan, ok þar fylgdu með þrjár tennurnar, en ek greip í brjóstin á henni, ok reif ek þau bæði af henni niðr at bringuteinum. Þar fylgdi ok með magállinn ok iðrin. Þá hljóp at mér in þriðja, ok var sú minnst fyrir sér. Ætlaða ek at stinga ór henni augun sem inni fyrri, en hún beit af mér tvá fingrna. Lék ek henni þá hælkrók, ok fellr hún á bak aftr. Hún bað mik þá miskunnar. (Jónsson, 1954, pp. 351–352 / ch. 13)

Finally, Arinnejfa's skin gets burned from her body: *Var þangat at hlaupa yfir eitt mikit bál. Lá ek fyrst hjá Óðni, ok hljóp ek síðan yfir bálit, ok fekk ek skikkjuna, ok er ek síðan skinnlaus um allan kroppinn.* (Jónsson, 1954, p. 353 / ch. 13)

It is difficult to approach a medieval text with modern ideas of irony or humour. But we can say for sure that in Arinnejfa's story, violence has crossed the line to the absurd, and to the grotesque. All the pulling-off-cheeks, gouging-out-eyes, tearing-down-breasts melt into a big, one wants to say, *goulash* of atrocities, and one that is ridiculed by Óðinn's sexual appetite for the freshly defaced.⁵⁵

Similar to modern TV cartoons, like *Roadrunner and Coyote*, this absurd violence is contained within the scene where it happens, and has no real consequences otherwise. When Arinnejfa is introduced into the saga, she is merely called an old hag, but nothing is said about the horrible disfigurement that should immediately catch the sworn-brothers'

⁵⁵ It would go too far to see Arinnejfa's trip as a literary variation of the shamanic concept of initiation by travelling to the underworld, where the initiate is torn to pieces and put together again by demons; compare Eliade (1957, pp. 62–67). The similarities are more likely a coincidence. Even though the concept of *helferð* is well known in Old Norse myth, it is usually not connected with dismemberment; see Davidson (1943, pp. 170–197). As mentioned before, Kruse's forthcoming dissertation will be relevant for a discussion of the grotesque; see footnote 16.

eyes; in contrast, the strange bodily proportions of her daughter Skinnnefja are described and later also discussed. The same is true for the ears that both Egill and Ásmundr are missing. They are only mentioned in the scenes they get torn off, but not when the characters are introduced. This is not due to the author's inability to keep track of the different time levels of his story. If a mutilation is important beyond its entertainment value – that is, Egill's cut off hand – he mentions it the moment the character is introduced. But the vast majority of the mutilations possess meaning only in their graphic immediacy. It is the act that matters, not its consequence.

d) Composition principles of the 'adventurous mode of combat'

The 'adventurous mode of combat', as it presents itself in *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*, is governed by five principles:

(I) a lust for *graphic, gory violence*: See the examples above. A preference for a certain type of weaponry is not discernible. Anything that can be used as a weapon (including the own body) will be used. Sometimes, violence is translated into verbal cruelty, as in Egill's farewell words to the giant he just blinded: 'Nú skal ek halda orð mín,' sagði Egill, 'ok drepa þik ekki. Skaltu lifa við harmkvæli, ok sé sá þinn dagr verstr, er síðast kemr yfir þik.' (Jónsson, 1954, p. 346 / ch. 10)

(II) a tendency towards *exaggeration*, more in size and quality than in quantity. From time to time, the heroes fight against or kill a large number of foes, but these deeds are only briefly mentioned. Outstanding enemies have their own story and character, pose a real threat (because of enormous size, magical weapons, or an invulnerability to iron) and are fought in small-scale skirmish.

(III) *imperfection* of the hero: Heroes can be wounded, taken captive, or forced to flee. Their imperfection is an important tool to make the combat scenes more interesting and dynamic, and to drive the story in a less predictable way. To equalize physical inferiority, teaming up on an opponent is an acceptable way of fighting.

(IV) a fascination for the *supernatural*: Combat scenes are often set in a supernatural surrounding. Fighting grounds like a burial mound, a giant's cave or the underworld itself imply that the violence taking place there will also transcend the limits of the usual, mutilation being a prime characteristic. The level of violence runs parallel to the level of the supernatural or otherworldliness of the fight scenes.

(V) the aforementioned points combine in the *intention to amaze*: While the characters and combat actions are standard types, the scenes that result in their combination are far from being stereotypical or predictable. No set combat structure is used more than one time during the saga. A combat formula, like the one found in chivalric literature, is impossible to develop here. The author tried his best to construct the scenes as diversified and dynamic as possible, with the aim to amaze his audience by something new every time.

At least modern readers will often tend to understand the 'adventurous mode of combat' as an example of comic violence and black humour, it might be added.

4.2. Comparison: *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*

The five composition principles are not unique to *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*. The combat scenes of, e. g., *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs* show several structural similarities. The main manuscripts of *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs* are AM 577, 4to; AM 510, 4to; AM 586, 4to.⁵⁶

Bósa saga ok Herrauðs tells the story of Bósi, a farmer's son, and his blood brother Herrauður, son of king Hringr. The friends undergo several fantastic adventures, first to appease the enraged king Hringr, then to re-capture Herrauður's stolen bride, princess Hleiður.

The combat scenes of *Bosa saga ok Herrauðs* shall not be analysed here in too much detail, but discussed in comparison to those of *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*.

a) No 'knightly mode of combat'

Like Egill and Ásmundr, Bósi and Herrauður do not adhere to any 'knightly mode of combat', neither in terms of weaponry, nor in terms of etiquette. When encountering an opponent that might prove dangerous, they are not shy of unfair methods, as they show in their fight against a eunuch

⁵⁶ For an overview of the research on *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*, and a discussion of its transmission, see Reifegerste (2005).

'er Skálkr heitir ok er svá sterkr, at hann hefir tólf karla afl, hvat sem reyna þarf.' [...] *Þrællinn sló með stórri kylfu til Herraúðar, en hann brá við skildinum. Höggit var svá þungt, at hann brotnaði allr. Herraúðr hljóp undir þrælinn, en hann tók fast í móti, ok váru þeira sviptingar sterkligar, ok fór þrællinn hvergi á hæl. Bósi kom þá at ok tók fætrna undan þrælnum, ok lögðu síðan snöru á háls honum ok hendgu hann þar á eikunum.* (Jónsson, 1954, pp. 316–317 / ch. 13)

Skalk is, in his combat function, comparable to the berserks of *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*, and so is the fight against him. As a eunuch of superhuman strength, he is an exotic and dangerous enemy, but not a real monster yet. The combat action is dynamic and dirty. Skalk fights on equal terms with Herraúðr, so the friends team up against him and bring him a quick and brutal end, using bare hands and a noose.

The weapons used by Bósi and Herraúðr in the course of the saga are of a wide variety: spears, clubs, an *atgeirr*, a noose, often the bare hands – but only one time, in Bósi's very last fight, a sword. The use of clubs and bare hands as weapons is insofar remarkable as it is not only non-chivalric, but more or less barbaric, even in the cosmos of the *fornaldarsögur*. The club is the weapon of the peasant, the heathen, and, most of all, the giant (Schulz, 2004, pp. 288–291), but it also helps to express the strength of its wielder.⁵⁷ The neglect shown for standard chivalric weaponry is made explicit in the saga, when Bósi's father Þvari takes military logistics in his hands and *hafði látit smíðja spjót ok öxar ok örvar* (Jónsson, 1954, p. 318 / ch. 14), that means, the typical infantry weapons of the Viking Age and Middle Ages.

b) No interest in mass battles

When a plan is needed to rescue the beautiful maiden Hleiðr from a forced wedding, the old warrior Þvari acts as the author's mouthpiece, and in fact explains how the text conceptualizes its combat scenes. Having been an accomplished fighter in younger years himself, Þvari points out that *þeir mundu verða of seinir, ef þeir söfnuðu liði miklu, ok því sagði hann, at þeir mundu heldr ná konungsdóttur með djúpsettum ráðum ok snörum atburðum, ok var nú þetta ráðit, at þeir bjuggu eitt skip ok á þrjá tigi manna.* (Jónsson, 1954, p. 307 / ch. 11) In other words: Like *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*, *Bosa saga ok Herraúðs* shows no interest in mass battles with huge numbers of participants. If such a battle happens, the text gives nothing more than a short account:

⁵⁷ Compare the iconic club-wielder of European culture, Herakles, or Þórr's hammer Mjöllnir (a refined club, so to say).

[The brothers Hrærekr and Siggeirr] *fengu þar þrjú skip ok tuttugu ok sigldu síðan til Gautlands [...] ok var Hringr konungr fámennr heima, ok buðu þeir honum þegar bardaga eða gefa upp meyna. Konungr kjöri heldr at berjast, ok urðu þar skjót umskipti. Fell þar Hringr konungr ok mestr hlutr liðs hans.* (Jónsson, 1954, p. 306 / ch. 10)

Not even the (so called) biggest battle in Scandinavian history provokes the author to tell about its course:

Þá var settr tími til bardagans á Brávöllum, er mestr hefir verit á Norðrlöndum [...] Í þessi orrostu fell Haraldr konungr ok með honum fimmtán konungar annars hundraðs, sem segir í sögu hans, ok margir aðrir kappar, þeir sem konungum váru meiri. Þar fellu þeir Dagfari ok Náttfari, en þeir Herrauðr ok Bósi urðu báðir sárir ok kómust þó báðir ór bardaganum. (Jónsson, 1954, p. 305 / ch. 9)

c) The 'adventurous mode of combat' applied

While mass battles are neglected, the saga's combat scenes reach their climax when the heroes stand against supernatural foes. Just like in *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*, in these moments the narration becomes the most dynamic, detailed, and violent. Foremost example is when Bósi and Herrauðr raid the temple of the god Jómali. Their enemies are a demonic bull, a giant vulture and Kolfrósta, the evil priestess of Jómali. After killing the slave who was to bring a heifer as food for the priestess, they stuff the animal's hide with moss and let the bull mount it – this is when the action sets in:

Mosabelgrinn var léttr fyrir, ok rak griddi höfuðit út á múrinn ok braut af sér bæði hornin. Herrauðr greip þá í bæði eyrun á honum ok í granirnar ok snaraði hann svá ór hálsliðinum. Þá vaknaði gýgrin ok hljóp á fætr. Í þessu kom Bósi inn í hofit ok bar þrælinn upp yfir höfði sér á spjótinu. Gammrinn brá nú við skjótt ok steypiti sér ofan ór hreiðrinu ok vildi gleypa þann, sem inn var kominn. Svalg hann nú þrælinn ofan at mitti. Bósi þrýsti þá spjótinu, svá at þat gekk upp í háls gamminum, þar til at stóð í hjartanu. Gammrinn setti nú klærnar í þjóin á þrælsskrokkinum ok setti vænghnúfana við eyrat á Bósa, svá at hann fell í óvit. Fell gammrinn þá ok ofan á hann, ok váru hans fjörbrot ógurliga mikil. Herrauðr réðst á móti hofgyðjunni, ok var þeira atgangr inn harðasti, ok hafði kerlin illa skornar negl, ok reif hún hold hans niðr at beini. Þau bárust þangat at, sem Bósi var fallinn, ok var blóðugt mjök. Kerlingu varð hált í gammsblóðinu, ok fell hún á bak aftr, ok váru þá sviptingar miklar með þeim, svá at ýmsi váru undir. Bósi raknaði þá við ok greip höfuð griðungsins ok rak á nasir gýginni. Herrauðr sleit þá af henni hödnina í axlarliðinum. Tók henni þá at dafna leikrinn, en í fjörbrotum hennar varð landskjálfti mikill. (Jónsson, 1954, pp. 301–302 / ch. 8)

All five of the aforementioned composition principles are at work here:

(I) Detailed violence is the mark of the whole scene, especially concerning the priestess. Herraúðr's flesh is ripped apart by her fingernails, and again, the motif of mutilation is used when her arm is torn off. The demonic bull, too, is physically destroyed. His horns break off, and Herraúðr kills him not with a weapon, but with his bare hands, by breaking his neck. We can assume that this includes the meaning of 'tearing off' as well, since the head of the beast is afterwards used as a weapon against Kolfrosta.

(II) The three enemies are highly exaggerated: an enchanted bull, a giant vulture (big enough to swallow half a human body in one bite), and a pagan priestess with jagged fingernails, as strong as a man, whose death causes an earthquake. Medieval audience and modern readers can hardly hope for more. All of the foes are presented with their own background information and call for a unique method to be killed.

(III) Though well devised and adequately executed, the heroes' action is not flawless: Bósi is knocked out by the dying vulture, Herraúðr has a hard time struggling with the priestess.⁵⁸ Only as a team, they can submit her. The friends might be great warriors, but they are far from being invulnerable.

(IV) Not only the monstrous enemies, but the whole setting of the scene belongs to the realm of the supernatural. A temple of a pagan god, situated in Permia, at the border of the known world, forebodes evil sorcery. The farmer's daughter who tells Bósi the story of the temple, is astounded someone would go there: *'en hverr var þér svá reiðr, at þik vill feigan ok senda þik forsending?* (Jónsson, 1954, p. 299 / ch. 7)

(V) In terms of combat action, the scene marks a climax in the saga. It is structurally very different from the second combat scene with supernatural personnel later in the saga (the sea battle against King Harek and his sons, where the witch Busla comes to aid the heroes), and combines the magical elements and heroes' manoeuvres into a fast-paced, unique outbreak of violence. The fight may use some known motifs, but it is not a mere copy of an existing model.

⁵⁸ There is a slight sexual undertone to the fight, when the wrestling goes *svá at ýmsi váru undir*. This corresponds to the second of Bósi's erotic adventures: *ok var bóndadóttir ýmist ofan á eða undir*. Jónsson (1954, p. 309 / ch. 11)

4.3. *Intention and audience of the ‘adventurous mode of combat’*

If the ‘knightly mode of combat’ displayed in *Rémundar saga keisarasonar* was part of a cultural program to propagate the Central European ideals of chivalry among a new Icelandic upper class, we may ask for the intentions and the audience of the ‘adventurous mode of combat’. Viking times were over, and giants and undead supposedly hard to find. Glauser argued that medieval literary production never aimed purely at entertainment:

Mittelalterliche Literatur, ästhetische Manifestation mittelalterlichen Bewusstseins, war in all ihrer Vielfalt darauf angelegt, durch das zentrale ständische Ideologem Gott zu glorifizieren. [...] Ebenso wie die Trennung zwischen Arbeit und Freizeit, Öffentlichkeit und Privatsphäre Begriffe der Neuzeit sind, die im mittelalterlichen Leben in dieser Form keine Entsprechung haben, wird man nicht von einer reinen, zweckfreien Unterhaltungsliteratur im Mittelalter ausgehen dürfen. (Glauser, 1985, p. 93)

But on the other hand, we would hardly do justice to texts like *Egils saga einhenda ok Ámundar berserkjabana* or *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs* if we were to deny their entertainment value as their first and foremost quality. While even the most ardent fan of chivalric literature will, at some point, have enough of *Rémundar saga keisarasonar*’s stereotypical combat scenes, the vivid fight descriptions ‘adventurous mode of combat’ are sure to provoke a different reaction than boredom – be it excitement, amusement, or disgust. Concerning *Qrvar-Odds saga*, Torfi Tulinius remarked:

It is striking that the saga relates this theme of conversion to a certain kind of ethic that the saga seems to be promoting, one which encourages warriors to seek legitimacy through royal service. It may be noted in addition that Qrvar-Oddr is not of royal blood himself; and his story is not integrated into that of a dynasty. This gives an indication of the kind of public this saga was intended for: most probably the households of Icelandic aristocrats of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, many of whom were members of the Norwegian court and who themselves had at their service men whom they could ask to fight for them. (Tulinius, 2005, p. 457)

Maybe, in some way, this can also be applied to the sagas in question. While three of the four heroes (Ásmundr, Egill, and Herrauðr) are of noble birth, this has no consequence for the course of action. Egill behaves like any low-born pirate. Only by his decision to enter the king's service and quest for his daughters, he can become a positive figure. Herrauðr, on the other hand, is even banned from his father's court. Nothing distinguishes him on their adventure from his friend Bósi, a farmer's son. For both of them, reconciliation with the king is dependent on completing a mission in his service. It is noteworthy that this

mission is of no importance to the well-being of king or country. The vulture's golden egg, once brought home, merely serves as a drinking cup to Hringr. But it proves the heroes' eagerness to be re-established within the social system. Schäfke points out the permeability of social borders in *Bósa saga*, where the Viking-farmer Bósi is finally elevated to be king. (Schäfke, 2013, pp. 56, 88)

Beyond the entertainment value⁵⁹ of the 'adventurous mode of combat' (which might have appealed to all layers of society), we may assume that the intended audience for its ideological subtext⁶⁰ were the fighting men in service of the social elite. Two qualities were expected from them: Readiness to use violence and face danger, and loyalty to their leaders. This may be also a reason why *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundr berserkjabana* and *Bósa saga ok Herraud's* merely brush on huge battles and the killing of large numbers of foes, while *Rémundar saga keisarasonar* vividly describes the horrible fate of hundreds of ordinary soldiers. The latter may not be the best way to motivate retainers for combat. Figures like Egill einhendi or Bósi serve as role models for both qualities. To identify with them, a man did not need to have the training and equipment of knightly mounted combat. The ability to swing a sword (or a broken piece of wood) was enough. Just like in their depictions of love and sexuality,⁶¹ the combat scenes of the two adventure tales are much rougher and more ribald than those in the *riddarasaga*, yet at the same time more entertaining. This is not due to the author's lack of aesthetic sensitivity, but the result of a different literary intention.

59 Mitchell (1991, p. 105) wondered: "[F]or reasons that may wholly escape modern readers, the audiences of the late Middle Ages found the *fonaldarsögur* to be exceptionally enjoyable." On must be quite on the intellectual side of life to share Mitchell's lack of understanding. Exaggerated fighting and gory violence have always been proven methods to guarantee the audience's interest – a look at any modern DVD-rental can back this up. Add, as in the case of *Bósa saga ok Herraud's*, some borderline pornographic material, and you'll get a sure hit.

60 Note that the ideological implications of the 'mode of combat' constitute only a part of the ideological position of the saga as a whole.

61 Compare e. g., Bósi's erotic adventures with the three farmers' daughters to Rémundr's romantic love for a woman he saw only in dreams, and his chastity: *Nú sem Rémundr er meiri en nokkurr konungsson í veröldinni, svá er hann ok frábærr flestum ungum monnum í sínu framferði, því (at) eigi var með honum ergi eða vanstilt lostasemi, heldr temprar hann sínar nátturugjafir*. Broberg (1909, pp. 203-204 / ch. 38)

5. Courage and death: The heroic mode of combat

Pálsson notes that “[t]he world of fighting and dying warriors presented in the *fornaldarsögur* is often lacking the sheer dignity and restraint found in the earlier heroic poetry.” (Pálsson, 1984, p. 141) Heroic poetry is, by definition, rich in ‘deeds of arms’. But it refers to these deeds in elaborate metaphors and stereotypical expressions. It may tell us who fought whom, that the fight was hard and the warriors brave, who won, and who fell. But its references to combat hardly give enough details to develop a ‘story board’ of a fight. They are very unlike the combat scenes we have discussed so far.

There are some sagas that mirror the silence of heroic poetry concerning the actual combat process.⁶² They make use of what shall be called the ‘heroic mode of combat’. *Völsunga saga* is one of the most famous examples, and shall be discussed here. The saga is preserved in only one medieval manuscript (NkS. 1824 b.4to) from around 1400, and several paper manuscripts from the 17th to the 19th century.

5.1. Combat without action

The literature on *Völsunga saga* is legion.⁶³ However, the majority of the ongoing discussions about the text shall not concern us here. Important, though, is the difficult relationship between the courtly and the mythic-heroic strands of the saga. Matthias

62 Regarding continental literature, Voorwinden (1990, p. 444) saw the silence on combat action, the dialogue before combat, and an emphasis on single combat as specific to the oral Germanic tradition: “Die germanische Heldendichtung beschreibt vorzugsweise den Einzelkampf [...] Die Kampfhandlung selbst wird nur skizziert, im Gegensatz zu der dem Kampf vorhergehenden Wechselrede, die alle Aufmerksamkeit auf sich zieht. Der Gegner wird zwar getötet, aber die Verwundungen, die den Tod herbeiführen, werden kaum oder gar nicht erwähnt. Der Kampf wird gewöhnlich aus der Perspektive des Angegriffenen dargestellt, der nur, um seine Ehre nicht zu verlieren, zu den Waffen greift. Im Gegensatz dazu kennt das Epos aus der lateinisch-schriftlichen Tradition den Massenkampf. Einzelkampf kommt zwar auch vor, wird aber gewöhnlich nur als Szene innerhalb einer Massenschlacht dargestellt. Nur in solchen Szenen geht dem Kampf auch hier ein Dialog vorher, dessen Ton sich aber prinzipiell von dem im germanischen Heldenlied unterscheidet. Auch hier wird der Gegner getötet; kein blutiges Detail wird aber verschwiegen: es wird genau mitgeteilt, welche Körperteile abgehackt, welche Organe durchbohrt und welche Knochen zersplittert werden. Der Kampf wird aus der Perspektive der Angreifer dargestellt, die aufgrund eines göttlichen Befehls zu den Waffen greifen, die den Kampf als heilige Pflicht begreifen.” And he believed “daß man die Weise, wie Kampfhandlungen beschrieben werden, als ein Kriterium betrachten kann, aufgrund dessen man Texte in eine der beiden Traditionen, die germanisch-mündliche oder die lateinisch-schriftliche, einordnen kann.” (Voorwinden (1990, pp. 434–435))

63 An up-to-date overview can be found on the excellent website “Stories for all Time: The Icelandic Fornaldarsögur” (<http://fasnl.ku.dk/>) (accessed 4. APR 2016).

Teichert argued that *Völsunga saga* systematically ‘mythifies’ the figures and narrative elements of the *Nibelungen* tradition. He differentiates between a “Mythisierung im engeren Sinne” (that is, the construction of a narrative that follows the structural characteristics of a myth), and an “Arbeit am (Heroen-)Mythos”. (Teichert, 2008, p. 54) The latter concept is influenced by the works of Hans Blumenberg and refers to the incorporation of an existing mythical narrative into the dominating mythical patterns of a social system.⁶⁴ According to Teichert, “Arbeit am (Heroen-)Mythos” applied on *Völsunga saga* means the story’s adaption into the aristocratic, courtly ideology of the Norwegian society during the late 13th century. (Teichert, 2008, p. 167) He counts “Höfisierung” as one of the key principles for such an adaption (Teichert, 2008, p. 169), and mentions that the text’s second part cannot deny “eine Nähe zu den Riddarasögur”. (Teichert, 2008, p. 172) An example of this proximity is Sigurðr’s education: *Reginn hét fóstri Sigurðar [...] Hann kenndi honum íþróttir, tafl ok rúnar ok tungur margar at mæla, sem þá var títt konungasonum, ok margá hluti aðra.* (Ebel, 1997, pp. 36–37) Brynhild’s needlework and especially the use of falcons for the hunt are further examples. (Ebel, 1997, p. 59) Bearing in mind what was said earlier about the importance of the ‘knightly mode of combat’ for the construction of a Nordic branch of courtly literature, we could expect this mode to be applied to the saga’s combat scenes as well. This, however, is not the case.

The overwhelming majority of *Völsunga saga*’s combat scenes show a certain taciturnity about what is actually happening. Fighting (and murder) are recounted in a few words. We get to know who remained victorious and who was slain, but the colourful descriptions found in other texts are missing here.

This starts with the saga’s first page, when Sigi kills the servant:

En er þeir bera saman veið(i) sína um aptaninn, þá hafði Breðiveitt miklu fleira ok meira en Sigi, hvat honum líkaði stórilla ok segir, at sik undri, at einn þræll skuli sik yfirbuga í dýraveiði Hleypr því at honum ok drepr hann. Dysjar síðan likit í snjófönn. (Ebel, 1997, p. 9 / ch. 1)

The text tells neither what kind of a weapon Sigi uses, nor what wound it causes. A few lines below, Sigi, now grown old, is killed by his wife’s brothers. Again, we are not told what exactly happens: *Þeir gera þá til hans, er hann varir sízt ok hann var fáliðr fyrir, ok bera hann ofliði. Ok á þeim fundi fell Sigi með hirð sinni allri.* (Ebel, 1997, p. 10 / ch. 1) Now, it is Sigi’s son Rerir’s turn to take revenge on his uncles: *ok safnar konungr sér nú liði miklu*

64 ‘Dominating mythical patterns’ understood in a broad sense here, roughly similar to ‘ideology’.

ok ferr nú á hendr frændum sínum með þenna her. [...] Ok svá gerir hann, fyrir því, at eigi skilsk hann fyrri við, en hann hafði drepit alla feðrbana sína. (Ebel, 1997, p. 11 / ch. 1)

One might argue that these first three combat scenes are merely an exposition of the saga's underlying theme, the violation of order and the bloodshed that follows. Maybe the author avoided detailed descriptions to paint the story's background with a few, broad strokes of the brush. But the combat scenes later in the saga do not become much more explicit. Neither when few men fight, nor when whole armies clash, as in the following two examples:

Konungr stendr nú upp ok heitr á menn at taka þá menn, er leynzk hǫfðu í forstofunni um kveldit. Nú hlaupa menn útar þangat ok vilja hǫndla þá. En þeir verja sik vel ok drengiliga, ok þykkisk þá sá verst hafa lengi, er næst er. Ok um síðir verða þeir ofrliði bornir ok verða handteknir ok því næst í bǫnd reknir ok í fjǫtra settir (Ebel, 1997, p. 24 / ch. 8)

Þat er sagt, at Helgi finnr þann konung í hernaði, er Hundingr hét. Hann var ríkr konungr ok fjǫlmennr ok réð fyrir lǫndum. Þar tekst orrosta með þeim. Ok gengr Helgi fast fram. Ok lýksk með því sjá bardagi, at Helgi fær sigr. En Hundingr konungr fellr ok mikill hluti liðs hans. Nú þykkir Helgi hafa vaxit mikit, er hann hefir fellt svá ríkan konung. Synir Hundings bjóða nú út her í mót Helga ok vilja hefna fǫður síns. Þeir eiga harða orrostu. Ok gengr Helgi í gegnum fylkingar þeira bræðra ok sækir at merkjum sona Hundings konungs ok felldi þessa Hundings sonu: Álf ok Eyjólf, Hervarð ok Hagbarð ok fekk hér ágætan sigr. (Ebel, 1997, p. 27 / ch. 9)

The detailed descriptions of individual combat actions that we have seen in both the 'knightly' and the 'adventurous mode of combat' are missing here.

5.2. The psychological dimension of violence

The 'heroic mode of combat' neglects physical attributes, martial technique and details in combat descriptions, yet emphasises the warriors' psychological qualities. In this respect, it resembles the way in which Eddic poetry recounts combat, and translates the poetic style into prose. For a comparison, Helgi's battle against King Hoddbroddr shall be quoted two times: first in prose, then in Eddic verse.

Fundusk þeir þar, er heitir Frekasteinn. Ok tóksk þar hǫrð orrosta. Helgi gengr fram í gegnum fylkingar. Þar varð mikit mannfall. Þá sá þeir skjaldmeyja flokk mikinn, svá sem í loga sæi. Þar var Sigrún konungsdóttir. Helgi konungr sótti í mót Hoddbroddi konungi ok fellir hann undir merkjum. Þá mælti Sigrún: 'Haf þökk fyrir þetta þrekvirki!

Skipt mun nú lǫndum. Er mér þetta mikill tímadagr. Ok muntu fá af þessu veg ok ágæti, er þú hefir svá ríkan konung felldan. (Ebel, 1997, pp. 29-30 / ch. 9)

The same battle is recounted in *Helgakvíða Hundingsbana I*:

53

| | |
|---------------------|----------------------|
| Svipr einn var þat, | er saman qvómu |
| fǫlvir oddar | at Frecasteini; |
| ey var Helgi, | Hundings bani, |
| fyrstr í fólki, | þar er firar bǫrðuz, |
| æstr á ímo, | alltrauðr flugar; |
| sá hafði hilmir | hart móðacarn. |

54

| | |
|--------------------|----------------------|
| Kómo þar ór himni | hiálmvitr ofan, |
| – óx geira gnýr –, | þær er grami hlífðo; |
| þá qvað þat Sigrún | – sárvitr flugo, |
| át hálo scær | af Hugins barri –: |

55

| | |
|----------------------|---------------|
| ‘Heill scaltu, vísi, | virða nióta, |
| áttstafr Yngva, | ok una lífi, |
| er þú felt hefir inn | flugar trauða |
| iofur, þann er olli | ægis dauða. |

56

| | |
|-------------------------|--------------------|
| Oc þér, buðlungr, | samir bæði vel |
| rauðir baugar | oc in ríkia mær; |
| heill scaltu, buðlungr, | bæði nióta |
| Hogna dóttur | oc Hringstaða, |
| sigrs oc landa; | þá er sócn lokit.’ |

(Kuhn, 1962, pp. 138–139)

As we can see, both *Vǫlsunga saga* and *Helgakvíða Hundingsbana* are more interested in Helgi's *móðacarn*, his ‘mood-acorn’, than in detailed combat manoeuvres.

In the ‘heroic mode of combat’, combat scenes serve two purposes: to praise the hero, and to prepare the stage for his doom. The foremost qualities of a warrior in *Vǫlsunga saga* are the mental and emotional capacity to engage in combat, to act out and receive violence without hesitation or reservation. When Sinfjǫtli is still a boy, Sigmundr doubts these qualities in him and devises a cruel training program: *Þat er nú at segja, at Sigmundi þykkir Sinfjǫtli of ungr til hefnda með sér, ok vil nú fyrst venja hann með nokkut harðræði. Fara nú um sumrum víða um skóga ok drepa menn til fjár sér.* (Ebel, 1997, p. 21 / ch. 8) There are no moral concerns about these murders, neither on Sigmundr's and Sinfjǫtli's, nor on the author's side, it seems.

Sigmundur and Sinfjötli kill in cold blood, while other men demonstrate utter fearlessness, and the capability to suffer severe punishment, like Hǫgni when he is facing imminent death. Caught by King Atli, he offers himself to be executed instead of the slave Hjalli. The saga remarks on this exceptional bravery: *sem færur er títt, þá er í mannaun koma.* (Ebel, 1997, p. 94 / ch. 39) When his heart is cut out by Atli's men, Hǫgni shows no pain: *Nú gengu þeir eptir eggjun Atla konungs at Hǫgna ok skáru ór honum hjartat. Ok svá var mikill þróttr hans, at hann hló, meðan hann beið þessa kvöl. Ok allir undruðusk þrek hans, ok þat er síðan at minnum haft.* (Ebel, 1997, p. 94 / ch. 39)

Courage in giving and receiving pain is a fundamental quality for the protagonists. Men are insulted by imputing a lack of lust for battle to them, as when Sinfjötli speaks to King Hóddbroddr's brother: *'Seg svá, at þú hefir gefit svínum ok hundum ok þú finnr konu þína, at hér eru komnir Vǫlsungar. Ok mun hér hittask í liðinu Helgi konungr, ef Hóddbroddr vill finna hann. Ok er þat hans gaman at berjask með frama, meðan þú kyssir ambáttir við eld.'* (Ebel, 1997, p. 28 / ch. 9)

In *Vǫlsunga saga*, superhuman strength or outstanding martial skills, lauded in the sagas we have discussed earlier, are subordinate to the warrior's courage. The text states this explicitly when Sigurðr says to Regin *'Þá er menn koma til vígs, þá er manni betra gott hjarta en hvasst sverð.'* (Ebel, 1997, p. 48 / ch. 19) When Hǫgni stands alone against twenty, he fights with courage: *Síðan barðisk Hǫgni af mikilli hreyst(i) ok drengskap ok felldi ina stærstu kappu Atla konungs tuttugu.* (Ebel, 1997, p. 93 / ch. 39)

Neither Hǫgni's physical strength nor skill at arms are mentioned. It is this emphasis on a warrior's psychic qualities that allows Guðrún, even though she is a woman, to engage in combat. Physically weaker than the other combatants and not trained in the use of weapons, her bravery lifts her on an equal level with them: *Nú sér hon, at sárt er leikit við bræðr hennar. Hyggr nú á harðræði. Fór í brynju ok tók sér sverð ok barðisk með bræðrum sínum ok gekk svá fram sem inn hraustasti karlmaðr. Ok þat sǫgðu allir á einn veg, at varla sæi meiri vörn en þar.* (Ebel, 1997, p. 92 / ch. 38)

5.3. Combat descriptions in *Völsunga saga*

The few details the saga does provide on combat action can be organized into the following groups:

a) One against many

When the saga wants to present the protagonists as superior fighters, they may take on several enemies at once: *felldi ina stærstu kappa Atla konungs tuttugu*. (Ebel, 1997, p. 93 / ch. 39) Compare also Sinfjötli's boasting of fighting (in wolf shape) against eleven men, while his father called him to help against seven.

Otherwise the fighters walk courageously against the enemy lines, a topos used several times:

- *Ok er svá sagt, at Völsungr konungr ok synir hans gengu átta sinnum í gegnum fylkingar Siggeirs konungs um daginn*. (Ebel, 1997, p. 17 / ch. 5)
- *Ok gengr Helgi í gegnum fylkingar þeria bræðra ok sækir at merkjum sona Hundings konungs*. (Ebel, 1997, p. 27 / ch. 9)
- *Helgi gengr fram í gegnum fylkingar*. (Ebel, 1997, p. 30 / ch. 9)
- *ok gekk hann jafnan í gegnum lið úvina sinna á þeim degi*. (Ebel, 1997, p. 33 / ch. 11)
- *Gunnarr ok Högni gengu í gegnum fylkingar Atla konungs*. (Ebel, 1997, p. 92 / ch. 38)

b) Fighting techniques

Closest to a detailed description of combat actions are the formulaic expressions of the power some of the protagonists put behind their strikes:

- *ok höggva á tvær hendr*. (Ebel, 1997, p. 17 / ch. 5)
- *Helzk hvárki við honum skjöldr né brynja*. (Ebel, 1997, p. 33 / ch. 11)

All in all, these lines indicate that the author imagined the warriors to fight on foot, with sword and shield, and not on horseback, with a lance. This is no surprise, as *Völsunga*

saga is a text that tells of a *fornöld*, a time when chivalric combat techniques were not yet known to Scandinavia.

The only detailed description of a combat action given in the saga is the breaking of King Sigmundr's sword. Interestingly, this sequence is of a purely symbolic meaning:

Þá kom maðr í bardagann með síðan hǫtt ok heklu blá. Hann hafði eitt auga ok geir í hendi. Þessi maðr kom á mót Sigmundi konungi ok brá upp geirinum fyrir hann. Ok er Sigmundr konungr hjó fast, kom sverðit í geirinn ok brast í sundr í tvá hluti. Síðan sneri mannfallinu, ok váru Sigmundi konungi horfin heill, ok fell mjök liðit fyrir honum. (Ebel, 1997, p. 33 / ch. 11)

Óðinn does not kill the king himself. The short exchange of blows and the broken sword are only there to mark the beginning of Sigmundr's downfall. The precise way how the king dies is, again, of no interest to the text: *(Í) þessi orrostu fell Sigmundr konungr.* (Ebel, 1997, p. 34 / ch. 12)

c) Blood and wounds

Similar to the lack of fighting manoeuvres, the 'heroic mode of combat' of *Vǫlsunga saga* does not describe the inflicted injuries in detail. There are no rolling heads or chopped of arms. Only the losses are mentioned:

- *Ok á þeim fundi fell Sigi með hirð sinni allri.* (Ebel, 1997, p. 10 / ch. 1)
- *Ok svá gerir hann fyrir því at eigi skilsk hann fyrri við, en hann hafði drepit alla feðrbana sína.* (Ebel, 1997, p. 11 / ch. 1)
- *Þá fellr Vǫlsungr konungr í miðri fylkingu sinni ok þar allt lið hans með honum, nema synir hans tíu, því at miklu meira ofrefli var í móti, en þeir mætti við standa.* (Ebel, 1997, p. 17 / ch. 5)
- *Ok engi kunni tǫl, hversu margr maðr fell fyrir honum.* (Ebel, 1997, p. 33 / ch. 11)
- *ok fell mjök liðit fyrir honum.* (Ebel, 1997, p. 33 / ch. 11)
- *Nú gerisk mikit mannfall.* (Ebel, 1997, p. 92 / ch. 38)
- *Sjá bardagi varð með miklu mannspelli, ok lýkr svá, at fellr allt lið þeira bræðra, svá at þeir standa tveir upp, ok fór áðr margr maðr til heljar fyrir þeira vǫpnum.* (Ebel, 1997, p. 93 / ch. 39)

If mentioned at all, the bodily destruction of countless men is expressed by the blood they have lost. We do not see it running from wounds, though. It is detached from their bodies, and serves as a background colour to the carnage:

- *Hann hafði báðar hendr blóðgar til axlar.* (Ebel, 1997, p. 33 / ch. 11)
- *Ok svá er sagt, at allr vøllr flaut í blóði.* (Ebel, 1997, p. 92 / ch. 38)

5.4. Cruelty and death

Vølsunga saga's interest is not in fighting, but in the psychological dimension of violence – in a warrior's courage when facing the enemy, and especially in the cruelty of asymmetrical violence. The saga is rich in gruesome atrocities. These cruelties will stay in the reader's mind, rather than the combat scenes.⁶⁵ A mother who has her children killed (Signý's children, killed by Sinfjötli) or even kills them herself (Guðrún); the slow death of Signý's brothers, tortured and eaten by the she-wolf; the cutting out of Högni's and Hjalli's heart; Gunnar's death in the snake pit. In these scenes, the protagonists' cold-heartedness is amplified to the extreme. They seem to be devoid of any compassion. Only in the atrocities we get detailed descriptions of the action: That Guðrún kills her sons by slitting their throats;⁶⁶ Gunnar's exact fate in the snake pit; the calm heart of Högni and the trembling heart of Hjalli.

The emphasis on courage and bravery, on the other hand, produces a feature that none of the other sagas share that were discussed so far. *Vølsunga saga's* protagonists not only can be captured or injured. They can be killed. There is no hope for them to enjoy their princesses and countless riches until the natural end of their lives, like Rémundr keisarason or Egill einhendi. Sooner or later, they all meet their doom. Insofar, in combat terms *Vølsunga saga* is the most realistic of the texts analysed so far, conveying a simple message: He who takes part in battle may die.

⁶⁵ Concerning the “Grausamkeit der Heldensage” in general, see Haug (1995, pp. 72–90).

⁶⁶ Killing the children by slitting their throats approximates them to animals in bloody sacrifice. Unfortunately for them, there is no voice telling Guðrún to stop and kill a goat instead, as in Abraham's and Isaac's case.

5.5. Composition principles of the 'heroic mode of combat'

Five composition principles of the 'heroic mode of combat' can be distilled from the observations on *Völsunga saga*:

(I) *taciturnity* on combat actions: Fighting is narrated in a general overview and with repetitive phrases, while individual manoeuvres are hardly ever described. Even large battles are summarized with a few sentences.

(II) emphasis on *psychic characteristics*: More important than physical deeds are the mental qualities of a warrior. Courage in combat, bravery even in the face of death and cold-heartedness against the enemy are at the centre of interest. As Gustav Neckel put it: "Die alten Stoffe [...] erwärmen sich viel weniger für den Waffengang als für die Heldengesinnung". (Neckel, 1915, p. 32)

(III) tendency to *exaggeration*: In the 'heroic mode of combat', exaggeration shows mostly in the vast numbers of foes a single hero can take on. Different from the 'adventurous mode of combat', but similar to the 'knightly mode', quantity is more important here than quality.

(IV) *vulnerability* of the hero: In contrast to the 'adventurous mode of combat', the protagonists of the 'heroic mode' face the danger of death when they go into battle, either in the fighting itself, or by execution after being captured. Sigmundr's death after his meeting with Óðinn emphasises this. No matter how favoured by fate a warrior might be, he will not be spared when his time has come.

(V) *cruelty*: physical violence takes on extreme forms. In contrast to the gory mutilations of the 'adventurous mode of combat', this is not only the case in combat, or against hostile warriors. Helpless victims are tortured and killed, among them children, innocent wayfarers or captured enemies. The methods used can be of atrocious inventiveness. At least for a modern reader, there seems to be no ironic undertone to the violence, and the scenes convey a rather grim mood.

a) Comparison: *Hálfs saga ok hálfrekka*

Are there other sagas in which the 'heroic mode of combat' is applied? We may consider *Hálfs saga ok hálfrekka* as an example. The text refers to several battles, of which not a

single is recounted in detail (I: *taciturnity*). To measure the ferocity of a battle, only the huge loss of men is mentioned, as was the case in *Völsunga saga*:

- *ok attu þeir oruztu ok þa fell Josur kongr fyrer ok aller bæendr þes herads. þui heiter þat Kuena herad at þar bygdu ekíur einar epter.* (Seelow, 1981, p. 171 / ch. 2)
- *þa komu Halfs rekar til orustu þeir sem uid skíp haufdu uerit. þar fell mikill hlutur Halfs reka. oruztan hellzt allt til nætur adr Jnst(einn) fell.* (Seelow, 1981, p. 185 / ch. 8)
- *þa gengu þeir Ulf syner ok Vtst(einn) utt ok baurduzt. hann drap alla Vlfsonu ok Geck sidan jn fyrer kong* (Seelow, 1981, p. 189 / ch. 9)

The last example displays the composition principle (III: *exaggeration*). However, the prose text is hardly more than a framework for the surrounding skaldic stanzas, which follow the standards of the genre. They mention the warrior's bravery and the number of men he killed, but they don't recount any details of the fight:

þig ueít eg manna

miklu fremstan

einn sníallaztan

er þu atta uott

(Seelow, 1981, p. 189 / ch. 9)

Smaller skirmishes are not fought between equally prepared parties, but are asymmetrical acts of homicide (V: *cruelty*):

- *Epter þat kom Kollur med lid mikit i Stord æ laun ok laugdu elld j hus Gunualldz roga. Gunualldr geck utt ok uar drepin.* (Seelow, 1981, p. 171 / ch. 2)
- *Reidar kongr sat sofandi j hasætinu en Æsa sat j kníam honum. Híorleifr kongr lagdi j bríost honum ok geck síþan til skíps epter lidi sínu [...] En Reidar k(ong) let hann heíngía daudan æ galga þann er hann hafdi honum ætlad.* (Seelow, 1981, p. 176 / ch. 3)

Like the heroes of *Völsunga saga*, King Hálf's men know no fear of death. When they face it willingly, they have one last joke on their lips (II: *psychic characteristics*). Though not a combat scene, a short sequence onboard their ship demonstrates this: *þeir fengu storm*

mikin j hafi. skíp þeira uard ecki ausít. þa uar þat rads tekit at hluta menn fyrer bord en þess þurfti ecki þuiat huer baud sinum felaga fyrer bord at fara. en er þeir stígu fyrer bord þa mælltu þeir. stra laust er fyrer stock(un)um. (Seelow, 1981, p. 178 / ch. 6)

Finally, the composition principle (IV: *vulnerability*) is very obviously applied. Hálfir and his men, after whom the saga is called, find their death at the hands of King Ásmundr. He betrays them, lays fire to their hall while they are asleep, and kills those who try to escape. Like in *Völsunga saga*, a heroic life ultimately leads to a gruesome death.

While the majority of the references to combat in *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka* fit neatly to the ‘heroic mode of combat’, there is one exception:

foru tveir menn at sækia uatn til lækiar er fell af biargi fram. þar sa þeir brun míga ok saugdu Hiorleifi kongi. Siþan heiter kongr brodd spíot j elldi ok skaut til hans. [...] Þa toku þeir uattn en Þussín skauty inn j biargit. þa er þau satu uid elld þæ kuad þuss af biargi annat hlíod [...] Þa skaut Hiorleifr hínu sama spíotí j auga þuí traulli. (Seelow, 1981, pp. 172-173 / ch. 2)

The scene shifts to resemble the ‘adventurous mode of combat’. It takes place at the southern edge of the Finnmark, that is, at the borders to the realm of the supernatural, and the enemy (or rather, victim) attacked by Hjörleif is a troll (IV: *supernatural* and II: *exaggeration*). For the only time in *Hálfs saga*, the inflicted injury is precisely described. The troll is mutilated, his eye being taken out with a red-hot spear (I: *graphic violence*) – again, a reflection of the Polyphem motif.

5.6. Sigurðr, the almost-riddari

As the troll episode in *Hálfs saga* indicates, a single saga can include more than one ‘mode of combat’. Similarly, *Völsunga saga* features a very important exception to the ‘heroic mode of combat’: the figure of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani. He is a clear example of the conscious use of different ‘modes of combat’ within one text.

On the one hand, and as his *nom de guerre* tells us, Sigurðr is not only concerned with killing enemy warriors, but even dares to attack the monstrous Fáfnir. The episode on *Gnítaheiðr* bears some characteristics of the ‘adventurous mode of combat’:

A dragon of enormous size and terrible appearance (II: *exaggeration*), who is closely connected to the realm of the gods by his family story and dwells on a place which may

have a mythical meaning (IV: *supernatural*) is killed by a cunning ruse (V: *intention to amaze*) by practically letting him bleed to death and later eating his heart (I: *graphic violence*). At the same time, it shall not go unmentioned that the scene lacks the black humour that, at least to a modern reader, is typical for the ‘adventurous mode of combat’. Its tone reminds us more of the mythical killings of Snorra Edda.

Beyond slaying the dragon, Sigurðr is also the figure that introduces the ‘knightly mode of combat’ into *Völsunga saga*. As Teichert pointed out: “Die literarische Technik der Höfisierung konzentriert sich auf die Figur des Hauptheros des Völsungengeschlechts, Sigurðr Fáfnisbani.” (Teichert, 2008, p. 172) This becomes most evident in the description of his fighting skills and combat actions. He is the only character in the text whose martial abilities are separately highlighted and put into context with a courtly upbringing: *Hann kenndi honum íþróttir, [...] sem þá var títt konungasonum* (Ebel, 1997, pp. 36–37 / ch. 13) And later: *Ok hans afl er meira en vöxtr. Vel kann hann sverði at beita ok spjóti at skjóta ok skapti at verpa ok skildi at halda, boga at spenna eða hest at ríða. Ok margskonar kurteisi nam hann í æsku.* (Ebel, 1997, p. 58 / ch. 23)

Singular in *Völsunga saga*, Sigurðr's skills and the way he acquired them mark him as belonging to the new, central European chivalric culture. Or, more precisely: He stands at its edge, being an ‘almost-*riddari*’: His courtly *íþróttir* associate him with figures like Rémundr keisarason, but the weapons he uses connect him to earlier times. He may know how to fence and how to ride, but mounted shock-combat (with a lance) is not mentioned among his skills. Neither does he use it in actual combat. Nevertheless, when Sigurðr goes to battle, the saga turns away from its usual ‘heroic mode of combat’:

Lyngi konungr lætr nú fara um allt sitt ríki herboð, vil eigi á flóttu leggjask, stefnir til sín öllum þeim mönnum, er honum vilja lið veita. Kemr nú á mót Sigurði með allmikinn her ok bræðr hans með honum. Teksk þar in harðasta orrosta með þeim. Mátti þar á lopti sjá mart spjót ok orvar margar, øxi hart reidda, skjöldu kloffna ok brynjur slitnar, hjálma skýfða, hausa kloffna ok margan mann steypask til jarðar. Ok er orrostan hefðir svá staðit mjök langa hríð, sækir Sigurðr fram um merkin ok hefðir í hendi sverðit Gram. Hann höggr bæði menn ok hesta ok gengr í gegnum fylkingar ok hefðir báðar hendr blóðgar til axlar, ok stökk undan fólk, þar sem hann fór, ok helzk hvárki við hjálmr né brynja. Ok engi maðr þóttisk fyrr sét hafa þvílíkan mann. Þessi orrosta stóð lengi með miklu mannfalli ok ákafri sókn. Ferr þar, sem sjaldnar kann henda, þá er landherrinn sækir til, at þat kom fyrir ekki. Fell þar svá mart fyrir Hundingssonum, at engi maðr vissi töl á. Ok Sigurðr var framarla í fylkingu. Þá koma á mót honum synir Hundingskonungs. Sigurðr höggr til Lynga konungs ok klýfr hjálm hans ok höfuð ok brynjaðan búk. Ok síðan höggr hann Hjörvarð, bróður hans, sundr í tvá hluti. Ok þá drap hann alla Hundingssonu, er eptir lifðu, ok mestan hluta liðs þeira. (Ebel, 1997, pp. 44-45 / ch. 17)

The scene is an example of the 'knightly mode of combat', and the only combat scene in the saga where this shift happens. All five composition principles are at work, yet they are spiced with an 'archaic' touch.

The clashing armies are of enormous size (III: *exaggeration*), while the focus is entirely on Sigurðr. Technically, the building blocks (iv): 'mass battle' and (iii): 'close quarter fighting with sword and shield on foot' are used. Nameless henchmen are killed in vast numbers (iv a), with a zooming in on Sigurðr when he kills King Lyngvi and Hjörvarðr (iv b and iii). Standard vocabulary is used to describe the hail of missiles and the carnage of the battle (V: *repetitiveness*), while Sigurðr's superiority over his enemies is absolute, and nobody can withstand him (IV: *perfect hero*). Confronted with King Hundingr's sons, he uses Rémundr's favourite method to kill an enemy, and cuts them in half (II: aesthetics of power and physical annihilation). Concerning the principle (I: *chivalrous weaponry*), however, the scene does not truly fulfil the 'knightly mode of combat'. Horses are mentioned, but only as victims of Sigurðr's onslaught, not as part of the hero's manoeuvres. Though not explicitly expressed, we rather imagine him on foot when he breaks through the enemy lines. Instead of the knightly lance, axes are in use on the battlefield. Not that, historically, the axe fell out of use with the arrival of the knight. But it does not have the symbolic connection to chivalry that sword and lance possess. Remarkably, Sigurðr is the only one in the scene mentioned to wield a sword (and not just any sword, but Gram). This is no coincidence: He is the point where *fornöld* and chivalric age merge into one, and he marks the "Ineinandergreifen einheimischer Vorzeitkunde und kontinentalen Rittertums". (Teichert, 2008, p. 172) This entry of chivalrous ideas into the world of the *fornaldarsaga* by the figure of Sigurðr can be interpreted via the polysystem approach Bampi proposes:

Thus, when a polysystem is in the process of being established, when it is peripheral or weak, or when there is a turning point, translated texts occupy a central position within the system, i.e. they succeed in establishing themselves as models for other types of texts and other genres. In the case of medieval Iceland, it is safe to assert that the appearance of courtly ideology represented a major turning point in the literary system. [...] These translated texts contribute to the re-shaping of the repertoire. [...] As a consequence, pre-existing genres (among them the *fornaldarsögur*) come to be influenced by translated texts in terms of an enlarged stock of themes, motifs and narrative patterns. (Bampi, 2012, p. 191)⁶⁷

Bearing in mind that *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* (following *Völsunga saga* as one text in NkS 1824 b, 4to, and continuing the story of the *Völsungs*) claims Sigurðr to be Haraldr

⁶⁷ On the same page, Bampi names "the bridal quest and a larger geographic setting" as "major examples" for the influence of courtly literature, while neglecting, like most authors, the change in military technique.

Hárfagri's great-great-grandfather, we understand the ideological implications. Not only is the Norwegian royal family provided with a mythical genesis – stemming, ultimately, from Óðinn (Teichert, 2008, p. 169) – but also with a forefather who, next to accomplishing mythical deeds in a heroic age, predefines that chivalric culture which King Hákon IV. Hákonarson sought to install at the Norwegian court in the 13th century:

Such centrality [of the new genre of *riddarasögur*] results in the canonized repertoire of Old Norse literature being strongly influenced by the rules and the *Weltanschauung* characterizing the translated *riddarasögur*. However, it is important to stress that this is made possible at the level of the literary polysystem by the fact that the interest in chivalry and in the courtly world and ideology is supported by the ruling class [...], both in Norway (with King Hákon Hákonarson and his cultural programme of translation of chivalric texts from the continent) and in Iceland.” (Bampi, 2012, p. 192)

5.7. Literary intention of the ‘heroic mode of combat’

Coming back to the ‘heroic mode of combat’ as described before, we have to ask what literary intentions may lie behind it. It can be understood as the product of a warrior class which is naturally fascinated with all aspects of combat and with the idea of physical superiority. But more important, it seems, are the mental circumstances of violence, the ability to give and take death without remorse. Most humans have an ambivalent attitude towards cruelty, somewhere between attraction and abhorrence. The ‘heroic mode of combat’ seems to reflect that.

It is hard to decide whether the mode is meant as encouragement or warning. Probably it is supposed to be both, depending on the audience.⁶⁸ As an observation on the dynamics of violence, it teaches the lesson that bloodshed will lead to bloodshed. And that for one who plays in this arena, death by the hand of the enemy is inevitable: “For all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword.” (Matthew 26:52) Instead of opening a perspective for the Christian idea of reconciliation, the warriors of *Völsunga saga* confirm

⁶⁸ *Völsunga saga* is the Old Norse rendering of the same material that the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied* is rooted in. The latter is a good example how the perception of a single text can change dramatically from encouragement to warning. On 30. JAN 1943, *Reichsmarschall* Hermann Göring compared the German soldiers fighting in the Battle of Stalingrad to the Burgundians in King Etzel's hall. To him, the Burgundians' fealty to their kings, and their determination to fight till their own death was the model that the soldiers, and ultimately all Germans, should be willing to follow: “Wir kennen ein gewaltiges, heroisches Lied von einem Kampf ohnegleichen, das hieß ‘Der Kampf der Nibelungen’. Auch sie standen in einer Halle von Feuer und Brand und löschten den Durst mit eigenem Blut - aber kämpften und kämpften bis zum Letzten.” (Krüger (2003, pp. 395–396)) Like most ideological concepts of this time, the proverbial *Nieblungentreue* has taken a 180° turn in today's view. It is perceived as a thoroughly negative characteristic.

their identity by following this rule to its very end. The story proposes a grim resignation to fate.

On the other hand, a conscious or subconscious aesthetic traditionalism on the author's side might be taken into account. In this perspective, the 'heroic mode of combat' can be understood as an attempt to translate that language into prose which poetry had found centuries earlier to tell of combat.

6. An interim result

In her study of the original *riddarasögur*, Astrid van Nahl (van Nahl, 1981) compared their combat scenes with those found in the *fornaldarsögur*. To her, the difference, if it exists at all, was in the numbers of combatants, but not in the description of combat itself:

Die Schilderung der Kämpfe verläuft in Riddarasögur und Fornaldarsögur gleichermaßen stereotyp. In der Wortwahl sind keine Unterschiede feststellbar. Die Gleichheit in der Diktion geht hin bis zur nahezu wörtlichen Übereinstimmung, etwa in Bezug auf die vielen anschaulichen Übertreibungen [...] Die originalen Riddarasögur können die Anregung für ihre ausführlichen Kampfschilderungen durchaus von den Fornaldarsögur empfangen haben. Vorbilder dafür gibt es genug, aber die Riddarasögur erweitern gleichsam bezüglich des Kampfes die ohnehin schon detaillierten Schilderungen der Fornaldarsögur und bringen sie in einen Rahmen internationaler Art. So treffen dann nicht nur ein paar Dutzend aufeinander, sondern da geht es gleich um einige Tausende aus allen Teilen der Welt, und wenn die Schlacht durch den Tod aller Beteiligten einem natürlichen Ende entgegengehen will, so taucht für gewöhnlich ein neuer Feind oder Verbündeter auf, der für den Fortgang sorgt. So erscheint das Motiv des Kampfes in den Riddarasögur zerdehnter als in den Fornaldarsögur. (van Nahl, 1981, p. 111)

As chapters 3, 4, and 5 have shown, van Nahl's observation is not correct. Different sagas can show and do show very different types of combat scenes. Even though the distinction between the three postulated genres *riddarasögur*, 'hero legends' and 'adventure tales' may prove difficult, we will find a tendency in those texts labelled as *riddarasögur* to make use of the 'knightly mode of combat' (although often with a strong adventurous impact), a tendency towards the 'adventurous mode of combat' in those perceived as 'adventure tales', while the 'heroic mode of combat' remains the domain of those referred to as 'heroic legends'.

Of course, the chosen texts display their respective 'mode of combat' in a pure form that is not the standard. Many sagas will switch between different modes or merge them into yet other ways of telling a fight. Nevertheless, the 'knightly', the 'adventurous', and the 'heroic mode of combat' are the basic configurations of combat scenes in those sagas that can be assigned to the "fabulous" end of Mitchell's coordinate system. This is the common denominator of all the three modes: Neither of them intends to describe the realities of combat. On the contrary. Being unrealistic is what defines them in the first place. Exaggeration in quality and quantity and the frequent use of fantastic motifs make a large part of their entertainment value. We may argue that medieval Icelanders had a very

different understanding of the factual and the fantastic than we do. (Clunies Ross, 2010, p. 96) But we may also assume that they had enough common sense to know that one man alone, no matter how well he is armed and trained, can hardly stand against hundreds all on his own, like Rémundr; that no one will ignore broken bones and torn off breasts with a shrug like Arinnefja; and that the common reaction to impending lethal violence is extreme emotional stress, not Högni's cool laughter. The saga authors and audiences surely were aware of such a lack of realism. And they most probably enjoyed it. As the author of *Flóres saga konungs ok sona hans* wrote in his prologue: *En þó er þat háttr margra manna, at þeir kalla þær sǫgur lognar, sem fjarri ganga þeirra náttúru, ok er þat af því, at óstyrkr maðr kann þat ekki at skilja, hversu miklu þeir mega orka, er bæði eru sterkir ok hefðu ágæt vǫpn, er allt bitu.* (Lagerholm, 1927, p. 122 / ch. 1) Modern readers must be 'aware of this awareness' to understand the meaning and function of the combat scenes.

Once we have understood the three 'fabulous modes of combat', we can raise the question: What does a 'factual mode of combat' look like in saga literature? One that begs for credibility among its audience? With the fabulous as background, we approach the factual. One is the contrast agent for the other.

7. With point and edge: The ‘factual mode of combat’

7.1. The problem of ‘realism’

Vésteinn Ólason notes on the necessity of contrasting various genres to evaluate their intended degree of ‘realism’:

[T]he real and the imagined are, indeed, not clearly distinguishable phenomena, but rather two aspects of experience, and the manner of representation governs the ways in which readers or listeners experience the words of a text. A study of the nature of one kind of narrative demands that attention be paid to other contemporary kinds which form contrasts with the object of study or overlap with it. (Ólason, 2007, p. 27)

If it is correct that a medieval Icelandic audience perceived the three ‘modes of combat’ described so far as fabulous, the question arises if those combat scenes that seem more realistic to a modern reader, did also seem realistic to them. Few scholars nowadays would believe that the *Íslendingasögur* are exact references of historical facts, but that does not mean they are unrealistic *per se*. What we are discussing here is not historical factuality, but plausibility of the described actions and behaviour. We may assume that the telling of an imagined past always found it easy to exaggerate, to include the extraordinary and even supernatural. But at the same time, such storytelling had to remain within the frame of the reality that the audience knew first-hand, from their daily life. It had to mediate the narrative desire for exaggeration with the need for plausibility. Where it failed to do so, it would have been perceived as a *skröksaga*, a tale of made-up lies.⁶⁹

We have reason to believe that the basic processes, techniques, work methods, and social relations of a Northern European, agricultural, sea-faring society are reflected rather faithfully in the sagas (if they are described at all and not just taken for granted). Even if there might be references to – real or imagined – older customs in a saga, allegedly used generations before its author's lifetime, the congruency of most of the everyday actions with the author's life experience needs not be questioned. Chopping wood, erecting a stone wall or tending to the animals are told the way they actually happened – or, admittedly, sometimes like the author thought they had happened a couple of hundred

⁶⁹ For a discussion of the terms *lygisögur*, *skröksögur*, and *stjúpmæðrasögur*, see Spurkland (2012). See also Schäfke (2013, p. 7): “Erstens ist Fiktionalität keine inhärente Eigenschaft eines Textes, sondern ergibt sich aus der Haltung, mit der der Text rezipiert wird. Der Fiktionalitätsstatus eines Textes oder eines Genres muss also stets für eine bestimmte Gruppe von Rezipienten zu einer bestimmten Zeit, an einem bestimmten Ort rekonstruiert werden.”

years before (which may then be pointed out in the text). This background of trivialities is one of the reasons why a medieval audience could relate to the *Íslendingasögur* in another way than it did to a *skrǫksaga*, and why modern readers still perceive them as ‘realistic’ and as different from most other storytelling of the same time. As Klaus Bödl put it in his discussion of the *Íslendingasögur* as sources for the study of Icelandic history:

Gerade diese Verpflichtung der Sagaautoren weniger gegenüber historischen Ereignissen als gegenüber gesellschaftlichen und kulturellen Realitäten macht indessen den ‘Realismus’ der Saga aus - und ermöglicht es gleichzeitig, Hypothesen mit relativ hohem Wahrscheinlichkeitsgrad über die den Sagas zugrundeliegende Wirklichkeit zu formulieren. [...] Verschiedene Historiker wie auch Literaturwissenschaftler haben dazu [zur Verwendung der Sagas als historische Quellen] Überlegungen angestellt, deren kleinster gemeinsamer Nenner darin besteht, daß die altnordische Historiographie nur begrenzten Wert für ereignisgeschichtliche Untersuchungen hat, hingegen für struktur- und sozialgeschichtliche wie auch für anthropologische Problemstellungen von großer Bedeutung ist. (Bödl, 2005, p. 46)

And furthermore:

Isländersagas sind also keine ‘informierten’ Geschichtswerke, sondern erfahrungsgespeiste Erzählungen. Für ihren Quellenstatus ergibt sich daraus, daß sich aus diesen Texten kaum authentifizierbare ereignisgeschichtliche Informationen entnehmen lassen; wohl aber sind sie geeignet, den Erfahrungshorizont ihrer Verfasser - und zum Teil auch der Traditionen, auf die sie rekurrieren - auszuleuchten. (Bödl, 2005, p. 66)

Following Bödl, to examine what a ‘factual mode of combat’ may look like we will soon undertake a close reading of *Íslendingasaga* fight scenes, namely those of *Njáls saga*. Being the longest of all *Íslendingasögur*, and rich in detailed combat descriptions, the text lends itself perfectly to our analysis.

Of course, fighting is no triviality. Armed combat is one of the physically and psychologically most extreme situations a human being can experience. And yet, for many people it was and is part of their lives. In an inherently violent society where fighting is a problematic, but nonetheless possible mode of social interaction, we may assume that many have an understanding of what it looks and feels like. Be it that they have themselves taken part in it, that they have witnessed it with their own eyes, or that they have heard first-hand accounts of it. Theodore Murdock Andersson has questioned such a basis of saga scenes in daily life, especially of the combat scenes: “It is not probable that these were inspired by the sober events of the day; they are more likely to be a draft on the gilded traditions of early Iceland.” (Andersson, 1964, p. 115) In a thorough analysis, we will try to tell apart “sober events” from “gilded tradition”. In our perspective, Ólason's

statement that “[t]rying to calculate whether the descriptions of fighting in the sagas are in some sense ‘true’” would be “beside the point” (Ólason, 2007, p. 41 fn. 30) has to be rejected – indeed, such calculating is straight *to* the point. Only by understanding which parts of a saga’s combat scenes are ‘true’, we can hope to decipher their full meaning. Exaggeration and fantasy exist only in contrast to the real. Any given combat scene can and should be dissected to estimate the proportions and relations of exaggeration, fantasy and realistic description, and to understand how these strands were interwoven. It must be noted that exaggeration, fantasy and realism can be deduced from a single text alone, while convention, which Ólason points out as the fourth of the constituting design principles of saga writing, is a rather intertextual phenomenon on a meta-level. Convention can only be understood as such by comparison with other texts, and it can apply to exaggeration, fantasy and realism alike.

In the study of the three ‘fabulous mode of combat’, we saw that combat scenes were deliberately designed to fulfil various narrative purposes within the text. We may assume that the same is true for the less fabulous fight scenes. Again, the descriptions of combat give depth to the characters, help to explain their mutual relationships, and have a huge part in defining the saga’s tone. However, how a medieval audience might have reacted to a combat scene can only be discussed after a close reading is undertaken that evaluates their plausibility. Once we start to calculate how ‘true’ the combat scenes in the *Íslendingasögur* are, we will notice that their level of realism is not necessarily homogeneous throughout one single saga. Often, certain characters or situations will be associated with a higher degree of exaggeration and/or the fantastic, while other fights in the same text may be completely plausible.

But before we can delve into the Old Norse material, we have to gain a basic understanding of the nature of medieval European martial arts. Knowledge of these arts, combined with practical experience with living, mostly Asian martial arts traditions are the basis on which we can dare to judge the combat scenes of the *Íslendingasögur*.

7.2. Martial arts: European tradition, living Asian systems, and Iceland

The term ‘martial arts’ is commonly used among Westerners to describe the fighting systems of Asia, like *karate*, *kung fu*, *muay thai*, and so forth. These systems are mostly associated with empty hands methods of combat, and imagined to be deeply rooted in Eastern spirituality. However, these assumptions are only partly correct. There *is* an abundance of martial arts systems in Asia, many of them *are* specialized in empty hand methods, and some *do* see the spiritual development of their practitioners as their main goal. Yet, martial arts are a much broader phenomenon, and can indeed be understood as a basic constant of human culture, common to all times and regions⁷⁰ – the universality of the problem of violence has always nurtured the development of martial arts as a necessary technique for the survival of the individual, and the group. (Wetzler, 2012, p. 64) Peter Lorge gave a minimal definition of ‘martial arts’ that serves well as a starting point for the further discussion:

I define ‘martial arts’ as the various skills or practices that originated as methods of combat. This definition therefore includes many performance, religious, or health-promoting activities that no longer have any direct combat applications but clearly originated in combat, while possibly excluding references to these techniques in dance, for example. Admittedly, the distinctions can be muddled as one activity shades into another. In addition, what makes something a martial art rather than an action done by someone who is naturally good at fighting is that the techniques are taught. Without the transmission of these skills through teaching, they do not constitute an “art” in the sense of being a body of information or techniques that aim to reproduce certain knowledge or effects.⁷¹ (Lorge, 2012, pp. 3–4)

In fact, martial arts possess a very strong tendency to attract and fulfil functions beyond the immediate preparation for interpersonal violence. Martial arts training curricula that address other functions just as much or even more than actual combat application are as common as those exclusively geared towards fighting. Generally spoken, there are at least five main ‘dimensions of meaning’ ascribed to martial arts practices: 1) preparation for violent conflict; 2) play and competitive sport; 3) performance; 4) transcendent goals; 5) health care. (Wetzler, 2015, pp. 25–26) To varying degrees, all of these dimensions have been present throughout history. The notion that only the combative dimension is ‘true’ to the idea of the martial arts, while the others are symptoms of decline – often uttered by

70 See Green and Svinth (2010) for an excellent take on the omnipresence of martial arts in human culture(s).

71 I agree with Lorge that the transmission of knowledge is an integral part of the martial arts. However, we could imagine a single person devising his or her own, personal combat system, training and fighting without ever teaching it to somebody else. I would not hesitate to classify this as a martial art. For a more detailed discussion, see Wetzler (2015, pp. 23–24).

modern practitioners – is without a historical basis. An individual martial arts system may be active in one, some, or all of the five dimensions, and of course, the dimensions may also overlap. This is the reason why a distinction between ‘martial arts’, ‘combat sports’, and/or ‘self-defence’, though practical at first glance, often becomes useless in confrontation with historical or living martial arts systems. Therefore, the term ‘martial arts’ is used here as an umbrella term for any movement system that basically refers to personal combat, and partakes in at least one of the aforementioned five dimensions. In the context of the European Middle Ages, these are mostly the combative, the sportive, and the performative dimension. Following the European tradition, the term ‘fencing’ will be used as synonym for the martial arts of the Middle Ages.

Since the Bronze Age, European culture has put tremendous efforts in the technical perfection of its weapons of war, and the history of the European sword, to name one prominent example, testifies to this.⁷² The swords of the Bronze Age, of the Roman Empire, the Migration Period or Viking Times were products of outstanding craftsmanship, high-tech of their days. It is hardly conceivable why such high standards in weapon production should not be matched by proficiency in the use of weapons.⁷³ Information on pre-medieval weapon training is sparse, with only short glimpses into historical practice, like the training of Roman soldiers described by Vegetius. (Önnerfors, 1995, pp. 24–26) The same is true for Migration Period and Viking Age combat methods. Due to the lack of detailed sources, all theories on their existence or form remain hypothetical to the largest part. However, the situation changes with the High Middle Ages. From that time on, there is ample evidence for the existence of systematic martial arts training, either in the context of the military education of the knightly class (Fenske, 1990, pp. 68–82) or of judicial combat. The following quote will give an impression of how deeply professional fencing training was embedded in medieval urban culture:

Sucht man nach den hochmittelalterlichen Vorläufern der städtischen Fechtmeister, kommt dem Phänomen des gerichtlichen Zweikampfs und der Kampfstellvertretung eine zentrale Rolle zu. Zu nennen sind hierbei vor allem die teils mit einem festen Monatssold vergüteten, teils freischaffend tätigen städtischen Kämpen, die im Sinne eines Wahrheitserweises den Rechtsstandpunkt einer Streitpartei unter gerichtlicher Aufsicht auf dem Kampfplatz ausfochten und als die ersten professionellen Nahkampfspezialisten des Mittelalters gelten können. In den Aachener Stadtrechnungen etwa finden sich über mindestens elf Jahre hinweg die beiden städtischen Kämpen Scotard und Beysennecken, die 1338 intensiv auf den Ernstfall vorbereitet wurden: Für

72 See, e. g., the articles collected in Deutscher, Kaiser, and Wetzler (2014).

73 For the conclusions that can, e. g., be drawn from the physical characteristics of Irish and British Bronze Age swords concerning the handling of these weapons, see Molloy (2007).

25 kleine Goldgulden oder 33 Mark 9 Schillinge nebst Kleidung erteilte ihnen ein Meister Wiricus Unterricht im Nahkampf; zudem wurden Meister Wiricus, sein *famulus* und die Kämpen in dieser „Trainingsphase“ auf städtische Kosten verköstigt. Die Tätigkeit von *magistri* genannten Fechtlehrern in der Vorbereitung auf einen gerichtlichen Zweikampf ist auch aus England hinreichend belegt: Der vermeintliche Axtmörder Walter de Stewton wurde 1220 eigens gegen Kautio aus der Haft im Londoner Tower entlassen, um sich bei einem Fechtmeister für einen anstehenden Zweikampf schulen zu lassen – *et discere eskirmire*. Auch das nordfranzösische und normannische Recht schrieb für den gerichtlichen Zweikampf obligatorisch Fechtlehrer vor, die die Kämpfer in der Zeit bis zum Kampftermin trainieren sollten – für diesen Zweck unterhielt etwa die Stadt Cambrai bereits im 13. Jahrhundert nicht weniger als elf *bretons*, wie diese Funktionsträger in den Quellen genannt wurden. Offenbar versammelte sich um den verfahrensregulierten und mit festen Vergütungssätzen lockenden gerichtlichen Zweikampf spätestens seit dem 13. Jahrhundert ein professionelles oder zumindest semi-professionelles Personal von Kämpen und Fechtlehrern, die häufig in den Städten ansässig waren. Stellvertretend seien hierbei die sieben *escrémisseurs* aus dem Pariser Steuerregister von 1292, die von Luigi Zanutto eruierten neun Fechtmeister im Cividale des 13. und 14. Jahrhunderts sowie die Paduaner Kämpendynastien der Cavacio, Bravi und Dal Rio genannt. (Jaser, 2014, p. 208)

From around the year 1300 on, the fencing masters' teachings were laid down in manuals that explained the use not only of the single-handed arming sword, but also, depending on the source, of buckler, two-handed sword, *messer*, or dagger, of pole arms or of empty hands techniques, for the combat with and without armour. In the Middle Ages, the term 'fencing' was not exclusive to fighting with a single sword, as it is nowadays. On the contrary, fighting systems were 'complete' – they tried to prepare for all weapons and all eventualities, and were just as highly developed as their today better known Asian counterparts. The German speaking parts of Europe produced a great number of medieval *Fechtbücher*,⁷⁴ many of which describe fighting with the two-handed sword – often in the tradition of German master Johann Liechtenauer of the early 14th century (Hils, 1985) –, before Renaissance and Early Modern martial arts culture turned towards Italian, and later French, methods of thrust fencing. Fencing manuals are no oddities, but constitute a large genre within the field of medieval practical literature. They fulfilled several functions: e. g. as mnemonic devices for the author's personal training, as presentation and advertisement for a certain style of fencing, or as written instructions for the self-learning fencer.⁷⁵ Many of them describe fencing techniques by word and image, and could be called forerunners

74 For an overview over this kind of literature, see Jaquet et al. (2016) and Bodemer (2008). An overview of the medieval German fight books was given by Forgeng and Kiermayer (2007), a complete list of the German illustrated fencing manuscripts was provided by Leng (2008).

75 Eric Burkart analysed these various functions using the example of the treatises of 15th century fencing master Hans Talhofer, see Burkart (2014).

of modern day martial arts or self-defence training books.⁷⁶ Even though any interpretation of historical European martial arts techniques is hampered by a number of serious methodological problems, and though a perfectly accurate re-creation of these techniques is most likely not possible, the fencing manuals do give enough information to describe the techniques and movement patterns contained therein quite precisely.

The art of fencing, as described in the manuals, was not restricted to the knightly class, but common among wide circles of society. (Wetzler, 2012, pp. 67–68) As we have seen in the chapter on the ‘knightly mode of combat’, systematic combat training was also known the Scandinavian North. Saxo Grammaticus had his hero Gram learn the use of the sword for attack and defence. (Ollrik & Ræder, 1931, p. I, 13). The *konungs skuggsjá* gives detailed instructions for combat exercises, not only on horseback (as quoted before), but also on foot:

En æf þu ert staddr i kaupstað eða æinum hværium þeim stað er æigi ma hæsta nyta til skemtanar þa skallt þu þæssa skemmtan ælska at ganga til hærbærgis þins oc bua þec þungum wapnum. Leita þer oc þærs felaga er mæð þer wili leic fræmia oc þu wæizt at wæl er til þæss lærðr at bæriaz unndan skillde eða buclara hvart sæm hælldr er ut lænndzkr eða herlænzkr. Tac þu oc iafnan til þæssa leics þung wapn annat twæggia bryniu eða þungan pannzara oc haf ihæannde þer annat twæggia þungan skiolld eða buclara oc þungt swærð. J þeim leic skallt þu wiðr leita at næma hæwilig hogg oc nauðsynleg oc hallkæmleg oc goð wiðr slog. Kenn þer oc at hylia þec wæl mæð þinum skillde oc þat at þu mætter þæssa luti wæl warazk fa æf þu att wið owin þinn at skipta. Ef þer þyckir noccot unnder at wæra wæl lærðr af þærri iðrott þa haf þænna leic tyswar um dagh æf þu matt wiðr komaz. En ængan dag lat þu swa allan ut ganga at þu leikir æi þænna leic æinu sinni nema heilact se þwi at þæssi iðrott er sæmilegh at kunna hværium konongs manni oc þo nauðsynleg æf til þarf at taca. [...] Þar til skallt þu gera þer æitt skapt oc hælldr þungra en spiotskapt oc reis siðan marc bacca millim swa sæm skottein þar wið mattþu næma hværsu langt eða beinnt þu matt spioti skotit fa swa at skot þitt wærðe hallkæmt. Ðat er oc goð iðrott oc þo skemmtan at ganga mæð boga sinn iskot bacca mæð aðrum mannum. Su skemmtan er oc goð oc halldkem æf maðr wæn sec at kasta af slongo hvartwæggia langt oc þo beint bæðe af starfslongu oc hanndslongu. Eð wapnsteini wæl at kasta. En forðum war sa siðr at allir þeir mænn er full komnir willdu wæra iþærs kyns iðrotom at wæra wæl lærðar til wapna oc riddara skaps. Þa wandu þeir bað hænndr iamkringar iallu wapna skipti til at gripa oc wiðr þat leitaðu æf þu þyckez þat finna at þu hæwir til þærs natturu.þwi at þeir ero bæzt at ser gærwir iþæirri iðrott oc hættazter sinum uwinum er swa ero lærðer. [...] Syn þec I orrosto diarwan oc ufælinn wægh þa mæð hæfilighum hoggum oc halld kæmum æpter þwi sæm fyrr hafðer þu numit swa sæm af goðo skapi oc þo driugleghre reiðe. Æigi skalltu bæriaz mæð liugannde hoggum eða þarflausum lagum eða mæð skialgum skotum swa sæm fælmattanðe maðr. Ga þu þærs at þu kunnr at warazk annars wigkæni (Brenner, 1881, pp. 99–100)

76 In fact, this genre never really disappeared. Even though changes in intention, presentation, function and use have to be considered, one could draw a direct line from the earliest German texts to modern guides on self-defence. For a comparison between the corpus of Talhofer fencing treatises and a modern tutorial on the Israeli self-defence system *krav maga*, see Burkart (2016).

As the quote shows, combat skills were perceived as something to be acquired by diligent training. Talent is only spoken of with respect to unusual abilities, like wielding one's weapons ambidextrously with equal expertise.

It is difficult to estimate how much impact such advice truly had on young Norwegian *hirðmenn*, and even more difficult to judge its influence on Icelandic martial culture. But we know that, like their Norwegian brethren, the Icelanders of the 13th century were well aware of the fact that fencing was not only “an action done by someone who is naturally good at fighting” (Lorge, 2012, pp. 3–4), but a set of techniques and qualities that could be learned, and enhanced by training. For example, the *Fóstbræðra saga* tells us: *Hávar og Þórelfur áttu son þann er Þorgeir hét. Hann var bráðger maður og mikill vexti og sterkur og kappsfullur. Hann nam á unga aldri að hlífa sér með skildi og vega með vopnum.* (p. 776 / ch. 2) It is no coincidence that we find this explicit reference to fencing training here in *Fóstbræðra saga*. Throughout the text, its author is eager to demonstrate his knowledge of matters outside the usual scope of the Icelandic horizon.⁷⁷ The exceptional mentioning of systematic fencing training refers to the then *en vogue* martial arts of Europe.

The saga authors were aware that competence in combat is dependent on several qualities a person can have: aggressiveness, or fighting spirit is one (and probably the most important), physical strength a second, and fencing skill a third. Their descriptions of saga protagonists address these different aspects with a diverse, nuanced vocabulary. Warriors in the sagas are not only fearless and strong, but also skilled and able with the weapon, as is demonstrated by words like *vígfimr*, *vápnfimr*, *vápnfærr*, or *liðfærr*. Some men know *að neyta vápna* (*Heiðarvíga saga*, p. 1385 / ch. 30), or they are *traustur til vápns* (*Vatnsdæla saga*, S. 1850 / ch. 7). Admittedly, these words by themselves do not necessarily imply that fencing skills are acquired by training, rather than by natural talent,⁷⁸ but they attest to the idea that a one has to master a certain set of movements to fight effectively. The quotes from *konungs skuggsjá* and *Fóstbræðra saga* however prove that training was the key to weapon mastery for the Norse fencer. The same mindset shines through the lines of other sources, like *Sturlunga saga*, where we find important indications for the awareness of advanced European fencing technique and for the perception of

77 For a general introduction to *Fóstbræðra saga* and its composition, see Kroesen (1962). A detailed discussion of the sagas sources, and the so called *klausura* (the learned digressions in the text), can be found in Kristjánsson (1972), whose views are supported by Bragason (2000). Ebel (2000) and Hartmann (2002) discuss meaning, motivation and moral implications of the violence described in the saga.

78 In fact, it is the mark of the true hero that he does not need to train fighting, but intuitively understands and excels in it from early age on, like Egill Skallagrímsson or strong Grettir. As far as their combat skills are concerned, such characters do not develop, but start the story with an outstanding level of expertise that they keep throughout the action, if not injured or growing old.

martial arts as a skill that does not just ‘happen to be there’: *Lauga-Snorri gekk fyrir Sturlu ok hlífði honum með buklara ok hafði sverðit undir buklaranum, sem þá er menn skylmast.* (Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, & Eldjárn, 1946, p. 435) The combination of sword and buckler⁷⁹ mentioned here is well attested both in the literature⁸⁰ and in illuminations of the High and Late Middle Ages. Most noteworthy, it is the subject of Europe's oldest surviving fencing manual, now kept in the Royal Armouries in Leeds, England, and known according to its signature as the MS I.33 (sometimes also called Tower or Walpurgis *Fechtbuch*). The book was written by a German-speaking fencer, as the Latin instructions are interspersed with German fencing terminology. It displays a highly advanced system of fencing with arming sword and buckler.⁸¹ One of its basic principles is the use of the buckler to protect

79 For a detailed history of the European buckler, see Schmidt (2016). Schmidt lists several Norwegian bucklers which are very similar in material and appearance. One of them (*Kulturhistorisk Museum* Oslo, nr. 954) even carries a runic inscription: *kun=nar gerþi mik hlfi a mik* (siglum N 189 M). (Schmidt (2016, pp. 118–119))

80 Kellett (2012, pp. 37–40) has discussed the depiction of fencing – or *schirmen* – with sword and buckler in Middle High German literature, for example in *Kudrun*. Her observations are highly interesting in our context, since she is also willing to interpret literary representations of combat as witnesses to a European martial arts tradition, once they match existing sources on fencing, and shall thus be quoted in full length:
 “The epic *Kudrun* features a passage giving one of the most detailed descriptions of the practice of *schirmen* to be found in Middle High German literature. The depictions of combat in *Kudrun*, as in the *Nibelungenlied*, are somewhat archaic in style, with the combatants portrayed as ‘heroes’ rather than as ‘knights’, and there is a greater focus on the use of the sword in both *Kudrun* and the *Nibelungenlied* than on combat with the lance. Texts such as these seem likely to be a useful source for material on *schirmen* and the art of fencing. The description of *schirmen* in *Kudrun* takes place while Wate is visiting the court of King Hagen and his queen Hilde in Ireland disguised as a merchant. During Wate’s stay at Hagen’s court, entertainment is offered to the guests, including a display of fencing and of throwing javelins: [...] The text gives details of the weapons used for *schirmen*: *kiule* (cudgels), *swerte* (swords) and *buckelaere* (bucklers). [...] Hagen asks his guest whether Wate has seen any fencing as good as this in his home country. Wate, in his guise as a merchant, pretends he has no knowledge of swordsmanship and responds that he would be grateful for a lesson. Hagen proposes that Wate take a lesson from the best Irish *schermmeister* at court, so that Wate will at least know *dri swanke* (‘three strokes’, 359, 3) to use if he is ever in combat. The *meister* arrives, and begins to ‘teach’ Wate, but it quickly becomes obvious that Wate is by far the better swordsman. As the fight begins, Wate takes up a guard position ‘as if he were a champion’ (‘*Wate stuont in huote, | sam er ein kemphe wære*’, 360, 3–4). The *meister* is saved by his agility – he leaps away like a wild leopard (361, 1–2) as Wate rains blows on his shield – but is clearly outfought by his ‘student’ (*schermknabe*). At this point, Hagen proposes that he fight Wate himself so that he can show him ‘his four blows’ (‘*die minen slege viere*’, 362, 3). Wate reluctantly agrees to fight. Hagen is hard-pressed and begins to steam from exertion like a fire doused in water (364, 2). The spectators are fascinated by the skill shown by both men (365,1), and both men are clearly extremely strong. Wate taunts Hagen by telling him that he has now learned all of the king’s four blows, and intends to ‘repay’ him. At length, the two men cease fighting, and Hagen expresses surprise at the ‘merchant’ Wate’s skill: ‘you are praiseworthy in the ring’ (‘*dâ sît ir ûf dem ringe lobebaere*’, 368, 4). Eventually, the joke is explained although Wate’s true identity is not exposed, and Hagen, to his credit, laughs with his guests. [...] This scene demonstrates not only that the author of *Kudrun* was familiar with the concept that swordsmanship was a skill that was taught to noblemen and knights by teachers specialised in the art, but also that it involved certain techniques, and that individual fencers might develop their own individual techniques (e.g. the ‘three strokes’ mentioned as being taught by the *schermmeister*, or Hagen’s ‘four blows’). Such details are far from common in literary depictions of combat of the time. There is even a potential reference – very rare indeed in Middle High German literary descriptions of sword combat – to a character taking up a specific guard [*huote*, S.W.] from which to fight. In other words, the combat being depicted in *Kudrun* is a skilled affair, in which highly experienced combatants are pitting their strength, speed, wits and learning against each other. This is indeed a portrayal of the art of fencing in practice.”

81 The social context and technical properties of the fencing system laid down in MS I.33 have been discussed by several authors. Anglo's judgement of the system as a crude and underdeveloped fencing style – “this raises questions concerning both the author's competence and his overall purpose. The constrained sword and buckler fighting taught by the priest to his disciple does not look remotely as efficient as the free-flowing, better balanced

the hand wielding the sword. The relatively small size of a buckler – 45cm have been considered the maximum diameter, most examples are smaller (Schmidt, 2016, p. 13) – may lead to the impression that it will not make much of a difference in actual fighting. Skilfully used, however, the advantage that a buckler provides is tremendous. It is therefore no wonder that *Sturlunga saga* remarks on this shield form explicitly, and refers to its proper application, in which the buckler protects the fencer's hand.

Continuing to play on the 'buckler theme', *Sturlunga saga* also tells of a certain Herburd, a retainer of Snorri Sturluson, and says that *hann var Suðrmaðr ok kunni allra manna bezt við bukklara*. (Jóhannesson et al., 1946, p. 267) In his biography of Snorri, Guðmundsson interprets Herburd "the German" as a fencing master, brought to Iceland to teach the use of sword and buckler:

Notkun bukklara í okkar heimshluta var á byrjunastigi þegar hér var komið sögu. Engir voru betri en Þjóðverjar sjálfir í að beita þessari verju - svo að Snorri flutti einfaldlega inn Þjóðverja til að kenna meðferð bukklara. Sú staðreynd að Herburd Suðrmaður var hér á vegum Snorra er til marks um stórhug hans og umsvif á veraldarvísu á fyrsta fjórðungi þrettánda aldar. (Guðmundsson, 2009, pp. 242–243)

It is hardly a coincidence that both the sword and buckler method described in the first quote, and the German origin of the man most able with the buckler fit so neatly to the MS I.33, which was written only a little later than *Sturlunga saga*. Judged by the production of fencing manuals, Germany was indeed the hotspot of medieval European martial arts culture. Guðmundsson's interpretation is therefore convincing, and it underlines both the Icelanders' fascination for fencing technique, and their participation in a shared European culture that consisted of much more than reading and writing, but also included martial arts. The history of martial arts shows how combat systems tend to travel from one place and one group to another, (compare Green & Svinth, 2010) and there is no reason to believe that medieval Iceland should make an exception. Martial arts training was a common pastime throughout the different social classes of European society, not only or necessarily among knights and soldiers – the fencing teacher depicted in the MS I.33 is a

techniques later expounded by Talhoffer or Marozzo [...]” (Anglo (2000, p. 128)) – is impossible to follow, once one starts to examine and recreate the techniques on display. Nor is Dawson's theory convincing, who believes the book to be the offspring of a Byzantine martial arts tradition, and who fails completely in judging the lethality of the depicted techniques when he writes: „Such blows would certainly end a bout effectively in the sort of civilian context depicted, yet would be very unlikely to do life-threatening injury. The same is largely true of all the cuts depicted in the manuscript.” (Dawson (2009, p. 79)) Much more convincingly, Kellett (2012, p. 32) argues “ that MS I.33 was designed as a teaching manual for a clerical fencing master to assist in providing training to defendants facing trial by combat.”, while she does not deny that the depicted system finds use as well in other applications. For further information on the book and its teachings, see Forgeng's introduction to his facsimile (Forgeng (2003)), or, most recent, Jaquet et al. (2016).

cleric, after all. From the 12th century on, some cities and universities of Europe tried to prohibit fencing training, obviously without much success (Anglo, 2000, pp. 7–8). Icelanders going abroad – be it to study at a university, to trade, to go on a pilgrimage, or for other reasons – will necessarily have come into contact with fencing systems like that of the MS I.33. Even if they did not take the time to learn such methods, they would still have taken the knowledge of their existence back home. And of course, men-at-arms of other nations coming to Iceland brought along not only their weapons, but the skill of using them, too.

These various hints lead to the conclusion that the Icelandic society had access and took part in European martial arts culture, and that Birgir Loftsson's general remark on the adoption of foreign weapons is also true for fencing skills: “Íslendingar lærðu snemma að tileinka sér vopnabúnað nágranna sinna. Þeir fylgdu ‘fískustraumum’ í vopnabúnaði sem var viðhafður í Evropu á miðöldum.” (Loftsson, 2006, p. 159) Whether imported fencing systems replaced indigenous methods, or rather blended with them, is impossible to say, though.⁸² But no matter what exactly fencing in Iceland looked like, it is not at all improbable that a saga author had learned it, or was at least accustomed to the sight of men training with weapons.⁸³

Next to our understanding of historical European fencing, as derived from the fencing manuals, the analysis in the following chapter draws on experiences in modern day Asian martial arts. Many of these systems are concerned with the use of and defence against edge and impact weapons. Similar to the medieval European systems, they teach their practitioners how to wield a variety of arms, like swords, spears, clubs, knives, and axes, and of course empty hands. Like Olympic fencing, some of the arts have developed into competitive sports – most famously Japanese *kendo* –, but several others are geared towards actual close quarter combat, like the blade fighting systems of the Philippines, some Japanese sword fighting styles, or *krabi krabong* from Thailand. Of course, not all weapon-based martial arts look the same. They vary according to preferred weaponry,

82 There is evidence for both processes in the history of martial arts. E. g., Italian-style thrust fencing ousted older English sword fighting methods in the late 16th and early 17th century, much to the displeasure of the notorious English fencer George Silver who wrote a whole book to discredit their systems, the “Paradoxes of Defence”. (Silver (1599)) At roughly the same time, in 1570, fencing master Joachim Meyer from Strasbourg described “German” and “Italian” weaponry and fencing methods next to each other in his treatise. (Meyer (1570))

83 Some may argue that scenes like that of *Sturlungas saga*, where men fought with their hands under their bucklers, will prove nothing more than literary dependencies on other European texts. Such a line of argumentation is symptomatic of an urge to tear medieval literature out of its historical context. It is rooted in the desire to establish hegemony over the interpretation of literature, and to deny it to any historical approach. A way of research that uses theory to separate the texts from the world that gave birth to them must fail to see the sagas for what they truly are: products both of the cosmos of literature, and at the same time of the cosmos of ‘life as it happened’. Denying the ‘real’ in the sagas means to admit defeat in the face of the complexity of these two cosmoi's interactions.

perceived situation of application (e. g., duel versus battle field), and not the least cultural presumptions (e. g. of aesthetic, religious, or pseudo-scientific nature, see Wetzler, 2012). Nevertheless, due to their identical purpose – hitting the enemy without being hit – there are remarkable similarities that allow to transfer observations from the training of one system to another. Not all martial arts are one and the same. But one might say that at least all life-or-death fencing systems are dialects of one common language. These dialects of techniques and movements will always remain mutually intelligible to a certain degree, no matter how far they lie apart in time and space.

The comparison to Asian martial arts is important also insofar as these systems prove that there is no need for a distinct warrior class, a military, or another social organisation separate from a rural community to keep combat training alive. Such institutions are helpful, but not indispensable for the transmission of martial arts skills. In the East, fighting systems could and can be transmitted in village communities, in family clans, or various other networks of practitioners. This is the case, for example, on the Indonesian Archipelago (Draeger, 1972), in parts of China,⁸⁴ and even in most remote parts of the world (seen from a Western perspective) like the Caroline Islands:

Die Trukleute sind ein seltsames Gemisch von kriegerischem Sinn und Feigheit. Wenn auch offene Schlachten Seltenheiten waren und man sich meistens mit hinterlistigem Abschlagen begnügte, kann man ihnen doch Vorliebe für das Kriegshandwerk nicht absprechen. Die junge Mannschaft wurde systematisch geschult in Kampfschulen. Ein Krieger, der Erfahrung besaß und viele Kniffe wußte für den Nahkampf, übernahm den Unterricht in einem abgelegenen Hause. Er zeigte seinen Schülern, wie man trotz Messer und Speer die Gegner packen und kampfunfähig machen könnte. Diese Kampfschulen blieben geheim, damit andere Stämme nicht beunruhigt würden. Beim Unterricht standen sich Meister und Schüler gegenüber. Der Meister nannte zuerst den Namen des Griffes, den sie üben wollten, dann sagte er zum Schüler: 'äsidiēi, greif mich an.' Beide schlugen nun mit der Hand an den Schenkel. Darauf griff der Schüler den Meister an, und dieser wehrte den Angriff ab durch den einzustudierenden Griff. (Bollig, 1927, pp. 109–110)

Bollig continues by explaining 18 specific techniques of the Truk martial art, and gives their names in the Truk language.⁸⁵

These examples show that an infrastructural level like that of the medieval Icelandic society would have been more than sufficient to support a martial arts culture, too.

84 “Die organisierte Übertragung von Kampfkünsten innerhalb von Klöstern, anderen religiösen Gesellschaftern [sic] oder Dorfgemeinschaften [!] förderte dann die Herausbildung von klar definierten, voneinander abgrenzbaren Kampfkunstsystemen und -traditionen.” (Ranné (2011, p. 169))

85 For further information on the fascinating research in *bwang*, the martial art of the Truk people of the Caroline Islands, see Lessa and Velez-Ibanez (2002).

Based on the assumption that saga literature reflects knowledge of martial arts techniques, and with a theoretical and practical understanding of both historical European and recent Asian martial arts, the plausibility of the movements in the *Íslendingasögur*'s combat scenes can be analysed. Estimations of the plausibility of the combatants' emotional reactions and general behaviour, on the other hand, will be based on the theoretical framework laid out by Randall Collins (Collins, 2008) and Barry Molloy and Dave Grossmann (Molloy & Grossman, 2007), as described at the appropriate places of the following discussion.

7.3. A first approach towards the 'factual mode of combat'

For a first examination of the assumed 'factual mode of combat', a close reading of two of *Njáls saga*'s well-known combat scenes will soon be undertaken.

Njáls saga, often perceived as the climax of the genre of *Íslendingasögur*, is thought to have been written around 1280, and is preserved in an relatively large number of manuscripts already from the 14th century. Among them are Reykjabók (AM 468 4to), c. 1300–1325, Gráskinna (GKS 2870), c. 1300 and with additions from c. 1500–1550, Möðruvallabók (AM 132 fol.), c. 1330–1370, Kálfalækjarbók (AM 133 fol.), c. 1350, and Skafinskinna (GKS 2868 4to), c. 1350–1400, followed by Oddabók (AM 466 4to) from c. 1460. Furthermore, a number of vellum fragments from the 14th century (AM 162 b fol.) contain parts of the text.⁸⁶

Njáls saga has been chosen as prime object for the study of the 'factual mode of combat' for three reasons: Firstly, its sheer size and huge number of combat scenes allow for an in-depth analysis of individual scenes and intra-textual connections. Secondly, since it is one of the best known sagas, many readers will be familiar with its content. This will facilitate an easy access to the following chapters. Thirdly, the fight scenes of *Njáls saga* are especially rich in those details our study is interested in: precise descriptions of combat action.

Concerning these fight scenes, Ólason wrote that

Gunnarr's and Kolskeggr's defense at Knafahólar or Skarphéðinn's killing of Þráinn show such exaggerated strength and agility that if we stop to reflect we find it

⁸⁶ For a detailed, recent overview of the *Njáls saga* manuscripts, see Lethbridge (2014).

incredible, unrealistic; it is not likely that any of the saga's readers had actually seen anything like it. (Ólason, 2007, p. 41)

The two scenes mentioned in the quote shall be both discussed. To evaluate how realistic or unrealistic they truly are, the protagonists' actions will be analysed both from the perspective of practical martial arts, and of combat psychology.

a) Gunnarr and Kolskeggr at Knafahólar

Nú eggjar Starkaður sína menn. Snúa þeir þá fram í nesið að þeim. Sigurður svínhöfði fór fyrstur og hafði törguskjöld einbyrðan en sviðu í annarri hendi. Gunnar sér hann og skýtur til hans af boganum. Hann brá upp við skildinum er hann sá örina hátt fljúga og kom ör in í gegnum skjöldinn og í augað svo að út kom í hnakkann og varð það víg fyrst. Annarri ör skaut Gunnar að Úlfhéðni ráðamanni Starkaðar og kom sú á hann miðjan og féll hann fyrir fætur bónda einum en bóndinn féll um hann þveran. Kolskeggur kastar til steini og kom í höfuð bóndanum og varð það hans bani.

Þá mælti Starkaður: 'Ekki mun oss þetta duga að hann komi boganum við og göngum að fram vel og snarplega.' Síðan eggjaði hver annan. Gunnar varði sig með boganum meðan hann mátti. Síðan kastaði hann niður boganum. Tók hann þá atgeirinn og sverðið og vegur með báðum höndum. Er bardaginn þá hinn harðasti. Gunnar vegur þá drjúgan menn og svo Kolskeggur. Þá mælti Þorgeir Starkaðarsonur: 'Eg hét að færa Hildigunni höfuð þitt Gunnar.' 'Ekki mun henni það þykja neinu varða hvort þú efnir það eða eigi,' segir Gunnar, 'en þó munt þú nær ganga hljóta ef þú skalt það meðal handa hafa.' Þorgeir mælti þá við bræður sína: 'Hlaupum vér að honum fram allir senn. Hann hefir engan skjöld og munum vér hafa ráð hans í hendi.' Þeir hljópu fram Börkur og Þorkell og urðu skjótari en Þorgeir. Börkur höggur til Gunnars. Gunnar laust við atgeirinum svo hart að sverðið hraut úr hendi Berki. Sér hann þá til annarrar handar Þorkel standa í höggfæri við sig. Gunnar stóð nokkuð höllum fæti. Hann sveiflaði þá til sverðinu og kom á hálsinn Þorkatli og fauk af höfuðið.

Kolur mælti Egilsson: 'Látið mig fram að Kolskeggi. Eg hefi það jafnan mælt að við mundum mjög jafnfærir til vígs.' 'Slíkt megum við nú reyna,' segir Kolskeggur. Kolur leggur til hans spjóti. Kolskeggur vó þá mann og átti sem mest að vinna og kom hann eigi fyrir sig skildinum og kom lagið í lærið utanfótar og gekk í gegnum. Kolskeggur brást við fast og óð að honum og hjó með saxinu á lærið og undan fótinn og mælti: 'Hvort nam eg þig eða eigi?' 'Þess galt eg nú,' segir Kolur, 'er eg var berskjaldaður' og stóð nokkura stund á hinn fótinn og leit á stúfínn. Kolskeggur mælti: 'Eigi þarft þú að líta á, jafnt er sem þér sýnist, af er fóturinn.' Kolur féll þá dauður niður. En er þetta sér Egill faðir hans hleypur hann að Gunnari og höggur til hans. Gunnar leggur í móti atgeirinum og kom á Egil miðjan. Gunnar vegur hann upp á atgeirinum og kastar honum út á Rangá.

Þá mælti Starkaður: 'Alls vesall ert þú Þórir austmaður er þú situr hjá en nú er veginn Egill húsbóndi þinn og mágur.' Þá spratt upp Austmaðurinn og var reiður mjög. Hjörtur hafði orðið tveggja manna bani. Austmaðurinn hleypur að honum og höggur framan á brjóstið og þar á hol. Hjörtur féll þá þegar dauður niður. Gunnar sér þetta og varpar

sér skjótt til höggs við Austmanninn og sníður hann í sundur í miðju. Litlu síðar skýtur Gunnar til Barkar atgeirinum og kom á hann miðjan og í gegnum hann og niður í völlinn. Þá höggur Kolskeggur höfuð af Hauki Egilssyni en Gunnar höggur hönd af Óttari í olbogabót.

Þá mælti Starkaður: 'Flyjum nú, ekki er við menn um að eiga.' Gunnar mælti: 'Það mun ykkur feðgum þykja illt til frásagnar ef ekki skal mega sjá á ykkur að þið hafið í bardaga verið.' Síðan hljóp Gunnar að þeim feðgum og veitti þeim áverka. Eftir það skildu þeir og höfðu þeir Gunnar marga þá særða er undan héldu. Á fundinum létust fjórtán menn en Hjörtur hinn fimmtándi. Gunnar reiddi Hjört heim á skildi sínum og var hann þar heygður. Margir menn hörmuðu hann því að hann var vinsæll. (pp. 198-199 / ch. 63)

At the first glance, the outset of the fight makes it indeed hard to believe that Gunnarr, Kolskeggr and Hjörtr would stand any chance against their enemies. Thirty against three is an overwhelming superiority in numbers. That the heroes are not only able to drive the attackers away, but even to kill fourteen of them and injure several others, seems hardly realistic. And yet, though the martial abilities of Gunnarr and his companions are hard to believe, they are different from what we have seen of Rémundr keisarason, or Egill Einhendi.

Three against thirty is unrealistic, but it is a numerical ratio that we at least can grasp and imagine, and thus unlike the killing of hundreds in the 'knightly mode of combat'. At Knafahólar, the dynamics of the fight go back and forth, when attack is followed by counterattack. This is very different from the monodirectional fighting in, e. g., *Rémundar saga keisarasonar*, where the hero drives the helpless enemies before him.

Rather than facing the enemy in open combat, Gunnarr decides to await the attackers on higher ground. This correct tactical assessment of the battlefield is key to his survival and (partial) success. Gaining advantage by superior positioning is a fundamental concept of combat, as any look into the history of warfare will show. Gunnarr cannot allow himself to simply face the enemy head on, like a protagonist of the 'knightly mode of combat' would do. He needs to tip the fight in his favour, well aware how dangerous the encounter will be. Such an action is also very different from the ideas about how to overcome a superior enemy force in the 'adventurous mode of combat'. There, the heroes resort to trickery and deceit in the style of legendary or mythic narration, and use tactics that may be entertaining to the saga's audience, but are wholly implausible. Examples discussed before were the construction of a trap from cow-hide to kill the demon bull of *Bosa saga ok Herrauds*, or the treacherous blinding of the cave giant in *Egils saga einhenda ok*

Ásmundar berserkjabana. While in the ‘adventurous mode of combat’ these tricks usually decide the fight for the hero definitely, Gunnarr can hope for nothing more than an improvement of his chances.

However, such an improvement can change the outcome of a fight more or less dramatically. Thinking of actual military history, the famous battle of three hundred Spartans against the Persian army at the Thermopyles is the example *par excellence* for superior tactical positioning. Bearing this in mind, and assuming that Gunnarr indeed was able to choose a good defensive position, the ratio three to thirty becomes a little bit less unrealistic. The position allows him to fire at the enemy with his bow before close quarter combat ensues, while Kolskeggr uses a stone as missile. The companions employ long range weapons as long as possible, to make up for their inferiority in numbers: *Gunnar varði sig með boganum meðan hann mátti. Síðan kastaði hann niður boganum.* (p. 198 / ch. 63) However, the defensive position still leaves room for the enemy to attack and take advantage of their own strengths. Unlike the noble warriors of *Rémundar saga keisarasonar*, who turn a battle into a series of mounted duels, Starkaðr’s men are not shy of unfair tactics: *Þorgeir mælti þá við bræður sína: ‘Hlaupum vér að honum fram allir senn. Hann hefir engan skjöld og munum vér hafa ráð hans í hendi.’* (p. 198 / ch. 63) In reality, when one’s own life is at stake, ‘unfair’ equals ‘sensible’.

The fight at Knafahólar has a potential consequence for Gunnarr and his companions that neither the heroes of the ‘knightly’ nor of the ‘adventurous mode of combat’ usually have to face: being killed. While Kolskeggr’s leg is pierced with a spear, Hjörtr receives a deadly wound to the chest. The simple fact that armed fighting can lead to death reminds us of the ‘heroic mode of combat’. But Hjörtr’s death at Knafahólar is far more prosaic – and therefore more realistic – than the deaths of *Völsunga saga*’s protagonists. Neither does it take the god Óðinn to cut him down – an angry Norwegian is enough –, nor is he allowed to prove his courage in captivity and torture. One undefended blow, and Hjörtr’s fate is sealed.

Although the saga says that the fight is *hinn harðasti* (p. 198 / 63), we do not get the impression of two opponents standing front to front and hacking at each other endlessly, like we read in *Egils saga einhenda*. At Knafahólar, only few manoeuvres are necessary to end an encounter between two fighters. This is one of the main reasons why the scene from *Njáls saga* reads far more plausible than the combat scenes of the three ‘fabulous modes’. When two armed people enter striking range with the firm intent to injure each

other, it usually takes only a few seconds until one or both are hit. With bladed weapons and without heavy armour, this means the end of the fight.

It is furthermore worth to take a detailed look at some of the wounds that Gunnarr deals to his opponents during the encounter, and how he inflicts them.

The first victim is Sigurðr Svinhǫfði, who is shot in the eye by Gunnarr. Even though he is quick enough to raise his shield against the shot, this cannot help him, and the arrow goes right through it. It should be noted that the author described the shield as a *törguskjöld einbyrðan* (p. 198 / ch. 63). This may either refer to a shield made from a single board, in contrast to a *tvíbyrðr* shield (Falk, 1914, p. 129), or maybe to a shield that was made with less care, and that lacks additional layers of leather, rawhide or textile. As experimental archaeology has shown, the protective value of a shield is dependent not only on the wooden planks used, but also on the leather or linen cover that is usually applied, if time and resources allow. Such a cover dramatically raises a shield's ability to withstand penetration by incoming blows and missiles. (Short, 2009, p. 41)⁸⁷ Even though the shot seems unlikely, sending an arrow through the uncovered shield is definitely not beyond the possible, and an audience accustomed to medieval weapon technique will notice the flaw in Sigurðr's armament. The next two missiles, an arrow and a thrown stone, are well aimed, but not exceptional. They hit two of the attackers in the body and the head, respectively.

After Kol's death, Egill turns against Gunnarr: *hleypur hann að Gunnari og höggur til hans* (p. 199 / ch. 63), while Gunnar *leggur í móti atgeirinum og kom á Egil miðjan*. (p. 199 / ch. 63) It makes sense to imagine this quick encounter literally: Egill with his weapon raised high, Gunnarr answering this with a thrust to the body, before Egill can bring down his blow. It is one of the main problems for beginners in sword or stick fighting to learn the proper coordination of strike, step and distance. In correct application, the strike should lead the movement of the body, so that the weapon covers the fighter while closing the distance. But the human body has an urge to be in balance before generating force. This means that less trained fighters very often step into their opponent's striking range, plant their feet, and only then deliver their strike. This behaviour can be observed especially when a beginner does several steps before the actual attack. The result is an opening that can be exploited by an experienced opponent, exactly like Gunnarr does with Egill. On the

⁸⁷ For a discussion of the construction of high medieval shields, see the collected articles in Augustyn and Beuing (forthcoming).

other hand, it is hardly plausible that Gunnarr should be able to lift Egill with his weapon and throw him into the river – *Gunnar vegur hann upp á atgeirinum og kastar honum út á Rangá* (p. 199 / ch. 63) –, especially if he is still holding the *atgeirr* in one hand, the sword in the other. But the lifting implies that he had countered Egill's attack with a thrust to the body, which makes perfect sense in this context.

Þórir is killed when Gunnarr *varpar sér skjótt til höggs við Austmanninn* (p. 199 / ch. 63) and cuts him in two. It may be hard, but not impossible to bisect a human body with a single blow of an edged polearm. As we read in an account from the 14th century, written down by historian Johann of Winterthur: *Habebant quoque Switenses in manibus quedam instrumenta occisionis gesa in vulgari illo appellata helnbartam, valde terribilia, quibus adversarios firmissime armatos quasi cum novacula diviserunt et in frusta conciderunt.* (Baethgen & Brun, 1924, pp. 79–80) In the discussion of the motif of the *Schwabenstreich* in *Rémundar saga keisarason*, we saw that such devastating blows are of course ideally suited as literary tools. But we also found that the exaggeration lies not so much in the fact that Rémundr cuts an enemy into two pieces, but that he does it every single time he strikes at someone. And it would be wrong to dismiss an account like that of Johannes Vitoduranus entirely as medieval fantasy. In his “Swordsmen of the British Empire”, D. A. Kinsley collected hundreds of first hands accounts of British soldiers mostly from the 19th century, who had witnessed the effects of edged weapons used in combat. (Kinsley, 2013) His quote from a cavalry officer summarizes the many accounts in one sentence: "We could name many who were almost cleft in two by the sharp, drawing sabre cut". (Kinsley, 2013, p. 83) Reports like the following can be found in the dozens:

From a skirmish in Afghanistan:

The Beloochee, turning round to see what threatened him, his bare neck became exposed; and the sowar seizing the opportunity thus contrived, with one furious stroke of his heavy sword, severed his head from his body. (Kinsley, 2013, p. 63)

Or, from the Crimean war:

Some fearful sabre cuts were discovered. I saw one (Russian) man with his head cloven to the chin, through helmet and all, so that the head appeared in two flaps; another with his arm lopped off, as if it had been done with a butcher's cleaver; and a third having a deep gash in the brain from behind, severing the head nearly in two; and yet this unfortunate man was alive, and several times sat up in great agony actually holding his head together with both hands. (Kinsley, 2013, p. 284)

There might be exaggerations in these accounts, for sure. But the sheer number of examples that Kinsley has collected, their historic and geographic diversity, and the different backgrounds of the men who reported them forbid to neglect them collectively as made-up horror stories. If we rule out the idea that complete generations of British military intended to shock their fellow countrymen at home with invented tall tales about gore and mutilation, Kinsley's collection is proof that the *Íslendingasögur's* descriptions of decapitation and dismemberment are indeed possible.⁸⁸

It has been discussed what type of weapon the *atgeirr* Gunnarr uses exactly was. A compilation of the relevant Old Norse sources suggests a form of polearm, with a long shaft and a blade suitable for both thrust and cut. The Anglo-Saxon equivalent *ætgār* is called *falarica*, *hasta grandis*, or *lancea magna* in glosses (Falk, 1914, pp. 82–83), which rather hints at a huge spear than at a halberd, the latter being sometimes found as a translation for *atgeirr*.⁸⁹ A detailed discussion of the nature of Gunnarr's *atgeirr* has been provided by Jan H. Orkisz, who also came to the conclusion that “the best option for the *atgeirr* of the sagas, given its use, would be a large hewing spear, probably with wings.” (Orkisz, 2016, p. 192) In any case, the *atgeirr*-wielding Gunnarr is set apart from the other combatants by the unusual weapon, which becomes his trademark, and a synonym for his violent potential: ‘*Þá er við finnumst næst skalt þú sjá atgeirinn*’ (p. 187 / ch. 53), Gunnarr threatens Otkel. The weapon's ‘singing’ reflects its owner's agitated emotional state:

- *Hann tók skjöld sinn og gyrti sig sverðinu Ölvisnaut, setur hjálm á höfuð sér, tekur atgeirinn og söng í honum hátt og heyrði Rannveig móðir hans. Hún gekk fram og mælti: ‘Reiðulegur ert þú nú son minn og ekki sá eg þig slíkan fyrr.’* (p. 188 / ch. 54)
- *Rannveig gekk til stofu. Þar var háreysti mikið. ‘Hátt kveðið þér,’ segir hún, ‘en þó lét hærra atgeirinn er Gunnar gekk út.’ Gunnar mælti til þeirra: ‘Nú er að verja sig. Er hér nú atgeirinn.’* (p. 189 / ch. 54)

At Knafahólar, Gunnarr uses the *atgeirr* to its full potential: He thrusts (vs. Egill), cuts (vs. Þórir), and finally throws it against Björk, driving the whole length of the *atgeirr* through the

88 For some very graphic evidence what damages edged weapons can do to a body, one can also take a look at the advertisement clips of the U.S. Knife and sword company *Cold Steel*, whose owners regularly demonstrate their weapons' cutting power on dead animals, and on ballistic torsos (dummies developed for forensics and firearm testing). Such testing might be rather tasteless, but it absolutely supports the realism of the weapon effects described by the sagas. See www.coldsteel.com (accessed 30. MAR 2016).

89 Halberds are a development of High Medieval military technology, although there is evidence for early predecessors in 9th century Switzerland, see Gessler (1928, pp. 140–141). When the Swiss fought the Austrians in 1315, their armament with halberds was a *novum* for their enemies, and it took its time until weapons of this type were common throughout Europe.

enemy's body. The three consequent manoeuvres are not assembled randomly, but put one after the other to demonstrate Gunnar's complete mastery of the weapon. Literary exaggeration can be seen in the maximum effect he accomplishes with every strike. But the handling in itself, the techniques he uses, make perfect sense. An audience with an understanding of armed combat may be entertained by Gunnar's almost superhuman strength, but most of all, it will be impressed by his technical skill, and will be able to picture his moves before the inner eye.

This skill culminates in Gunnar's parallel use of two weapons at the same time, the *atgeirr* in the one hand, and a sword in the other. Fighting with two weapons demands, most of all, very good coordination, a coordination that has to be acquired by training. A lack of it equals the danger to get entangled in one's own weapons, and to hit the own arm or hand. Beginners are often more hampered than empowered by a second weapon.⁹⁰ If it is correct that the *atgeirr* is to be understood as a huge weapon normally intended for double handed use, proper coordination has to be accompanied in Gunnar's case by great physical strength. Furthermore, the simultaneous use of *atgeirr* and sword does not allow him to carry a shield. The protective value of a shield cannot be overestimated, and the lack of it has to be made up for by even greater fencing skill. The saga articulates this explicitly: '*Hann hefir engan skjöld og munum vér hafa ráð hans í hendi.*' (p. 198 / ch. 63) Of course, it soon turns out that the opposite is true.

Gunnar's actions demonstrate that the author of *Njáls saga* possessed a very clear understanding of human movement in combat. It is not far-fetched to assume that the same was true for at least parts of his intended audience. One of the most remarkable indicators for this knowledge can easily be missed by a superficial reading: *Sér hann þá til annarrar handar Þorkel standa í höggfæri við sig. Gunnar stóð nokkuð höllum fæti. Hann sveiflaði þá til sverðinu og kom á hálsinn Þorkatli og fauk af höfuðið.* (p. 198 / ch. 63)

Had the author only cared about the mayhem Gunnar creates, it would have sufficed to describe the beheading of Þorkell. But by having Gunnar shift his weight first so that he *stóð nokkuð höllum fæti*, he showed his awareness of the dynamics of movement. Let us assume Gunnar wields the *atgeirr* in his right hand. He deals a full power strike against Björk's sword, sending it flying through the air. When he realizes he is being attacked from

⁹⁰ The most common combination of two weapons (the various forms of shields not included) in Europe was rapier and dagger. Several fencing manuals describe their use. The coordination of two weapons designed primarily for thrusting may not be easy, but is significantly *easier* and less dangerous for oneself to perform than with weapons tending towards the slash. In modern times, simultaneous use of two weapons is, e. g., taught in the martial arts of the Philippines, of Okinawa, and some Japanese sword fighting styles.

behind, he turns counterclockwise and strikes immediately. To do so, he needs to lift his weight from the left foot to gain freedom for the turning, and to generate striking power. He leans his upper body over his right foot, raises his left foot, and plants it to a new position. This allows for a rotation of the upper body and a shifting of the weight from the right to the left foot. In a motion like this, the whole body, combined with a twisting of the hip, will pull the sword into an very powerful strike.⁹¹ The natural angle of such a backhand strike will be a horizontal or a shallow diagonal, depending on the starting position of the sword. On a backhand horizontal strike, the hand can pull the sword over a significant way, thus making for a combination of a hacking first contact, followed by a long cut. We might credit the beheading of Þorkell to literary exaggeration. But on the other hand, we could ask the question: If a fighter cannot chop off the head of a standing enemy with this strike, with which other strike then?

If the fight at Knafahólar is realistic on a micro level – that is, in the description of individual movement and fencing technique –, the same is true on the macro level. Setting and course of the confrontation follow typical patterns of the dynamics of violence; patterns that evolve as a combination of emotional stress and battle tactics.

Violence has a fundamental tendency towards imbalance. The ‘fair fight’ needs to be constructed ritually – in judicial combat, in a duel, in tournaments, sports and competitions –, while unregulated violence seeks to construct a hierarchical imbalance between the participants. That means that the roles of agent and victim are usually dealt out before physical contact is made. The development of weaponry as well as the whole concept of strategy are nothing but attempts to gain ‘unfair’ advantage over the enemy. From the ‘sucker punch’ of a pub brawl to the drone attacks of 21st century warfare, the basic aim of combat is not to fight, but to win.

Of course, social values like ‘honour’ and ‘manliness’, dominating the code of warrior ethics, can alter this underlying principle. *Njáls saga* reflects this when Gunnarr decides, against all odds, to take up the fight against Starkaðr and his men: *‘Hvað skal nú til ráðs taka?’ segir Kolskeggur. ‘Eg get að þú viljir eigi renna undan þeim.’ ‘Ekki skulu þeir að því eiga að spotta,’ segir Gunnarr.* (p. 198 / ch. 62) But as history has shown, neither Christian chivalry, nor Japanese *bushido*, nor any other ideological system has ever truly eradicated

91 For a better understanding, imagine the movement of a baseball player when swinging the bat, combined with a turning.

the fundamental human urge to combine a maximum of safety for oneself with a maximum of danger for the enemy when the own life is at stake. As Randall Collins analysed:

The prevailing mythology about fights may be summed up in the formula that the fighters are brave, competent, and evenly matched. [...] The reality is almost entirely the opposite. Fighters are mostly fearful and incompetent in their exercise of violence; when they are evenly matched, they tend to be particularly incompetent. It is when the strong attack the weak that most violence is successful. (Collins, 2008, pp. 39–40)

In the small scale skirmishing of the *Íslendingasögur*, the ambush – or at least: the swift, unexpected attack – is therefore standard, as is typical for societies of low military organization:

[A]n attack on isolated or weak members of the tribe [is] more effective. [...] In addition to full-scale battle confrontations, tribes also engage in raiding, attempting to surprise a village, especially when the fighting men are away; or they may engage in ambushes. When tribal fighters have the advantage over defenseless enemies, they often massacre them. [...] The biggest incidents of violence happen where opposing sides are very unmatched in strength. (Collins, 2008, p. 41)

Beginning and end of the fight at Knafahólar fit neatly to the outlines of unorganized, small scale combat described by Collins. The attackers ambush their victims, and they massively outnumber them. When the events turn against Starkaðr and his men, they take to flight, while Gunnarr and Kolskeggr pursue and wound several of them. It seems to be psychologically significantly easier to wound or kill an enemy who is fleeing than to attack someone face to face.⁹²

When the integrity of a line crumbles or a rout occurs, the dynamic of killing is rapidly altered and the ability to kill opponents increases exponentially as the chase instinct takes effect. While posturing, fighting or even submission have a direct engagement with the enemy, flight has a negative relationship as the engagement is broken and the killing distance consequently increased. Add to this the impersonal aspect of not being able to see an opponent's face or eyes and the fact that a human-being's offensive capabilities are geared towards the front of the body – a fleeing opponent is somewhat de-personalised and does not represent a direct threat. (Molloy & Grossman, 2007, p. 200)

Thus, not only Starkaðr's tactics are plausible, but also Gunnarr's and Kolskeggr's reaction, as it reflects typical human behaviour: “[T]he ‘excitement’ at seeing the enemy fleeing when in a heightened physiological state is likely to trigger instinctive midbrain responses of pursuit.” (Molloy & Grossman, 2007, p. 201) This corresponds to the patterns of forward panic and overkill which Collins demonstrates to be common for the final phase of violent situations. (Collins, 2008, pp. 83–112)

⁹² Of course, it is also technically easier, but this is not a surprising insight.

Is this supposed to mean that we can read the fight at Knafahólar, or even all of *Njáls saga's* combat scenes, as faithful, accurate depiction of armed combat? Certainly not. As pointed out before, Gunnarr's perfection in fighting and his strength are beyond what normal men can hope to achieve, as the saga states explicitly: *Þá mælti Starkaður: 'Flýjum nú, ekki er við menn um að eiga.'* (p. 199 / ch. 63) But we must be aware that, while his level of skill may be beyond the ordinary, his movements are not. On the contrary: For those trained in fighting, Gunnarr's techniques and tactics are familiar, and an informed audience can easily imagine how he defeated his enemies. The 'factual' description of combat demonstrated in the scene is thus very different from that of the 'knightly' or the 'adventurous mode of combat': Though not necessarily 'realistic' in the narrow sense, it parallels experiences gathered either in martial arts training and/or actual combat.⁹³ We have little information about the exact circumstances under which sagas were read out loud, but we could imagine how, during the recital, the reader-narrator mimicked such combat movements found in the text.

However, in sharp contrast to this plausible rendering of the physical side of combat stands the lack of realism where the psychology of violence is concerned. Even in the face of their potential death, the combatants do not react with any recognizable emotional stress. They get angry when called a coward – *Þá spratt upp Austmaðurinn og var reiður mjög* (p. 199 / ch. 63) –, or decide for retreat when they feel their case is lost. But they show almost none of the behavioural patterns typical for humans in combat.

When Collins analysed the “confrontational tension” and fear a person faces even *before* he or she commits an act of violence, he came to the conclusion that not only being attacked, but also attacking another human being is connected with severe emotional stress:

Despite their bluster, and even in situations of apparently uncontrollable anger, people are tense and often fearful in the immediate threat of violence - including their own violence; this is the emotional dynamic that determines what they will do if fighting actually breaks out. (Collins, 2008, p. 8)

Most of the times, such emotional stress leads to panic, to senseless and repetitive behaviour, and to overkill. And it seems that only a small percentage of combatants – even

⁹³ This reminds us of modern action movies: the number of opponents and the protagonist's superiority may be exaggerated, but the techniques used are taken from (mainly Eastern) martial arts, and directors, actors, fight choreographers as well as audience are aware of this.

of those trained for combat – are able to confine and control the stress. (Collins, 2008, p. 448)⁹⁴

On the level of the individual combatant, Barry Molloy and Dave Grossman have described the physiological reactions to combat, where a rising heart rate combines with a shift from rational to instinctive action:

As conflict-induced physiological responses increase in intensity, the forebrain becomes less involved in decision making processes, and the midbrain begins to take control of bodily operation. The midbrain performs extensive reflexive processes, whereas the forebrain, ‘the thinking part’, performs basic thought processes including abstract reasoning or problem solving. The midbrain can be described as the instinctive, animal-like aspect of our consciousness. It is not concerned with morals, etiquette, bravery, cowardice or strategy – it is concerned with survival. (Molloy & Grossman, 2007, p. 191)

And they argue that these reactions are an anthropological constant:

It can be shown that there are many aspects to violence which are best interpreted as inherent to our species, whether dealing with a post-Enlightenment or prehistoric warrior. It is certainly true that the social conditioning of a professional soldier of the twentieth century dramatically diverges from that of a Bronze Age one. Yet they are physiologically the same species and subject to the same instinctive response mechanisms. (Molloy & Grossman, 2007, p. 190)

It is very likely that a medieval Icelander would have shown the same reactions to combat stress that Collins, Molloy and Grossman describe. However, this is not the case for the protagonists of *Njáls saga*. Everyone who has ever been in a fight, or witnessed one, feels that the behaviour of the combatants at Knafahólar is quite abnormal.

There, all of the fighters are competent in using violence. Which does not refer to their respective technical skill in handling their weapons, nor to the success of their actions, but to the simple fact that they do what they are supposed to do – attacking the enemy in all-out close quarter combat. As Collins notes (Collins, 2008, pp. 43–59), in combative situations with potentially lethal outcome and a lack of a firm, socially constructed framework,⁹⁵ usually a high percentage of fighters is acting ineffectively – panicking, freezing, fleeing, etc. No such reaction is referred in the scene; all of the combatants dare

94 The results of Collins' research hold also valuable information for Old Norse studies, namely, when the historical background of the *berserkr* is discussed. There is no reason to assume ritual intoxication by mushrooms, pain-induced trance, or even epileptic fits as basis of their combat effectiveness. Being often depicted as the elite warriors in a military leader's *hirð*, the early historical *berserkrs* were most likely nothing more and nothing less than those men forming the “violent few” of their community, who were actively and competently engaging in violence. (Collins (2008, pp. 370–374)) Their appearance and actions may have incorporated notion of the wild, beast-like, or mad. But these were secondary factors, the *habitus*, but not the precondition of belonging to this elite.

95 E. g., the framework provided by judicial combat.

to enter close range, and try to kill their enemies. Even the Norwegian Þórir, though reluctant at first, attacks without hesitation once he enters the fight.

On the other hand, neither Gunnarr, nor his companions or enemies show the restricted communicative abilities that are typical for combat stress. They do not shout at each other, nor do they fall into repeating the same phrases over and over again (another common behaviour⁹⁶). Instead, they remain true to the matter-of-fact mode of communication that is so typical for the *Íslendingasögur*, including some laconic comments on the violence that is happening: *‘Þess galt eg nú,’ segir Kolur, ‘er eg var berskjaldaður’ og stóð nokkura stund á hinn fótinn og leit á stúfinn. Kolskeggur mælti: ‘Eigi þarft þú að líta á, jafnt er sem þér sýnist, af er fóturinn.’* (p. 199 / ch. 63)

It can be argued that this unimpressed mode of communication is dependent on the overall, often dry tone of the saga, and the way its protagonists interact. But it also reminds us of the mental attitudes portrayed by the ‘heroic mode of combat’: calmness and even sarcasm in the face of an armed enemy. The heroic determination to take the fight to very end results in the huge number of fatalities: *Á fundinum létust fjórtán menn en Hjörtur hinn fimmtándi.* (p. 199 / ch. 63) When Starkaðr finally decides to flee, it is too late for many of his men. But also the hero's side is vulnerable (Hjörtr dies), another parallel to the ‘heroic mode’. Such similarities underline Ólason's remark: “The strongest influence behind them [the *Íslendingasögur*] was the traditional heroic tale which in turn was an amalgamation of heroic song and historical tale or legend.” (Ólason, 2007, p. 45)

b) The fight on the ice

The second fight scene Ólason referred to as incredible and unrealistic is the famous fight of the sons of Njáll and their brother in law, Kári, against Þráinn and his men:

Lambi Sigurðarson mælti: ‘Skildir blika við í Rauðaskriðum er sólin skín á og mun þar vera nokkurra manna fyrirsát.’ ‘Þá skulum vér snúa ofan með fljótinu,’ segir Þráinn, ‘og munu þeir þá til móts við oss ef þeir eiga við oss nokkur erindi.’ Sneru þeir Þráinn þá ofan með fljótinu. Skarphédinn mælti: ‘Nú hafa þeir séð oss, því snúa þeir nú

96 A noteworthy modern example of repetitive yelling as part of combat stress could be witnessed on February 18th 2012. At a press conference after a match between heavy weight boxers Vitali Klitschko and Dereck Chisora, a fight broke out between Chisora and David Haye, another heavy weight boxer who was attending the conference in the audience. The two men's movements did only loosely resemble the techniques of sports boxing, and Haye attacked Chisora with a bottle. Chisora began to yell repetitively: “He glassed me, he glassed, he fucking glassed me, he glassed me...” As the episode showed, not even athletes belonging to the world's elite of combat sports are immune against the typical symptoms of combat stress, once they have to fight outside of their accustomed framework. For a footage of the brawl, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tT1pXRa0GFQ> (accessed 30. APR 2016).

leiðinni og er oss nú engi annar til en hlaupa ofan fyrir þá.' Kári mælti: 'Margir munu fyrir sitja og hafa eigi þann veg liðsmun sem vér. Eru þeir átta en vér fimm.' Snúa þeir nú og ofan með fljótinu og sjá yfir spöng niðri og ætla þar yfir. Þeir Þráinn námu staðar upp frá spönginni á ísinum. Þráinn mælti: 'Hvað munu menn þessir vilja? Þeir eru fimm en vér erum átta.' Lambi Sigurðarson mælti: 'Þess get eg að þó mundu þeir til hætta þó að manni stæði fleira fyrir.' Þráinn fer af kápunni og tekur af sér hjálminn.

Það varð Skarphédni er þeir hljópu ofan með fljótinu að stökk í sundur skópvengur hans og dvaldist honum eftir. 'Hví hvikast þér svo Skarphédinn?' kvað Grímur. 'Bind eg skó minn,' segir Skarphédinn. 'Förum vér fyrir,' segir Kári, 'svo list mér á Skarphédin sem hann muni ekki seinni verða en vér.' Snúa þeir nú ofan til spangarinnar og fara mikinn. Skarphédinn spratt upp þegar er hann hafði bundið skóinn og hafði uppi öxina Rimmugýgi. Hann hleypur að fram að fljótinu en fljótið var svo djúpt að langt var um ófært. Mikið svell var hlaupið upp fyrir austan fljótið og svo hált sem gler og stóðu þeir Þráinn á miðju svellinu. Skarphédinn hefur sig á loft og hleypur yfir fljótið meðal höfuðisa og stöðvar sig ekki og rennir þegar af fram fótskriðu. Svellið var hált mjög og fór hann svo hart sem fugl flygi. Þráinn ætlaði í því að setja á sig hjálminn. Skarphédin bar nú upp að fyrr og höggur til Þráins með öxinni Rimmugýgi og kom í höfuðið og klauf ofan í jaxlana svo að þeir féllu niður á ísinn. Þessi atburður varð með svo skjótri svipan að engi kom höggvi á hann. Hann renndi þegar frá ofan óðfluga. Tjörvi renndi fyrir hann törgu og stöðjaði hann yfir upp og stóðst þó og rennir á enda svellsins. Þá koma þeir Kári að neðan í mót honum.

'Karlmannlega er að farið,' segir Kári. 'Eftir er enn yðvar hluti,' segir Skarphédinn. Snúa þeir þá upp að þeim. Þeir Grímur og Helgi sjá hvar Hrappur var og sneru þegar að honum. Hrappur höggur þegar til Gríms með öxinni. Helgi sér þetta og höggur á höndina Hrappi svo að af tók en niður féll öxin. Hrappur mælti: 'Hér hefir þú mikið nauðsynjaverk unnið því að þessi hönd hefir mörgum manni mein gert og bana.' 'Hér skal nú endir á verða,' segir Grímur og leggur spjóti í gegnum hann. Hrappur féll þá dauður niður. Tjörvi snýr í móti Kára og skýtur að honum spjóti. Kári hljóp í loft upp og flaug spjótið fyrir neðan fætur honum. Kári hleypur að honum og höggur til hans með sverðinu og kom á brjóstið og gekk þegar á hol og hafði hann þegar bana.

Skarphédinn grípur þá báða senn, Gunnar Lambason og Grana Gunnarsson, og mælti: 'Tekið hefi eg hér hvelpa tvo eða hvað skal við gera?' 'Kost átt þú,' segir Helgi, 'að drepa hvorntveggja ef þú vilt þá feiga.' 'Eigi nenni eg,' segir Skarphédinn, 'að hafa það saman að veita Högna en drepa bróður hans.' 'Koma mun þar einu hverju sinni,' segir Helgi, 'að þú mundir vilja hafa drepið þá því að þeir munu þér aldrei trúir verða og engi þeirra er nú eru hér.' 'Ekki mun eg hræðast þá,' segir Skarphédinn. Síðan gáfu þeir grið Grana Gunnarssyni og Gunnari Lambasyni og Lamba Sigurðarsyni og Loðni. (p. 236-237 / ch. 92)

The ratio of numbers – five against eight – seems not as bad for Njáll's relatives as it did for Gunnar and his friends at Knafahólar. Again, many of the details given in the text can be understood as accurate descriptions of armed combat:

On a tactical level, both parties act sensibly. Njáll's sons and Kári try to surprise their enemies with an ambush. Þráinn's group spots them, and consequently changes to a

better position for defence. Once the fight has started, the saga refers to some fundamental concepts of weapon combat. It speaks of speed and distance – *Þessi atburður varð með svo skjótri svipan að engi kom höggvi á hann.* (p. 236 / ch. 92) –, describes the interception of an incoming blow by attacking the weapon hand,⁹⁷ and has the combatants killed by quick and direct actions that are not exaggerated (Hrappr dies from a spear thrust, Tjörvi from a blow to the chest with the sword).

On the other hand, the scene sounds far more unrealistic than the fight at Knafahólar, mainly due to the ‘ice-skating action’. Obviously, a deed like this has to be considered impossible, or at least far beyond the plausible. Even if Skarpheðinn (who is not wearing skates, but his normal shoes) was able to slide long and fast enough to accomplish it, hitting a man on his way would inevitably turn his body and bring him off his course. Already before Skarpheðinn's initiative, the saga marks the sequence as being beyond the plausible: His friends split up the group and advance on the enemy, while he is still binding his shoe laces – tactically stupid, and psychologically hardly believable. On the other hand, the scene shows the saga author's interest in the depiction of dynamic movement. Skarpheðinn's speed is expressed several times in a row: *[F]ór hann svo hart sem fugl flygi, Skarphéðinn bar nú upp að fyrr*, everything happens *með svo skjótri svipan*, and *[h]ann renndi þegar frá ofan óðfluga*. Then, when Tjörvi throws the shield to make him fall, he jumps over it and *stóðst þó.* (p. 236 / ch. 92, all quotes) We can imagine how Skarpheðinn struggles to keep his balance.

Turning our attention away from Skarpheðinn, the next remarkable feat in the scene is Kári's evasion of a thrown spear. He jumps over it, which, depending on the height of the incoming projectile, may or may not be realistic.

On a psychological level, the scene shows the same emotional detachment from the stress of combat that we have seen at the fight at Knafahólar. When Hrappr's hand is chopped off, he remarks drierly: *‘Hér hefir þú mikið nauðsynjaverk unnið því að þessi hönd hefir mörgum manni mein gert og bana.’* And Grímr answers coldly: *‘Hér skal nú endir á verða,’* before he kills him with a spear. (p. 237 / ch. 92)

⁹⁷ Attacking the weapon hand is a key concept in many blade fighting systems. European *Fechtbücher* demonstrate in vivid images how to chop off the enemy's hand; in Japanese *kendo*, the wrist (Jap.: *kote*) is one of the main targets in competition; many Filipino fencing systems lay great emphasis on the precise hitting of the opponent's weapon arm.

c) Patterns of the 'factual mode of combat' as presented in *Njáls saga* – preliminary assessment

What patterns can be deduced from the two fight scenes, regarding their realism?

On a tactical level, the combatants of both scenes behave sensibly. They try to improve their chances by ambush, by positioning, by the use of long range weapons, and by the attack in larger number. When a risky decision is made in the prelude of a fight, the saga makes this explicit: Gunnarr is forced by his sense of honour to take up the fight against a superior number, while in the second scene, both parties are aware that it is unusual to attack in inferior number: *Kári mælti: 'Margir munu fyrir sitja og hafa eigi þann veg liðsmun sem vér. Eru þeir átta en vér fimm.'* [...] *Þráinn mælti: 'Hvað munu menn þessir vilja? Þeir eru fimm en vér erum átta.'* (p. 236 / ch. 92)

On a physical level, most of the combatants' movements are plausible descriptions of actual fighting technique, and fit modern day knowledge of medieval armament and martial arts. They can be very precise, as in the case of Gunnarr shifting his weight to attack an enemy in his rear, and betray the author's understanding for close quarter combat. The inflicted wounds are severe, but easily within the range of damage that bladed weapons do to a human body. On the other hand, both scenes feature actions that are indeed incredible – in the case of Skarpheðinn's ice-skating, to an almost comical degree.

On a physiological and psychological level, the scenes contradict typical human combat behaviour. With the exception of the Norwegian Þórir, all of the combatants enter the fighting without hesitation, show no signs of panic, and use their weapons appropriately. Their situational judgement is not flawed, they keep awareness of their surrounding, and remain able to verbalize both the ongoing fight and even severe wounds in laconic remarks. In a word: They have full self control, when extreme emotional agitation would be natural to expect. As mentioned before, detached reactions to emotional stress are, of course, typical for the *Íslendingasögur*. During the combat scenes, however, the discrepancy between situation and reaction becomes the most obvious.

As one can see, Ólason's assessment that the two analysed scenes are "incredible, unrealistic" (Ólason, 2007, p. 41) is only partly correct. Concerning Skarpheðinn's stunt, it may be true that "it is not likely that any of the saga's readers had actually seen anything like it" (Ólason, 2007, p. 41). But the exact opposite can be assumed for many of the less spectacular details. In fact, the more understanding the saga's audience had for combat,

the bigger their enjoyment in the reception of the scenes would have been. For someone alien to the field of physical fighting, the exaggerated moments will eclipse these illuminating details.

The hypothetical outlines of the assumed 'factual mode of combat' as presented in *Njáls saga* can be deduced from the two scenes:

(I) Realistic description of combat tactics

combine with

(II) mostly realistic fighting techniques

and an

(III) unrealistic level of self control.

(IV) The overall realism of the physical action is compromised by exaggerated features that play with the 'almost possible' (victory over a far larger number of enemies, incredibly spectacular manoeuvres). These exaggerated features may eclipse the rest of the scene and prove especially memorable.

A scene that follows these four characteristics is rich in vivid, exact details that can be easily visualized before one's inner eye. Together, they construct a consistent picture.

If one wants to assume an oral tradition behind (at least some of) the combat scenes, it may be considered if it were not especially the exaggerated features which served as the nucleus of a scene. Quite likely, the exaggerations drew the attention of both narrators and audience, and were well suited to be handed down orally. Smaller, realistic details, on the other hand, are much more arbitrary and could be designed freely by an author. The exaggerated parts not only mark a scene's narrative core, the point that will be remembered and referred to, but are also especially suited to be transformed into visual media – compare the various depictions of Skaphéðinn's ice-skating. And they are the reason why authors like Ólason classified the two scenes discussed above as on the whole incredible and unrealistic, when actually only parts of them are.

In the next step, we will have to examine if the four postulated characteristics of the assumed 'factual mode of combat', deduced from only two scenes, can also be applied on a larger scale. To do so, we will now discuss the total of *Njáls saga's* combat scenes. After that, combat scenes of other classical *Íslendingasögur* will be compared.

7.4. The combat scenes of *Njáls saga*

a) A systematic overview

All in all, *Njáls saga* includes 46⁹⁸ combat scenes. Some of them could rather be called ‘murder scenes’, as they describe how men are slain without a chance to defend themselves. At least two of the scenes – the fight at the *alþingi* and the Battle of Clontarf – are large enough to justify a further division into sub-scenes. The fight at the *alþingi* contains thirteen such sub-scenes, and the Battle of Clontarf six. The following three tables list the combat scenes and give some of their details. Table 1.1 is divided into five columns, while the second column (Situation/Setting) will be dropped in tables 1.2 (fight at the *alþingi*) and 1.3 (Battle of Clontarf), for obvious reasons. The columns are :

- *Number*: For easy reference in the following discussion, the combat scenes will be numbered consecutively. Combat scenes (CS) from table 1.1 will be quoted with their respective number in brackets, while those from table 1.2 will be preceded by an A (= *alþingi*), those from 1.3 with a C (= Clontarf): e. g., (CS 17), (CS A12), or (CS C7)
- *Chapter / Page*: The edition used for reference is the digital version of the *Íslendingasögur* published by *Mál og menning* ("Íslendinga Sögur"), which in turn is based on the edition (Halldórsson et al., 1987), and features the same page and chapter numbers.
- *Situation / Setting*: This column lists several types of information – the type of interaction the scene describes, noteworthy people involved, the social or geographical surrounding, and so forth. The idea is to identify the narrative core of the scenes and provide according ‘titles’ for them, like one would do when talking about *Njáls saga*: “You know, that scene, when the first free man is killed at the coal-pit.”
- *Combatants*: For the sake of clarity, all combatants are listed with their full names. The winning party comes first, divided from the defeated by an arrow (→). Where more than one person is on the winning side, the first letter of their names in

98 The murder of Jarl Hákon by the slave Karkr is not included in this number, since the lines carry more the tone of a historiographic reference than a combat scene in the narrow sense.

brackets is assigned to the combatants. For the rest of the row, this letter is used for reference.

- *Victim - weapon - wound (inflicted by)*: This column lists in the first place the name of the victim, followed by a cross symbol (†) if he⁹⁹ is killed in the scene; then the weapon wielded by the attacker; and the wound inflicted. If a victim is injured more than one time in a single scene, the weapons and wounds are separated by a semicolon. Finally, if there is more than one possible attacker, the actual aggressor will be indicated by his name's first letter in brackets (see column *Combatants* for reference).

⁹⁹ In the entire *Njáls saga*, only one woman is killed: Bergþóra, in the *brenna*.

| CS | Page / Chapter | Situation / Setting | Combatants | Victim - weapon - wound (inflicted by) |
|------|----------------|---|---|--|
| (1) | 130 / 5 | Against pirates / Naval battle | Hrútr Herjólfsson (H), Úlfr ópveginn, Qzurr & their men → Atli Arnviðarson (A) and his men, among them Ásólftr (Á) | Nameless warrior † - spear - throw, unspecified wound (A); Four nameless men † - unspecified weapon - unspecified wounds (Á); Ásólftr † - unspecified weapon - unspecified wound (H); Úlfr † - spear - throw, unspecified wound (A); Qzurr - spear - attack from behind, unspecified wound (unspecified attacker); Atli † - stone; own sword - hit on the arm (unspecified thrower); leg chopped off; unspecified wound (H) |
| (2) | 138 / 12 | Hallgerðr's first husband killed / provoked outburst of violence | Þjóstólfr → Þorvaldr Ósvírfsson | Þorvaldr † - axe - arm broken; axe to the head |
| (3) | 145 / 17 | Hallgerðr's second husband killed / quarrel about sheep, no witnesses | Þjóstólfr → Glúmr Óleifsson | Glúmr † - axe - shoulder and collar bone split |
| (4) | 146 / 17 | Þjóstólfr's death / Fight in the night | Hrútr Herjólfsson → Þjóstólfr | Þjóstólfr † - sword - leg almost chopped off; blow to the head |
| (5) | 156-157 / 30 | Gunnarr against pirates I / Naval battle | Gunnarr Hámundarson (G), Kolskeggr Hámundarson (K), Hallvarðr hvíti & their men → Vandill Snæúlfsson, Karl Snæúlfsson & their men | Nameless man † - sword - unspecified wound (G); "margur maðr" † - sword - unspecified wound (G); Vandill † - sword - both legs chopped off (G); Karl † - spear - thrust, unspecified wound (K) |
| (6) | 157 / 30 | Gunnarr against pirates II / Naval battles | (no detailed description) | |
| (7) | 158 / 30 | Gunnarr earns the <i>atgeirr</i> / Naval battle | Gunnarr Hámundarson (G), Kolskeggr Hámundarson & their men → Hallgrímr, Kolskeggr (pirate) & their men | <i>verður mannfall mikið</i> † - unspecified weapon - unspecified wound Hallgrímr † - unspecified weapon / his own <i>atgeirr</i> - paralyzing blow to the arm / driven through the body (G); Kolskeggr (pirate) † - <i>atgeirr</i> - unspecified wound (G) |
| (8) | 164-165 / 36 | The first murdered thrall / in the forest; no witnesses | Kolr → Svartr | Svartr † - axe - blow to the head |
| (9) | 167 / 37 | The second murdered thrall / at work; no witnesses | Atli → Kolr | Kolr † - spear - throw to the body |
| (10) | 169 / 38 | The first murdered free man / at the coal-pit; no witnesses | Brynjólfr rósta → Atli | Atli † - axe - blow to the head |
| (11) | 171 / 39 | The second murdered free man / on horseback on the road; no witnesses | Þórðr Sigtryggsson → Brynjólfr | Brynjólfr † - axe - blow to the chest |
| (12) | 173- | Killing the outnumbered Þórðr / on the | Sigmundur hvíti Lambason (SL) & Skjöldr (Sk) → Þórðr | Þórðr † - unspecified weapons - hand chopped off (Sk); thrust, |

| | | | | |
|------|--------------|---|---|---|
| | 174 / 42 | road | Sigtryggsson | unspecified wound (SL) |
| (13) | 177-178 / 45 | Njáll's sons avenge Þórðr / tending the horses | Skarpheðinn Njálsson (S), Grímr Njálsson & Helgi Njálsson (G&H) → Sigmundur hvíti Lambason & Skjöldr | Sigmundur † - axe <i>Rimmugýgr</i> (not explicitly) - split shoulder blade, blow to the helmed head, unspecified death wound (head?) (S); Skjöldr † - unspecified weapon; sword - chopped off foot, thrust to the body (G&H) |
| (14) | 189 / 54 | First skirmish (two vs. eight) / at the Rangá | Gunnarr Hámundarson (G), Kolskeggr Hámundarson (K) → Otkell Skarfsson, Hallbjörn hvíti Skarfsson, Skammkell, Auðólfr, Hallkell Skarfsson & three more men | Hallbjörn † - <i>atgeirr</i> - hand chopped off; unspecified death wound (G); Skammkell † - <i>atgeirr</i> - driven through the body (G); Auðólfr † - spear - throw to the body (G); Otkell † - <i>atgeirr</i> - unspecified thrust (G); Hallkell † - <i>sax</i> - unspecified blow (K); three more men † - unspecified weapon - unspecified wound (G&K) |
| (15) | 195 / 59 | Horse fight escalates | Gunnarr Hámundarson → Þorgeirr Starkaðarson & Kolr Egilsson | Kolr - wrestling throw - unconscious; Þorgeirr - staff - unspecified blow, most likely to the head |
| (16) | 198-199 / 63 | Second skirmish; ambush / at the Rangá (Knafahólar) | Gunnarr Hámundarson (G), Kolskeggr Hámundarson (K) & Hjörtr Hámundarson (H) → Starkaðr Barkarson, Sigurðr svínhöfði, Úlfheðinn, Þorkell Starkaðarson, Kol Egilsson, Egill Kolsson, Þórir Austmaðr (Þ), Björk Starkaðarson, Hauk Egilsson, Óttar Egilsson, Þorgeirr Starkaðarson & nineteen more men | Sigurðr † - arrow - shot in the eye, through the head (G); Úlfheðinn † - arrow - center of body (G); Nameless farmer † - stone - hit to the head (K); Þorkell † - sword - beheaded (G); Kol † - <i>sax</i> - leg chopped off (K); Egill † - <i>atgeirr</i> - thrust (?) to the body (G); two men † - unspecified weapon - unspecified wound (H); Hjörtr † - unspecified weapon - blow to the chest (Þ) Þórir † - unspecified weapon - cut through the middle (G); Björk † - <i>atgeirr</i> - throw, most likely to the body (G); Hauk † - unspecified weapon - beheaded (K); Óttar - unspecified weapon - arm chopped off (G); Starkaðr & Thorgeir - unspecified weapon - unspecified wound (G); Many of the surviving - unspecified weapon - unspecified wound (G&K); Four nameless men † - unspecified weapon - unspecified wound (G&K) |
| (17) | 207-208 / 72 | Third skirmish; ambush / at the Rangá | Gunnarr Hámundarson (G) & Kolskeggr Hámundarson (K) → Þorgeirr Otkelsson (Þ), Qnundr inn fagri, Qgmundr flóki, Þorgeirr Starkaðarson & 21 more men | Many attackers - arrows - unspecified wound (G); Some attackers † - arrows - unspecified wound (G); Qnund † - <i>atgeirr</i> - throw, goes through (G); Qgmund Floki † - unspecified weapon - legs chopped off; thrown into the river to drown (K); Some attackers † - unspecified weapon - unspecified wound (K); Many attackers - unspecified weapon - unspecified wound (K); |

| | | | | |
|------|--------------|--|--|--|
| | | | | Gunnar - spear - stab through the hand (P); Nameless attacker † - <i>atgeirr</i> - unspecified wound (G); Þorgeirr Otkelsson † - <i>atgeirr</i> - thrust (?) through the body (G) |
| (18) | 212-214 / 77 | Gunnarr's last stand / home invasion at Hlíðarendi | Gizurr hvíti Teitsson, Geirr goði, Starkaðr Barkarson, Mǫrð Valgarðsson, Þorgrímur Austrmaðr, Eilífr Qnundarson, Þorbrandr Þorleiksson, Ásbrandr & others → Gunnarr (G) | Þorgrímur † - <i>atgeirr</i> - unspecified thrust (G); Eilífr - arrow - unspecified heavy wound (G); Þorbrandr † - <i>atgeirr</i> - unspecified thrust, goes through (G); Ásbrandr - <i>atgeirr</i> - thrust & turning to the forearm, bones break (G); two nameless attackers † - unspecified weapon - unspecified wound (G); sixteen nameless attackers - unspecified weapon - unspecified wound, some heavy (G); Gunnarr † - unspecified weapon - <i>mörgum stórum sárum</i> (þeir) |
| (19) | 216 / 79 | Revenge for Gunnarr | Hǫgni Gunnarsson (H) & Skarpheðinn Njálsson (S) → Hróaldr Geirsson, Tjǫrvi, Starkaðr Barkarson & Þorgeirr Starkaðarson | Hróaldr † - axe <i>Rimmugýgr</i> - unspecified wound (S); Tjǫrvi † - <i>atgeirr</i> - driven through the body (H); Starkaðr † - axe <i>Rimmugýgr</i> - unspecified wound (S); Þorgeirr † - <i>atgeirr</i> - unspecified wound (H) |
| (20) | 217-218 / 82 | Burning of Hallvarðr sóti | Kolr Ásmundarson (viking) & his men → Hallvarðr sóti | Hallvarðr † - unspecified weapon - unspecified wound |
| (21) | 218 / 82 | Hunt for the viking Kolr / naval battle | Þráinn Sigfússon (P), Gunnar Lambason, Lambi Sigurðsson & their men → Kolr (K) & his men | Many of Þráinn's men † - sword - unspecified wound (K); Kolr † - stone; unspecified weapon - throw & hit to the arm (unspecified thrower); leg chopped off (P); unspecified wound (þeir); beheaded after death (P) |
| (22) | 220-221 / 84 | Against Scottish pirates / naval battle | Grímr Njálsson (G), Helgi Njálsson (H), Kári Sǫlmundarson (K), Óláfr elda Ketilsson, Bárðr svartí & their men → Grjótgarðr Moldansson, Snækólfr Moldansson (S) & their men | Óláfr † - spear - thrust to the body (S); Snækólfr - spear - thrust throws him overboard (G); Snækólfr † - sword – blow to shoulder, arm chopped off (K); Grjótgarðr † - sword - thrust through the belly (H) |
| (23) | 222 / 86 | Battle of Duncansby / field battle | Army of Jarl Hákon Sigurðarson, incl. Grímr Njálsson, Helgi Njálsson, Kári Sǫlmundarson → Scottish Army, incl. Jarl Melsnati | Melsnati † - spear - throw, unspecified lethal wound (K) |
| (24) | 224 / 87 | Failed punishment for adultery / in the hazels | Víga-Hrappr Qrgumleiðason → Ásvarðr | Ásvarðr † - axe - spine cut in two from behind |
| (25) | 225-226 / 88 | Failed ambush / open field | Víga-Hrappr Qrgumleiðason → Þrándr Guðbrandsson & five more men | Three nameless men † - unspecified weapon - unspecified wound; Þrándr - unspecified weapon - unspecified wound, lethal (though not immediataly) |
| (26) | 230 / 89 | / naval battle | Jarl Hákon Sigurðarson & his men, incl. Sveinn Hákonarson, Áslákr úr Langey, Egill → Grímr (G), Helgi (H) & their men | Áslákr † - spear - throw to the throat (G); Egill † - unspecified weapon - unspecified wound (H); Grímr & Helgi - shields - captured (Sveinn's men) |

| | | | | |
|------|-------------------|--|---|---|
| (27) | 236-237 / 92 | Fight on the ice / failed ambush | Skarpheðinn Njálsson (S), Helgi Njálsson (H), Grímr Njálsson (G), Kári Sölmundarson (K) & Høskuldr Njálsson (not mentioned with name) → Þráinn Sigfússon, Lambi Sigurðarson, Tjörvi, Víga-Hrappr Örgumleiðason, Gunnar Lambason, Grani Gunnarson, Loðinn, one nameless man | Þráinn † - axe <i>Rimmugýgr</i> (not explicitly) - skull split to teeth (S); Hrappr † - unspecified weapon; spear - hand chopped off (H); thrust, unspecified wound (G); Tjörvi † - sword - blow into chest cavity (K) |
| (28) | 243 / 98 | Høskuldr's death / ambush | Lýtingr, two of his brothers & three of his servants → Høskuldr Njálsson | Lýtingr - unspecified weapon - arm wounded; Høskuldr † - unspecified weapon - sixteen wounds, unspecified (<i>þeir</i>) |
| (29) | 244 / 99 | Njáll's sons avenge their brother Høskuldr | Skarpheðinn Njálsson (S), Helgi Njálsson (H) & Grímr Njálsson (G) → Lýtingr, Hallgrím & Hallkell | Hallgrím † - axe <i>Rimmugýgr</i> - leg chopped off (S); Skarpheðinn - stone - throw, no serious damage; Hallkell † - axe <i>Rimmugýgr</i> - spine broken (S); Lýtingr - unspecified weapon - two unspecified wound (H & G) |
| (30) | 247 / 101 | Þangbrandr's <i>holmganga</i> | Þangbrandr Vilbaldús son greifa → Þorkell | Þorkell † - unspecified weapon - unspecified wound |
| (31) | 247 / 102 | Hunt on Galdra-Heðinn | Guðleifr Arason → Galdra-Heðinn | Heðinn † - spear - throw, pierced through |
| (32) | 247 / 102 | Quick work of Vetrliði skáld | Þangbrandr Vilbaldús son greifa (Þ) & Guðleifr Arason → Vetrliði skáld | Vetrliði † - unspecified weapon/axe ¹⁰⁰ - unspecified wound (Þ & G) |
| (33) | 249 / 102 | Failed ambush on Þangbrandr | Þangbrandr Vilbaldús son greifa (Þ) & Guðleifr (G) → Þorvaldr inn veili | Þorvaldr † - spear; unspecified weapon – throw, pierced through (Þ); arm chopped off (G) |
| (34) | 250 / 103 | Þangbrandr and the <i>berserkr</i> | Þangbrandr Vilbaldús son greifa (Þ) & Guðleifr (G) & bystanders (B) → Ótryggr | Ótryggr † - crucifix; sword; unspecified weapon - blow to the arm (Þ); thrust to the chest (Þ); arm chopped off (G); unspecified wound (B) |
| (35) | 253 / 106 | Ámundi's regains eyesight / at the Þingskalar-Þing | Ámundi Høskuldsson inn blindi → Lýtingr | Lýtingr † - axe - head split |
| (36) | 256 / 111 | The slaying of Høskuldr Hvítanessgoði; ambush / on the field | Skarpheðinn Njálsson (S), Helgi Njálsson, Grímr Njálsson, Kári Sölmundarson & Mörðr Valgarðsson → Høskuldr Þráinsson Hvítanessgoði | Høskuldr † - unspecified weapon - blow to the head (S); unspecified wound (whole group) |
| (37) | 279-283 / 128-130 | The <i>brenna</i> | Flosi Þórðar son Freysgoða (F), Grani, Hróaldr Özurarson, Kolr Þorsteins son breiðmaga, Ketill Sigfússon, Gunnarr Lambason, all in all one hundred men → Njáll Þorgeirsson, Skarpheðinn Njálsson (S), Helgi Njálsson (H), Grímr Njálsson (G), Kári Sölmundarson (K), all in all almost thirty men, incl. servants; furthermore Bergþóra Skarpheðinsdóttir & Þórðr Kárason | Hróaldr † - axe <i>Rimmugýgr</i> - hit to the face (S); Many of the attackers - unspecified weapon - unspecified wound (H, G & K); Random attacker - sword - leg chopped off (H); Helgi † - unspecified weapon - head chopped off (F); Gunnar - one of Þráinn's teeth - throw, hit to the eye, eye leaks out (S); Njáll, Bergþóra & Þórðr † - fire - smoke poisoning; |

100 The axe is not mentioned in the prose text, but in stanza 6: *Siðreynir lét síðan / snjallr morðhamar gjalla* (p. 247 / ch. 102)

| | | | | |
|------|----------------------|---|---|---|
| | | | | Grímr † - fire - smoke poisoning; Skarpheðinn † - hit by beam; fire - unspecified cause of death |
| (38) | 285 / 130 | Changing words and spears / at the Rangá | Flozi Þórðarson Freysgoða (F), Þorsteinn Kolbeinsson, the Sigfússynir & more men of their party → Ingjaldr Hqskuldsson (I) | Ingjaldr - spear - throw, pierced through thigh (F); Þorsteinn † - spear - throw, unspecified wound (I) |
| (39) | 297 / 136 | Failed attack on Flozi / in Ásgrímr's farm | Ásgrímr Elliða-Grímsson → Flozi Þórðar son Freysgoða, Glúmr Hildisson | Flozi - carpenter's hatchet - no injury; Ásgrímr stopped and disarmed by Glúmr |
| (40) | 316- 319 / 145 | The battle at the <i>alþingi</i> | See table 1.2 | |
| (41) | 323- 324 / 146 | Waking up the Sigfússynir / Kerlingadal | Kári Sölmundarson (K), Þorgeirr skorargeirr Þórisson (Þ) → Þorkell Sigfússon, Mqrðr Sigfússon, Sigurðr Lambason, Lambi Sigurðarson, Leiðolfr inn sterki, Ketill Sigfússon & nine more men | Nameless man † - back of axe <i>Rimmugýgr</i> - skull smashed to pieces (Þ); Þorkell † - axe <i>Rimmugýgr</i> - arm chopped off (Þ); Sigurðr † - spear - thrust to the chest, pierces through (K); Mqrðr † - sword - blow, hip and spine split (K); Leiðolfr † - axe <i>Rimmugýgr</i> ; sword - blow to the chest, splits collar bone and enters chest cavity (Þ); leg chopped off (K) |
| (42) | 330- 331 / 150 | Kári and Björn, the big-mouthed coward / at the river Skaptá | Kári Sölmundarson (K), Björn hvíti Kaðalsson (B) → Móðólfr Ketilsson, Grani Gunnarsson, Lambi Sigurðarson, Þorsteinn inn fagri Geirleifsson, Gunnar & four more men | Móðólfr † - sword - blow, hand chopped off, hit between the ribs (K); Grani - spear - throw, leg pierced through (K); Nameless man † - unspecified weapon; sword - hand chopped off (B); cut through the middle (K); Lambi † - sword - thrust to the chest, pierced through (K); Þorsteinn † - sword - blow between the shoulders, cut in half (K); Gunnar † - sword - unspecified wound (K); Three nameless men - unspecified weapon - unspecified wound (B) |
| (43) | 332 / 151 | Kári and Björn, the big-mouthed coward, part II / hidden position in the lavafield at Kringlumýrr | Kári Sölmundarson (K), Björn hvíti Kaðalsson (B) → Ketill Sigfússon, Glúmr Hildisson, Vébrandr Þorfinnsson, Ásbrandr Þorfinnsson & two more men | Glúmr † - sword - leg chopped off (K); Vébrandr † - sword - thrust, stomach pierced through (K); Ásbrandr † - sword - both legs chopped off (K); Kári - unspecified weapon - unspecified wound (unspecified attacker); Björn - unspecified weapon - unspecified wound (unspecified attacker); Ketill - hands - seized and held (K) |
| (44) | 336 / 155 | Kári murders Gunnarr Lambason / feast in Jarl Sigurðr's hall | Kári Sölmundarson → Gunnar Lambason | Gunnar † - sword - beheaded |
| (45) | 339- 340 / 157 | Battle of Clontarf | See table 1.3 | |

| | | | | |
|------|--------------|-------------------------------------|--|---------------------------|
| (46) | 344 / 158 | The counting head / a city in Wales | Kári Sölmundarson → Kolr Þorsteins son breiðmaga | Kolr † - sword - beheaded |
|------|--------------|-------------------------------------|--|---------------------------|

Table 1.1: Combat scenes of Njáls saga

The battle at the alþingi

After the failed attempt to have Flosi sentenced, fighting ensues. Two large parties clash; Njáll's murderers and their associates on the one side, those attached to Njáll on the other. The mood is heated, people are shouting: *Var þá kall mikið um allan herinn og síðan var æpt heróp. Þeir Flosi snerust þá við og eggjuðust nú fast hvorirtveggju.* (p. 317 / ch. 145) The fighting comes not as a surprise. The combatants have prepared and arrive in arms, with field signs attached to their helmets. (p. 305-306 / ch. 142) Obviously, they anticipate a mass battle, where telling apart friend from foe can be difficult. The text invokes the image of a fight too large to keep track of: *En þó að hér sé sagt frá nokkurum atburðum þá eru hinir þó miklu fleiri er menn hafa engar frásagnir af.* (p. 317-318 / ch. 145)

| CS A | Page | Combatants | Victim - weapon - wound (inflicted by) |
|------|------|---|---|
| (1) | 316 | Þórhallr Ásgrímsson → Grímr inn rauði | Grímr † - spear - thrust, pierced through upper body; |
| (2) | 317 | Kári Sölmundarson → Árni Kolsson, Hallbjörn inn sterki & nameless man | Árni † - unspecified weapon - blow, shoulder and collarbone shattered, weapon cuts into the chest cavity; Hallbjörn - unspecified weapon - big toe chopped off; Nameless man † - spear - throw, unspecified wound |
| (3) | 317 | Þorgeirr skorargeirr Þórisson → Hallbjörn inn sterki & Þorvaldr Ketils son þryms | Hallbjörn - bare hand - blow, knocked to the ground; Þorvaldr † - axe <i>Rimmugýgr</i> - blow cuts into chest cavity |
| (4) | 317 | Ásgrímr Elliða-Grímsson, Þórhallr Ásgrímsson, Hjalti Skeggjason, Gizurr hvíti Teitsson → Flosi Þórðar son Freysgoða, Sigfússynir, more of Njáll's murderers | No combat manoeuvres specified; intense fighting; Ásgrímr's side charges, Flosi's side retreats |
| (5) | 317 | Guðmundr inn ríki Eyjólfsson, Mörðr Valgarðsson, Þorgeirr skorargeirr Þórisson → men from the Eastfjords, from the Öxár fjord and the Reykjardalr | No combat manoeuvres specified; intense fighting |
| (6) | 317 | Kári Sölmundarson → Bjarni Brodd-Helgason & nameless man | Nameless man - sword - crippling cut to the leg; Bjarni - spear - falls to the ground to evade thrust, no wound |
| (7) | 317 | Þorgeirr skorargeirr Þórisson → Hólmsteinn Spak-Bersason, Þorkell Geitisson & their men | No combat manoeuvres specified; Þorgeirr attacks, the others retreat |
| (8) | 317 | Þorvarðr Tjörvason | Þorvarðr - spear - throw, heavy wound to the arm (thrower presumably Halldórr Guðmundar son ríka) |
| (9) | 318 | Ásgrímr Elliða-Grímsson → Skapti Þóroddsson | Skapti - spear - throw, both calves pierced through |
| (10) | 319 | Ásgrímr Elliða-Grímsson & his men → Flosi Þórðar son Freysgoða & his men | No combat manoeuvres specified; intense fighting; Ásgrímr's side charges, Flosi's side retreats |
| (11) | 319 | Hallbjörn inn sterki → Sölví | Sölví † - boiling broth – boiled to death, head first |
| (12) | 319 | Flosi Þórðar son Freysgoða → Brúni Hafliðason | Brúni † - spear - throw to the body |
| (13) | 319 | Þorsteinn Hlennason → Flosi Þórðar son Freysgoða | Flosi - spear - throw to the leg, heavy wound |
| (14) | 319 | Unknown attacker → Ljótr Hallsson | Ljótr † - spear - throw to the body |
| (15) | 319 | Kári Sölmundarson → Eyjólftr Þolverksson | Eyjólftr † - spear – throw pierces through the body |

Table 1.2: Battle at the alþingi

The Battle of Clontarf

On Good Friday, the Irish King Brjánn faces his enemies under King Sigtryggr, Jarl Sigurðr and the Viking Bróðir. Close to the city of Dublin, their ethnically mixed armies clash. A large scale battle ensues.

| CS C | Page | Combatants | Victim - weapon - wound (inflicted by) |
|------|------|--|---|
| (1) | 339 | Bróðir → Úlfr hræða's men | <i>alla er fremstir stóðu</i> † - unspecified weapon - unspecified wounds |
| (2) | 339 | Úlfr hræða → Bróðir | Bróðir - unspecified weapon - knocked down three times |
| (3) | 339 | Kerþjálfaðr Kylfisson → Jarl Sigurðr Hlōðvisson's men & standard bearers | <i>alla er fremstir voru</i> † - unspecified weapon - unspecified wounds; Standard bearer I † - unspecified weapon - unspecified wound; Standard bearer II † - unspecified weapon - unspecified wound |
| (4) | 340 | Ámundi hvíti & Jarl Sigurðr Hlōðvisson | Ámundi † - unspecified weapon - unspecified wound (unspecified attacker); Jarl Sigurðr † - spear - thrust, pierced through (unspecified attacker) |
| (5) | 340 | Óspakr → Sigtryggr Óláfsson's men | No combat manoeuvres specified; Óspakr charges and breaks through the enemy lines, Sigtryggr & his men turn to flee |
| (6) | 340 | Bróðir → Brjánn & Taðkr Brjánsson | Taðkr - unspecified weapon - hand chopped off; Brjánn † - unspecified weapon - head chopped off |
| (7) | 340 | Úlfr hræða, Kerþjálfaðr Kylfisson & their men → Bróðir & his men | Bróðir & his men - branches - taken captive |

Table 1.3: Battle of Clontarf

Listing the combat scenes of *Njáls saga* in such a way allows us to identify patterns and singular pieces of information that are hardly discernible otherwise. And it provides some 'hard facts' on the armed violence in the text:

We can count a total number of 122¹⁰¹ individuals getting killed, of which 120 are grown men (the other two are Bergþóra and the boy Þórðr, during the *brenna*). However, this number does not include the many references to slain combatants who are mentioned without their exact number being given, like in the naval battles or at the Battle of Clontarf. They would make for a much higher number of fallen. Of the 46 combat scenes (counting the fight at the *alþingi* and the Battle of Clontarf as single scenes), only two end without fatalities, (CS 15) and (CS 39). The most effective fighter is Gunnar, who kills 21 enemies, closely followed by Kári, with a head count of 20. Skarpheðinn, third in line, takes eight lives, followed by Kolskeggr (six), Grímr, Helgi, Þorgeirr skorargeirr, and the missionary Þangbrandr (all of whom kill four enemies). Again, only precise descriptions of killings have been taken into account, but no ambiguous phrases like *mannfall mikið* or *alla er fremstir voru*, which would rise some of these numbers significantly.

Weapons used in Njáls saga

Counting the weapons used in the fights proves somewhat difficult. In some instances, the context makes it obvious which weapon a combatant is wielding, without explicitly stating it. In other cases, when large groups of men are taking part in a battle, we may assume that varying armament is being used. Thus, if the following table counts 74 instances where unspecified weapons are being used, this should be understood as a tendency, not a final count. For example, 18 of these 74 instances represent injuries Gunnarr inflicts during his last stand, where we may assume that either the *atgeirr* or bow and arrow are the weapons being used. Furthermore, only those weapons were taken into account which indeed injured or killed a person, while the total number of weapons mentioned in the text is of course much higher.

101 Or 123, if one wants to count Jarl Hákon; see footnote 98. It remains unclear to me how Victor Turner came to his number „I have counted the killings in Njal - they amount to 94“. Turner (1971, p. 367)

| Weapon | People killed | People injured |
|--|--------------------------------------|----------------|
| Unspecified | 39 | 35 |
| Sword | 22 | 2 |
| Spear | 18 | 8 |
| Axe | 19 (thereof <i>Rimmugýgr</i> : 11) | - |
| <i>atgeirr</i> | 14 | 1 |
| Fire | 5 (but: Skarpheðinn's death unclear) | - |
| Arrow | 2 | 1 |
| <i>sax</i> | 2 | - |
| Improvised weapons: staff (CS 15); Shields (CS 26); Þangbrandr's cross (CS 30); Þráinn's tooth (CS 37); Carpenter's hatchet (CS 39); Boiling broth (CS A11); Branches (CS C7) | 1 (boiling broth) | 6 |
| Stone | 1 | 3 |
| Unarmed | - | 3 |

Table 2: Weapons used in *Njáls saga*

When Njáll's sons prepare for a fight, *Njáls saga* describes a standard set of weapons: ‘*Skarpheðinn hvatti öxi, Grímur skefti spjót, Helgi h nauð hjalt á sverð, Höskuldur treysti mundriða í skildi.*’ (p. 175 / ch. 44) Axe, spear, sword, and shield; for centuries, this has been the basic weaponry for close quarter combat throughout Europe, and the numbers in table 2 reflect this. The knightly weaponry that saw use in *Rémundar saga keisarasonar*, or the spectacular weapons of the ‘adventurous mode of combat’ play no role in *Njáls saga*. Here, Gunnarr's magical *atgeirr* and Þangbrandr's cross are the most extraordinary weapons.

Of the weapons specified in the combat scenes, the sword is accountable for the most killings. This may be at odds with historical reality. During the Viking Age and the Scandinavian Middle Ages alike, the sword was a most expensive item and associated with the social elite. Other weapons, like spears and axes, were easier and cheaper to produce, and saw more frequent use. The common use of swords in *Njáls saga* puts the protagonists in an upper class context.¹⁰²

102 It is noteworthy that nameless thralls play their roles in the combat scenes only as victims of the upper class warriors, as their attacks are never successful. Like the sword is associated with the elite, thralls and farmers have their own, fitting weapons: While stones are used as missiles in several combat scenes in *Njáls saga*, the only one to die from this most archaic of all weapons is the nameless farmer in the fight at Knafahólar (CS 16).

With 26 instances, effective use of the spear in the text is almost similar in number to that of the sword (25 instances). However, the spear lacks the killing capacity of the sword. Only 65% of those hit with a spear die of the wound, whereas 92% of the hits with a sword are fatal. This may reflect practical experience. Since many of the fighters are protected by a shield, a high percentage of the wounds is inflicted to the legs (see below). While a spear thrust to the head, throat or body has a high chance of causing a fatal injury, a thrust to the leg is less likely to do so. On the other hand, a chopping blow or cut to the leg with a sword can more easily sever main arteries, leading to a lethal loss of blood.

Axes are on the list's third place, with an interesting twist. The axe 'takes no prisoners' – every time someone is hit with an axe, a fatal injury is inflicted. By its physical properties alone, the axe as a weapon suggests massive physical force. Its centre of mass being located at one end, it lends itself for decisive, single blows – a characteristic understood intuitively, even without ever having fought with an axe. The resulting imagery is one of raw power, and culminates in Skarpheðinn's *Rimmugýgr* ('Battle ogress'). The name immediately indicates the destructive nature of the weapon, which appears in more than half of the instances an axe is used in the saga.

Gunnarr's *atgeirr* is the other personal weapon of *Njáls saga*, and has been dealt with above. Just as Gunnarr holds the record for the most killed enemies, the *atgeirr* is similarly responsible for the highest death toll, compared with the other individual weapons (assuming that Kári uses more than one sword during the saga).

Including fire into the table is, of course, slightly problematic, and is mainly done for the sake of completeness. Whether Skarpheðinn is killed by fire or the wooden beam that hits him, is not exactly clear.

The thrown spear is the dominant missile weapon in *Njáls saga*, while bow and arrow play only a minor role. It is mostly the combat expert Gunnarr who uses them. For an interpretation of possible narrative implications, see below.

The *sax* that Kolskeggr uses is mentioned only two times in the combat scenes, both times causing fatal results. We may assume that it is Kolskeggr's standard weapon; on his way to a fight, the saga tells us that he *hafði saxið og alvæpni*. (p. 207 /ch. 71) Even though it is not stated explicitly, the *sax* seems to be the one originally wielded by Kolskeggr's

namesake, the pirate in (CS 7): *Kolskeggur hefir sax. Það er hið besta vopn.* (p. 157 / ch. 30)¹⁰³

The various improvised weapons have a rather narrative than combative function. They are used to spur on the course of the story, like the staff in (CS 15), that triggers further and more serious violence. Or they end a fight, when the author has something different in mind for the losing side than dying in battle, like the shields of (CS 25) or the branches of (CS C7). Or they have a symbolic meaning, like Þangbrandr's cross in (CS 29), Þráinn's tooth in (CS 36), the carpenter's hatchet in (CS 38), and finally the boiling broth in (CS A11), all of which will be discussed below. The boiling broth is the only improvised weapon to cause a fatality.

Stones as missiles are used three times, once with fatal results. Even though rather archaic at first glance, a hurled stone is known to the very day for its effectiveness, and its use in the saga is most likely a reflection of actual historical practice.

Finally, the use of empty hand fighting methods does not result in any fatal injuries, but shows the combat skills the author attributed to some of his figures. When attacked by two men in (CS 15), Gunnar gets hold of one and smashes him to the ground, leaving him unconscious. In (CS 39), Ásgrímr, who attacks Flosi with a hatchet, is disarmed by Glúmr with bare hands. And in (CS A3), Þorgeirr skorargeirr almost knocks out his opponent with a punch.

Location and type of wounds

Table 3 provides a detailed account of the wounds inflicted during the combat scenes of *Njáls saga*. Hit location, type of the wound, and inflicting weapon have been taken into account. The saga's reference to the injured body parts can be quite specific; therefore, the table discriminates between, e. g., "Arm" and "Hand". On the other hand, the rather unspecific category "Body" subsumes all hits to the torso that are not defined more precisely. The column "Fatal" lists all lethal injuries, while "Non fatal" gives the totals for

103 In archaeological perspective, *sax* is usually understood as the heavy chopping knife of the Migration Period and Viking Age, an all-purpose tool used both for work and (probably) close quarter combat. However, Kolskegg's *sax* is most likely of a different kind. The relatively short blade and the lack of a cross guard make the early medieval *sax* a back-up weapon, but not the first choice when going into battle. We may rather assume that in 13th century Iceland, the term *sax* referred to a longer single-edged combat weapon, like the falchion, or the German *Messer*. Such single-edged, often curved weapons were being widely used, as fencing manuals, iconography and archaeology show, see Grotkamp-Schepers, Immel, Johnsson, and Wetzler (2015, pp. 144–146). Examples of such high medieval, single-edged weapons found in Iceland are on display at the *Þjóðminjasafn Íslands*.

injuries that do not lead to the victim's death. Bearing in mind Glauser's observation that Old Norse literature possesses a macabre fascination for dismemberment and mutilation (Glauser, 2006, pp. 34–36), the column “Dismembered/pierced through” indicates when the respective body part is hacked off (by the chopping blow of, e. g., a sword or an axe) or pierced through (by the thrust of , e. g., a spear or a sword). Finally, the column “Remarks” lists clarification or noteworthy details. In each case, the total of a given hit location/injury type combination is indicated first, followed by a detailed account which weapon in which combat scene inflicted it (“u.w.” stands for ‘unspecified weapon’). Where more than one weapon is listed, the relevant combat scene describes several fitting injuries.

As in the preceding tables, the entries are based on the saga's exact wording, not on implications that might be deduced – even if, e. g., one can easily imagine that a spear thrust would drive through a throat all the way, such a thrust will not be listed under “Dismembered/pierced through” if the text does not clearly say so. Multiple wounds dealt to individuals – e.g., in (CS 36: The slaying of Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði) – or to groups of men will be represented by a single entry, if the saga does not specify. For example, (CS 18: Gunnarr's last stand) says two times that Gunnarr wounds eight men, but not if he uses *atgeirr* or arrows to do so. This results in two entries in the table, both reading “u.w.”. On the other hand, a single victim can be represented by more than one entries, if several inflicted wounds are described in the text. In other words, table 3 reflects the narrative pattern of the telling of wounds, not the actual body count. Readers should therefore not be confused if the total numbers of table 3 do not conform to those of the preceding tables.

To give an example: Under the combination “Arm” + “Non fatal”, we find the entry [(34): crucifix; sword], followed by the entry [(34): sword] under the combination “Arm” + “Dismembered/pierced through”. This reads as: In the combat scene (CS 34) – which is the fight of Þangbrandr and the *berserkr* – two non lethal blows against an arm are dealt, one with a crucifix as a weapon, one with a sword. Of these two, the blow with the sword did not only lead to an injury, but was sufficient to cut the arm off.

| | Total | Fatal | Non fatal | Dismembered/ pierced through | Remarks |
|-------------|-------|--|--|--|------------------------------------|
| Location | | | | | |
| Unspecified | 62 | Total: 45 [(1): spear; u.w.; spear; u.w.; sword] [(5): sword; spear] [(7): atgeirr] [(12): u.w.] [(13): axe <i>Rimmugýgr</i>] [(14): atgeirr; atgeirr; sax] [(16): u.w.; atgeirr; u.w.] [(17): atgeirr; atgeirr] [(18): atgeirr; atgeirr; u.w.; u.w.] [(19): axe <i>Rimmugýgr</i> ; atgeirr; axe <i>Rimmugýgr</i>] [(20): u.w.] [(21): u.w.] [(23): spear] [(25): u.w.] [(26): u.w.] [(27): spear] [(28): u.w.] [(30): u.w.] [(31): spear] [(32): axe] [(34): u.w.] [(36): u.w.] [(37): fire] [(38): spear] [(42): sword] [(A2): spear] [(C3): u.w., u.w.] [(C4): u.w.; spear] | Total: 17 [(15): wrestling throw; staff] [(16): u.w.; u.w.] [(18): u.w.; u.w.; arrow; u.w.] [(22): spear] [(29): stone; u.w.] [(33): spear] [(42): u.w.] [(43): u.w.; u.w.] [(A3): bare hand] [(C2): u.w.] | Total: 5 [(7): atgeirr] [(17): atgeirr] [(18): atgeirr] [(33): spear] [(C4): spear] | (25): wound not immediately lethal |
| Arm | 10 | Total: 1 [(16): u.w.] | Total: 8 [(1): stone] [(2): axe] [(18): atgeirr] [(21): stone] [(28): u.w.] [(34): crucifix; u.w.] [(A8): spear] | Total: 4 [(16): u.w.] [(17): spear] [(18): atgeirr] [(34): u.w.] | |
| Hand | 6 | Total: 0 | Total: 7 | Total: 6 | |

| | | | | | |
|----------------------|----|---|---|--|--|
| | | | <p>[(12): u.w.] [(14): atgeirr] [(17): spear] [(27): u.w.] [(42): sword; u.w.] [(C6): u.w.]</p> | <p>[(12): u.w.] [(14): atgeirr] [(27): u.w.] [(42): sword; u.w.] [(C6): u.w.]</p> | |
| Leg | 16 | <p>Total: 3 [(16): sax] [(29): axe <i>Rimmugýgr</i>] [(41): sword]</p> | <p>Total: 13 [(1): sword] [(4): sword] [(5): sword] [(17): u.w.] [(21): u.w.] [(37): sword] [(38): spear] [(42): spear] [(43): sword; sword] [(A6): sword] [(A9): spear] [(A13): spear]</p> | <p>Total: 13 + 1/2 [(1): sword] [(4): sword] [(5): sword] [(16): sax] [(17): u.w.] [(21): u.w.] [(29): axe <i>Rimmugýgr</i>] [(37): sword] [(38): spear] [(41): sword] [(42): spear] [(43): sword; sword] [(A9): spear]</p> | <p>(4) leg almost chopped off (43) Ásbrandr: both legs chopped off (A6): crippling blow (A9): both calves pierced through</p> |
| Foot | 2 | <p>Total: 0</p> | <p>Total: 2 [(13): u.w.] [(A2): u.w.]</p> | <p>Total: 2 [(13): u.w.] [(A2): u.w.]</p> | <p>(A2) big toe chopped off</p> |
| Head | 20 | <p>Total: 17 [(2): axe] [(4): sword] [(8): axe] [(10): axe] [(16): arrow; stone; sword; u.w.] [(27): axe <i>Rimmugýgr</i>] [(35): axe] [(37): axe <i>Rimmugýgr</i>; u.w.] [(41): axe <i>Rimmugýgr</i>] [(44): sword] [(46): sword] [(A11): boiling broth] [(C6): u.w.]</p> | <p>Total: 3 [(13): axe <i>Rimmugýgr</i>] [(36): u.w.] [(37): Þráinn's tooth]</p> | <p>Total: 11 [(16): arrow; sword, u.w.] [(21): u.w.] [(27): axe <i>Rimmugýgr</i>] [(35): axe] [(37): u.w.; Þráinn's tooth] [(41): axe <i>Rimmugýgr</i>] [(44): sword] [(46): sword] [(C6): u.w.]</p> | <p>(16): arrow in the eye & through the head (21): Kolr is beheaded post mortem (37): eye hit with a tooth, leaks out</p> |
| Throat | 1 | <p>Total: 1 [(26): spear]</p> | <p>Total: 0</p> | <p>Total: 0</p> | |
| Shoulder/collar bone | 6 | <p>Total: 5</p> | <p>Total: 1</p> | <p>Total: 4</p> | |

| | | | | | |
|--------|-----|---|-------------------------------|--|--|
| | | [(3): axe] [(22): sword] [(33): u.w.] [(41): axe <i>Rimmugýgr</i>] [(A2): u.w.] | [(13): axe <i>Rimmugýgr</i>] | [(22): sword] [(33): u.w.] [(41): axe <i>Rimmugýgr</i>] [(A2): u.w.] | |
| Body | 20 | Total: 20 [(7): atgeirr] [(9): spear] [(13): sword] [(14): atgeirr; spear] [(16): arrow; atgeirr; u.w.] [(17): atgeirr] [(19): atgeirr] [(22): spear; sword; sword] [(41): sword] [(42): sword; sword] [(43): sword] [(A12): spear] [(A14): spear] [(A15): spear] | Total: 0 | Total: 11 [(7): atgeirr] [(14): atgeirr] [(16): u.w.] [(17): atgeirr] [(19): atgeirr] [(22): sword] [(41): sword] [(42): sword] [(43): sword] [(A15): spear] | (41): one blow single cuts through cross guard, chops off hand and enters the body |
| Chest | 11 | Total: 11 [(11): axe] [(16): u.w.] [(27): sword] [(34): sword] [(41): spear; axe <i>Rimmugýgr</i>] [(42): sword; sword] [(A1): spear] [(A2): u.w.] [(A3): axe <i>Rimmugýgr</i>] | Total: 0 | Total: 5 [(41): spear] [(42): sword] [(A1): spear] [(A2): u.w.] [(A3): axe <i>Rimmugýgr</i>] | |
| Back | 2 | Total: 2 [(24): axe] [(29): axe <i>Rimmugýgr</i>] | Total: 0 | Total: 2 [(24): axe] [(29): axe <i>Rimmugýgr</i>] | (29): spine broken |
| Totals | 154 | 104 | 43 | 62,5 | |

Table 3: Location and type of wounds in Njáls saga

Table 3 shows that unspecified wounds, with a total of 62, are the largest single group in the table; as explained above, this is the number of instances when unspecified wounds are mentioned, not the number of wounds themselves. However, 94 wounds are described with their specific location. Of these, head and body injuries are the largest groups (total for both: 20), followed by leg wounds (total: 16). Of course, it suggests itself to sum up the rows “body”, “chest”, “shoulder/collar bone”, and “back” as one category (total: 39), “leg” and “foot” as another one (total: 18), and “hand” and “arm” as a third (total: 16).

All of the head wounds and almost all of the wounds to the torso (38 of 39) are lethal, while only 4 of the leg wounds kill their victim. Similarly, blows to the arms or hands are lethal in only one of 16 cases. But even if these attacks to the extremities do not kill, their consequences are horrible: Of the ten times an arm is injured, four times it is chopped off; hand and foot always (6 of 6 and 2 of 2 times, respectively), the leg mostly (13,5 of 17 – the 0,5 referring to (CS 4), where a leg is almost chopped off). All in all, fighting in *Njáls saga* is a deadly business: Of all the 94 combat wounds described in detail, 60 are lethal, almost two third. The less precise category “unspecified wound” even surpasses this ratio; here, around 73% refer to lethal wounds.

These numbers derived from *Njáls saga* – especially those of the wounds inflicted to head and body – support what Charlotte Kaiser wrote in general about lethal combat wounds in the *Íslendingasögur*:

In den Isländersagas gehören die Hohlwunden zu denjenigen Verletzungen, die quantitativ alle anderen übertreffen. Sie führen in der Regel sogleich zum Tode, was in den Texten mit ‘þegar’ kommentiert wird. Ärztliche Hilfe ist somit überflüssig. Die Schilderungen sind entsprechend knapp und realistisch. Aberglauben und Zauberei spielen keine Rolle. Wird in Ausnahmefällen ein Wundheiler medizinisch tätig, so hat die an Hand des erfolglosen Therapieversuchs zu vermittelnde Botschaft über die medizinischen hinaus in besonderem Maße funktionale Bezüge, die der Personengestaltung des Protagonisten und Aufwertung der christlichen Heilslehre dienen. In den Isländersagas führt eine Hohlwunde unausweichlich zum Tode. In der regel sind Hieb- und Stichwunden im Gehirn (‘í heila’) sofort tödlich. Tiefe Verletzungen in der Brust- und Bauchhöhle (‘á hol’) können, müssen aber nicht umgehend zum Tode führen. Läsionen bis ins Knochenmark (‘í beini’) bedeuten meist einen qualvolleren Tod, der ein bis mehrere Tage auf sich warten lassen kann. Diese Beobachtungen entsprechen durchaus der medizinischen Wirklichkeit. Ein nach den drei Hohlwundenarten in Segmente aufgegliedertes Kreisdiagramm soll eine Vorstellung von der Häufigkeit und Verteilung der in den Isländersagas erwähnten für tödlich geltenden Verletzungen vermitteln. (Kaiser, 1998, pp. 150–151)

Kaiser's diagram of the distribution of lethal wounds in the *Íslendingasögur* does, unfortunately, not give exact numbers. An estimation would be: wounds *í heila*: 22%, wounds *á hol*: 72%, wounds *í beini* 6%.

However, Kaiser also suggested a direct correlation between weapon type and wounded body part:

Schilderungen von Hohlwunden, die die Brust- und Bauchhöhle betreffen, überwiegen in den Isländersagas bei weitem vor solchen im Gehirn und Knochenmark. Was die Waffenart anbelangt, so lassen sich die tödlichen Verletzungen im Knochenmark und Gehirn auf die Nahkampfwaffen Axt [...] und Schwert [...] zurückführen, in der Brust- und Bauchhöhle dagegen vorwiegend auf den Speer [...], seltener auf den aus der Ferne abgeschossenen Pfeil. (Kaiser, 1998, p. 154))

Table 3 shows that, at least for *Njáls saga*, Kaiser's observation is only partly correct. While it is true that wounds to the head are never dealt with the spear, but usually with sword and axe, the latter two are also responsible for a large part of the injuries to the body.

b) Narrative functions of the combat scenes

The first chapters have shown that saga literature employs 'fantastic' combat scenes for different narrative purposes. We may assume that the same is true for the rather 'factual' combat scenes of *Njáls saga*, following the idea that the saga is an accomplished piece of medieval storytelling, not a mere attempt in historiography.

As in the fantastic modes discussed before, the narrative purpose of combat in the saga is twofold. On a primary level, combat scenes are dense, exciting moments in the text, one of the foremost tools of entertainment. On a less obvious level, they convey information on the protagonists, their relations to each other, or their function within the textual matrix. It is *communis opinio* among scholars of Old Norse literature that

[f]or the most part, the people are depicted from the outside. We know what they are from the way they appear, from what they do and say, and from what others say about them. Frequently the basic characteristics of an individual are revealed through his dealings with others. (Sveinsson, 1971, p. 94)

If so, would it then not be worthwhile to look at one of the saga heroes' most intense and most frequent ways to deal with others – that is, by trying to kill them?

We must become aware of the narrative purposes of the combat scenes before we can hope to make a definite attempt on judging their 'realism'. Like an emulsion in a centrifuge, the two basic components of the combat scenes must be separated: the author's understanding of armed combat on the one hand, his literary intentions and dependencies on the other.

The narrative purposes of the relevant scenes are most clearly discernible if we look for recurring patterns within them. Often, such recurring patterns are tied to the protagonists in the fights. Some of the individuals have their very own way of fighting, ways which set them apart from others, and which we may assume to also reflect their behaviour outside combat. Recurring patterns are sometimes connected to certain archetypes of combatants – e. g., the *berserkr* – or can be established within a larger combat scene, to give it a defining sub-text – e. g., during the fight at the *alþingi*. Some examples for recurring patterns will be discussed. The list might not be exhaustive; after all, the question how much repetitiveness is necessary to constitute a pattern is open to discussion. Nevertheless, it will hopefully become clear that these patterns exist, and that it is very unlikely they should not serve a narrative purpose. What this purposes might be, and what additional meaning they transmit, shall also be discussed. The examples start with some of the central protagonists of *Njáls saga*, then move on to other figures and situations.

Gunnar (and Kolskeggr)

Some of Gunnarr's legendary combat skills have been already discussed above. He is the fighter *per se* in *Njáls saga*,¹⁰⁴ and the only one whose skills are described in greatest detail:

Hann var mikill maður vexti og sterkur og allra manna best vígur. Hann hjó báðum höndum og skaut ef hann vildi og hann vó svo skjótt með sverði að þrjú þóttu á lofti að sjá. Hann skaut manna best af boga og hæfði allt það er hann skaut til. Hann hljóp meir en hæð sína með öllum herklæðum og eigi skemmra aftur en fram fyrir sig. Hann var syndur sem selur. Og eigi var sá leikur að nokkur þyrfti við hann að keppa og hefir svo verið sagt að engi væri hans jafningi. (p. 147 / ch. 19)

At the same time, Gunnarr doubts his own ability to exert violence: '*Hvað eg veit,*' segir Gunnar, '*hvort eg mun því óvaskari maður en aðrir menn sem mér þykir meira fyrir en*

104 *Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu*, however, puts him only in second place: *Þorsteinn átti Jófríði Gunnarsdóttur Hlífarsonar. Gunnar hefir best vígur verið og mestur fimleikamaður verið á Íslandi af búandmönnum, annar Gunnar að Hlíðarenda, þriðji Steinþór á Eyri. (p. 1166 / ch. 1)*

öðrum mönnum að vega menn.’ (p. 190 / ch. 54) And a little later: ‘Sáttgjarn hefi eg verið jafnan’ (p. 192 / ch. 56)

His deeds tell a different story, though – as we have seen, nobody in *Njáls saga* kills more men than Gunnarr. If this contradiction is not simply an ironic twist, then the reluctance he claims to possess implies that if he fights, he has good reasons for it. Nevertheless, Gunnarr is fully aware of his exceptional martial skills, and does not hesitate to threaten opponents at the *þing* with a challenge:

Es ist auffällig, daß bei fast allen Fällen des Holmgangs [in *Njáls saga*] Gunnar beteiligt ist. Es wird ständig geargöhnt, daß er sich nicht einem Verfahren durch Zeugenaussage beugen, sondern die Entscheidung durch Kampf suchen wird. [...] Denn Gunnar droht immer dann mit dem Holmgang, wenn er befürchtet, daß der Streit nicht zu seinen Gunsten und zu seiner Zufriedenheit ausgehen wird und damit s e i n Recht keine Chance auf Verwirklichung hat [...] Dadurch, daß gerade Gunnar sich gerne des Holmgangs bedient, wird abermals deutlich, daß Gunnar gleichsam das Durchsetzungsrecht mittels Kraft und Stärke verkörpert. Wie sein Verhalten nach der Friedlosigkeit gezeigt hat, ist er letztlich nicht geneigt, einem Rechtsentscheid aufgrund eines verbalen Verfahrens stattzugeben, wenn er seinem Willen zuwider läuft. Gunnar erachtet die eigene körperliche Kraft für rechtskräftiger als jede Zeugenaussage und jeden Vergleich, eben weil sich seine mächtige Stellung nicht auf verbale Bekundungen, sondern auf seine eigenen physischen Fähigkeiten gründet. (Gottzmann, 1982, pp. 158–159)

Besides his almost superhuman physical abilities, Gunnarr is portrayed by his superior tactics. His skilful use of bow and arrow is an exception in *Njáls saga*, and allows him to confront much larger groups of enemies. In the end, however, his reliance on bow and arrow contribute to his downfall, when his wife Hallgerðr refuses to grant him two strands of her hair for a new bowstring.

Gunnarr's brother Kolskeggr is an outstanding fighter, too, but is unable to step out of Gunnarr's shadow in the combat scenes. Even when he kills a number of opponents and some of his actions are described in detail, the overall focus remains on Gunnar (CS 7, 9, 16). In his short analysis of roles and stock characters in *Njáls saga*, Lönnroth counts him among the figures of the “comrade-at-arms” type who “will usually play a subordinate and sometimes comic role.” (Lönnroth, 1976, pp. 63–65)

Like Gunnarr, Kolskeggr uses a weapon nobody else in the saga wields, a *sax*. With the *sax* as his main weapon, he is fully armed: *Kolskeggur hafði saxið og alvæpni*. (p. 207 / ch. 71) As explained before (see footnote 103), this *sax* should be understood as a proper combat weapon, not a short utility blade. While Gunnarr's *atgeirr* is an enchanted weapon, the *sax* is merely of extraordinary quality, according to the well-informed Dane Tófi.

Nevertheless, the episode how it comes into Kolskeggr's possession might be a reflex of a motif 'how to acquire an enchanted weapon in combat'. While Gunnarr uses the wood of the ship to defeat his opponent and take the *atgeirr* into possession (see below, where the berserk motif is discussed), the fact that the sax's old and new owner have the same name could be the necessary narrative prerequisite to allow the blade to go from one hand to the other.

Kolskeggr's true importance becomes painfully obvious once he has left the country. Before that, he never abandoned Gunnarr when fighting was ahead – even when Gunnarr tries to go into combat all alone, his brother would follow him:

Kolskeggur tekur vopn sín og leitar sér að hesti og ríður eftir slíkt er hann mátti. (p. 189 / ch. 54) Fighting side by side, the two brothers resembled a two men army: *'Flýjum nú, ekki er við menn um að eiga,'* (p. 199 / ch. 63) their opponents shout out. But without Kolskeggr's support, Gunnarr is finally defeated, his mother being unable, his wife being unwilling to help him. As Kári puts it later in the saga: *'Ber er hver að baki nema sér bróður eigi'* (p. 333 / ch. 152) – a proverb that had been tested before in practical application in (CS 17): *Ögmundur flóki hljóp að baki Gunnari. Kolskeggur sá það og hjó undan Ögmundi báða fætur og hratt honum út á Rangá og drukknaði hann þegar.* (p. 207 / ch. 72)

Nevertheless, (CS 17), which is the last fight the brothers fight together, and the last fight Gunnarr wins before his death in (CS 18), already hints at the hero's downfall – here, Gunnarr is wounded for the first time in the saga, when his protection fails: *Þorgeirr hleypur að Gunnari af mikilli reiði og lagði spjóti í gegnum skjöldinn og svo í gegnum hönd Gunnari.* (p. 207 / ch. 72) When the attackers turn to flee, Kolskeggr recommends to pursue and kill their enemy Þorgeirr, but Gunnarr denies this – with fatal consequences, as we know. While Kolskeggr's absence is the condition that allows Gunnarr's enemies to kill him, according to the narrative logic of the saga, the hero's death at the same time eliminates his comrade-at-arms from the story. Kolskeggr leaves Iceland with the words: *'seg það móður minni og frændum mínum að eg ætla ekki að sjá Ísland því að eg mun spyrja þig látinn frændi og heldur mig þá ekki til útferðar.'* (p. 210 / ch. 75) When his brother is slain, Kolskeggr is so far away from home that the task of avenging Gunnarr falls to his son Hǫgni and Skarpheðinn Njálsson instead.

Gunnarr's death is tied to the revenge of his wife Hallgerðr, who refuses to give him a strand of her hair to repair his torn bow string.

Hann mælti til Hallgerðar: 'Fá mér leppa tvo úr hári þínu og snúið þið móðir mín saman til bogastrengs mér.' 'Liggur þér nokkuð við?' segir hún. 'Líf mitt liggur við,' segir hann, 'því að þeir munu mig aldrei fá sóttan meðan eg kem boganum við.' 'Þá skal eg nú,' segir hún, 'muna þér kinnhestinn og hirði eg aldrei hvort þú verð þig lengur eða skemur.' 'Hefir hver til síns ágætis nokkuð,' segir Gunnar, 'og skal þig þessa eigi lengi biðja.' Rannveig mælti: 'Illa fer þér og mun þín skömm lengi uppi.' (p. 213 / ch. 77)

This is, of course, a purely fictional – almost mythological – motif. A bowstring is not made *ad hoc* during the heat of battle from a woman's hair, it has to be carefully prepared. Carola Gottzmann's interpretation of the scene is convincing:

Gunnar glaubt, sich jedem Angriff widersetzen zu können. Er wäre auch durchaus dazu imstande gewesen, wenn ihm seine Bogensehne nicht zerrissen worden wäre, und wenn er Hallgerd nicht hätte bitten müssen, ihm durch ihre Haarsträhne die Bogensehne zu ersetzen. Allein ihre Weigerung, ihm zu helfen, macht Gunnar unfähig, sich zu verteidigen. Der Bogen, der schon in der genealogischen Einführung (Kap. 19) erwähnt wurde, Zeichen seines Durchsetzungsvermögens, wird in dem Moment zerbrochen, da es um die äußerste Gefährdung seiner Existenz geht. Da Gunnar sie herabsetzte und nicht schützte, kostet sie nun ihre Macht über ihn aus, indem sie Gunnar ihre Hilfe versagt. (Gottzmann, 1982, p. 68)

She continues:

Gunnar, Inbegriff eines Menschen, der sich durch seine eigene Stärke zu behaupten weiß, vertraut uneingeschränkt auf diese. Deshalb werden ihm die Instrumente, die ihm die Durchsetzung seines eigenen Willens ermöglichen, Pfeil und Bogen, selbst zum Verhängnis. Indem er nicht seinen eigenen Pfeil benutzt, ermöglicht er es seinen Gegnern, die Waffe selbst zu zerstören. Gunnars entscheidender Irrtum, die tragische Verkennung, liegt darin begründet, daß er sich nicht, wie sonst in seinen Handlungen, auf die eigene Verteidigung beschränkt, sondern seine Feinde darüber hinaus aus einer Haltung der superbia heraus zu erniedrigen sucht. (Gottzmann, 1982, p. 77)

Skarpheðinn (and the two Hǫskuldrs)

After Gunnar's death, the focus in the combat scenes is mainly on two men: Skarpheðinn Njálsson and Kári Sǫlmundarson. Even though Flosi Þorðarson calls Kári the man '*er næst gengur Gunnari að Hlíðarenda um alla hluti*' (p. 283 / ch. 130), the attention turns to Skarpheðinn's actions when both he and Kári are engaging in the same combat. Like Kolskeggr in relation to Gunnar, Kári can be read as a "comrade-at-arms" to the "hero" Skarpheðinn, as long as Skarpheðinn is alive. This is an example of the author's intention to use the combat scenes as a reflection of the development of the wider conflict the saga tells. Skarpheðinn's combat style is, as we will see, dominated by the use of brute force at the proper moment of time. This lack of subtlety resembles the behaviour of Njáll's sons

and their brother in law Kári in the ongoing feud. When they engage in combat, Skarpheðinn is the dominant figure, and his way of fighting determines their actions as a whole. This is nowhere more obvious than in the assassination of Hǫskuldr Þráinsson Hvítanessgoði. Already in the planning of the killing, Skarpheðinn speaks for his family:

Mörður rægir Hǫskuld að vanda sínum og hefir nú enn margar nýjar sögur og eggjar einart Skarphéðin og þá að drepa Hǫskuld og kvað hann mundu verða skjótara að bragði ef þeir færu eigi þegar að honum. 'Gera skal þér kost á þessu,' segir Skarphéðinn. (p. 256 / ch. 110)

And it is he who deals the first blow to his father's foster-son, his former friend. Only then the others fall over Hǫskuldr in an excess of violence:

Þeir Skarphéðinn höfðu það mælt með sér að þeir skyldu allir á honum vinna. Skarphéðinn spratt upp undan garðinum. En er Hǫskuldur sá hann vildi hann undan snúa. Þá hljóp Skarphéðinn að honum og mælti: 'Hirð eigi þú að hopa á hæl, Hvítanessgoðinn' og höggur til hans og kom í höfuðið og féll Hǫskuldur á knéin. Hann mælti þetta við er hann féll: 'Guð hjálpi mér en fyrirgefi yður.' Hljópu þeir þá að honum allir og unnu á honum. (p. 256 / ch. 111)

Richard Allen pointed out that “one should note the care by which the onus of Hǫskuldr's death is mainly shifted to Skarpheðinn; Kári's share in the slaying is played down, probably because Kári's later role at the end will demand an intact reputation.” (Allen, 1971, p. 112)

Quick and shockingly violent, the slaying of Hǫskuldr is one of the most intense combat scenes of *Njáls saga* - “That Hǫskuldr's slaying is an evil deed is made quite clear, perhaps most effectively in the telling of the deed itself.” (Allen, 1971, p. 111) Its intensity derives not only from set-up¹⁰⁵ and personal relations between killers and victim, but just as much from its realism, that is, from the imbalance of the depicted violence, the hopelessness of Hǫskuldr's situation, and the excessive and merciless use of lethal force by the attackers. Hǫskuldr does not behave like the heroes of old, who put their personal honour above their own survival. When he tries to save himself and avoid the attack, he suddenly lends a credibility to the scene that leaves the audience with a feeling of discomfort. His total submission to the attackers is not only requisite of a Christian martyr, but indeed typical for real life violence, and helps constructing the momentary interpersonal system that makes overkill actions possible:

105 As Lönnroth (1976, p. 96) pointed out, the author carefully builds up the scene to highlight the imbalance between killers and victim, and the peaceful, innocent nature of the latter: “Clearly, this is the death of a martyr! The effect is achieved primarily through the skillful use of pastoral stageprops as a setting for a revolting display of brutality. [...] Most of the pastoral details (the weather, the cloak, the basket full of grain, etc.) are indidental [sic!] to the story and could easily have been left out. But, presented so naturally and discreetly as part of the setting, they are never felt to be superfluous. The inexperienced reader will not notice that the narrator is deliberately creating a medieval *passio*, or description of martyrdom!”

The emotional mood is interactional; it is shared on both sides. The domination is emotional even more than physical; the victorious side feels ebullient, charged up; the losing side feels despairing, helpless, frozen, suffocated. [...] In atrocities, this mechanism is [...] ebullient killers feeding off the hopeless passivity of those who are being killed, and the victims caught in helpless shock and depression by the emotional dominance of those who kill them. This seems irrational, against all self-interest of the victims. Nevertheless, it is a factual pattern that characterizes virtually all major atrocities. (Collins, 2008, pp. 102–104)

Based on the resemblance of Hǫskuldr's last words to the words of Christ on the Cross – Luke 23:43 “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” –, Wolf has seen an influence from martyrs' stories on the scene:

Dieser dritte Auszug der Njálssöhne zu einer Gewalttat, nach der Tötung Sigmunds und dann Þrains, unterscheidet sich von diesen darin, dass es dort um berechnete Ansprüche ging und es zu einem fairen Kampf kam. Wozu es nun kommt, ist nicht mehr altheroischer Totschlag, sondern heillos sündhaftes Tun. [...] Unvorstellbar, dass ausgerechnet der altheroische Recke Skarpheðinn die Parole ausgegeben hätte, dass sie alle auf den einen losgehen sollten. [...] Skarpheðinn derart aus der Rolle fallen zu lassen, ist nur zu verstehen als Annäherung an das blindwütige Rasen heidnischer Verfolger, wie man das aus der Märtyreriiteratur kennt. (Wolf, 2014, pp. 89–90)

The scene's Christian subtext is further amplified by Hǫskuldr's bloody cloak, which reminds the reader of a saint's relic (Wolf, 2014, p. 91). Flosi's words that the killing of Hǫskuldr was an evil sowing, and will bring an evil harvest, enforces the Christian tone of these chapters: “For they sow the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind.” Hosea 8:7.

This is a noteworthy parallel to the slaying of Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði's namesake, Hǫskuldr Njálsson. When Skarpheðinn, Grímr and Helgi and attack Sigmundur and Skjöldr, they decide to leave Hǫskuldr behind: *‘Þú skalt gera að ekki Höskuldur því að þú munt oft sendur einn saman óvarlega,’* (p. 177 / ch. 45) as Skarpheðinn says. This seems strange; as a family member, Hǫskuldr can anyway become a worthy target in the ongoing feud at any time. As the non-legitimate son of Njáll, he is only half-brother to the other three men, and neither complete family member nor warrior. Throughout the saga, all his engagement with combat is passive or defensive: In the aforementioned preparing of the weapons, he fixes his shield, not a weapon for attack; he is often travelling alone; on Skarpheðinn's command to stay back, he does so without protest – *Höskuldur settist niður* (p. 177 / ch. 45) –, while his brothers attack; at (CS 27: Fight on the ice), he neither kills, nor wounds, not even attacks an enemy – although present, Hǫskuldr seems to stay out of the fight. This means that when he is killed by Lýtingr – indeed while travelling *einn saman óvarlega* –, he is actually innocent, and no blood is on his hands. Obviously, it is no coincidence that

he shares a name with Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði. They are parallel figures, as is also indicated by their family status in relation to Njáll – one is his illegitimate son, the other his foster-son. The horrible slaying of the Hvítanessgoði is prepared by the slaying of Hǫskuldr Njálsson. Six men ambush a single traveller, and they do not deal just one fatal wound, but hack at him in an excess of violence: *Þeir særðu Hǫskuld sextán sárum* (p. 243 / ch. 98). Hǫskuldr Njálsson is not yet the true martyr that his namesake will be; he defends himself with his sword, wounds Lýtingr and kills two of his servants.

Later in the saga it becomes evident how much God himself loathed this slaying of an innocent: The first miracle after Iceland's conversion to Christendom happens to avenge Hǫskuldr, when his son Ámundi inn blindi ('the blind') suddenly regains his eyesight at a þing. Lýtingr refuses to pay any compensation to the blind son of his victim, whereupon Ámundi answers, invoking God: *'Eigi skil eg,' segir Ámundi, 'að það muni rétt fyrir guði svo nær hjarta sem þú hefir mér höggvið. Enda kann eg að segja þér ef eg væri heileygur báðum augum að hafa skyldi eg annaðhvort fyrir föður minn fébætur eða mannhefndir enda skipti guð með okkur.*' (p. 252 / ch. 106) Indeed, God passes the judgement between them:

Eftir það gekk hann út. En er hann kom í búðardyrnar snýst hann innar eftir búðinni. Þá lukust upp augu hans. Þá mælti hann: 'Lofaður sért þú guð, drottinn minn. Sé eg nú hvað þú vilt.' Eftir það hleypur hann innar eftir búðinni þar til er hann kemur fyrir Lýting og höggur með öxi í höfuð honum svo að hún stóð á hamri og kippir að sér öxinni. Lýtingur fellur áfram og var þegar dauður. Ámundi gengur út í búðardyrnar. Og er hann kom í þau hin sömu spor sem augu hans höfðu upp lokist þá lukust nú aftur og var hann alla ævi blindur síðan. (p. 252-253 / ch. 106)

If we have asked ourselves why God does not more often intervene to rectify the countless killings in *Njáls saga*, but grants Ámundi a few moments of eyesight, it is because his father is a personification of the slain innocent.

In both cases, the slaying of Hǫskuldr Njálsson and that of Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði, the attackers fall into a murderous frenzy. Wolf's labelling as "blindwütiges Rasen" (Wolf, 2014, p. 90) is accurate. At the killing of the Hvítanessgoði, Skarpheðinn is the key for this outbreak. It can hardly be said that he "falls out of his [heroic] role" (Wolf, 2014, p. 90) – on the contrary, he fulfils it perfectly. Even when not engaged in actual combat, he radiates violence, and the lust for it - Skarpheðinn is a man to be afraid of.

When he is introduced to the saga, these traits are only hinted at:

Hann var mikill maður vexti og styrkur, vígur vel, syndur sem selur, manna fóthvatastur, skjótráður og öruggur, gagnorður og skjótorður en þó löngum vel stilltur. Hann var jarpur á hár og sveipur í hárinu, eygður vel, fölleitur og skarpleitur, liður á nefi og lá hátt tanngarðurinn, munnljótur nokkuð og þó manna hermannlegastur. (p. 153-154 / ch. 25)

A crooked nose reminds the reader of a bird's beak – maybe that of the predatory eagle, or those of crow and raven, the carrion eaters associated with the battle slain. The prominent teeth may hint at the fangs of the wolf, another beast of battle. The facial features combine with Skarpheðinn's powerful physique into a warrior's appearance. His rather ugly mouth is the physical expression of his often aggressive and insulting mode of communication – Skarpheðinn's deadly insult at the *alþingi* makes it impossible for Flosi to accept the retribution Njáll has prepared, the *brenna* being the ultimate consequence. Everyone familiar with *Njáls saga* wonders about the statement that Skarpheðinn should be *löngum vel stilltur*. There is hardly any provocation he would not react to aggressively. And while the thus ensuing violent encounters finally lead to the slaying of Hǫskuldr, Skarpheðinn's appearance becomes ever more intimidating. Not only his enemies, but the Icelandic public in general starts to refuse him: “The evil of the deed [the slaying of Hǫskuldr] stands forth in Skarpheðinn's appearance, which becomes twisted, baleful, and troll-like. All the chieftains before whom Ásgrímur and the Njálssons go in supplication remark upon it.” (Allen, 1971, p. 112) After the murder he committed, something has changed in the way Skarpheðinn looks, or the way he is perceived. When Skapti Þóroddsson asks ‘*Hver er sá maður, segir Skafti, ‘er fjórir menn ganga fyrri, mikill maður og fölleitur, ógæfusamlegur, harðlegur og trólleslegur?*’ (p. 265 / ch. 119), Skarpheðinn remarks that Skapti has known him for years: ‘*Skarphéðinn heiti eg og hefir þú séð mig jafnan á þingi en vera mun eg því vitrari en þú að eg þarf eigi að spyrja þig hvað þú heitir.*’ (p. 265 / ch. 119) None of the other chieftains seem to recognize Skarpheðinn either,¹⁰⁶ yet all of them remark on his facial features, his dark aura, and his resemblance of a troll. Given Skarpheðinn's confrontational nature, he repays insult with even greater insult, but he does nothing to dismiss the comparison with a troll. It is, after all, a reputation he had hard to work for – a troll may be a monster, but at the same time a terrible foe, an active and aggressive creature. It is fitting that in this scene, the name of Skarpheðinn's axe is mentioned for the first time, a name he himself has chosen: *Hann hafði [...] öxi þá í hendi er hann hafði drepið Þráin með og hann kallaði Rimmugýgi.* (p. 267 / ch. 120) Translated as ‘battle ogress’, the axe is another connection to the realm of trolls and monsters (more about

106 For a discussion of the ambiguities in the descriptions of Skarpheðinn, see Jakobsson (2004).

Rimmugýgr later). When Skarpheðinn gravely insults Flosi, he does not compare him to a troll (as is done to himself), but instead claims that Flosi was raped by a troll every ninth night: *‘Því þá ef þú ert brúður Svínfellsáss sem sagt er hverja hina níundu nótt og geri hann þig að konu.’* (p. 273 / 123) To a certain degree, Skarpheðinn can identify with the monster and its violent potential, perceiving himself rather on the giving than the receiving end of violence. And he rejoices in the possibility of combat and impending bloodshed.

Skarpheðinn's grin¹⁰⁷ is one of his trademarks, his answer to conflict and emotional stress, and often a sign that he is mentally one step ahead of his peers on the path of violence:

- Skarpheðinn grins after hearing Sigmundur's insults on his family (p. 176 / ch. 44);
- Skarpheðinn laughs on his way to kill Þráinn when Njáll asks where he is going (p. 235 / ch. 92);
- Ásgrímr Elliðagrímsson cautions Skarpheðinn to stay out of the conversation with Þorkell hákur; Skarpheðinn grins, insults and even threatens Þorkell (p. 267 / ch. 120);
- Skarpheðinn grins and speaks not a word when the compensation with Flosi is figured out (p. 272 / ch. 123);
- at the *brenna*, Skarpheðinn grins when Kári compliments him on his fighting skill (279 / ch. 128).

Two combat scenes involving Skarpheðinn have already been discussed above: (CS 27: Fight on the ice) and (CS 36: The slaying of Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði). We shall now turn to his remaining fights: (CS 13: Njáll's sons avenge Þórðr), (CS 19: ‘Hǫgni and Skarpheðinn avenge Gunnarr), (CS 29: ‘Njáll's sons avenge their brother Hǫskuldr), and (CS 37: The *brenna*).

(CS 13: Njáll's sons avenge Þórðr): Þórðr leysingjason (‘son of a freed man’) had helped bringing up the sons of Njáll. Although *mikill maður og styrkur* (p. 170 / ch. 39), he is known to be a man not prone to violence. When Bergþóra sends him to kill Brynjólfr rósta, Þórðr himself expresses his usually peaceful mindset: *‘Engi er eg vígamaður,’ segir hann, ‘en þó mun eg til hætta ef þú vilt.’* (p. 170 / ch. 39) At Hlíðarendi, Hallgerðr repeats these words: *‘Engi ert þú vígamaður,’ segir hún, ‘og mun ekki undir hvar þið finnist.’* (p. 170 / ch.

107 For further thoughts on Skarpheðinn's grin, see Low (1996).

39) This provocation does not remain without consequences; even though Þórðr says *'Aldrei hefi eg séð mannsblóð,' segir hann, 'og veit eg eigi hversu mér bregður við'* (p. 170 / ch. 39), he does what he is told. After his killing of Brynjólfr, Njáll and Skarpheðinn express their surprise about Þórðr's deed:

'Fleiri gerast nú vígamenn en eg ætlaði.' Skarphéðinn mælti: *'Sjá maður hefir þó helst hraðfeigur verið er látist hefir fyrir fóstura vorum er aldrei hefir séð mannsblóð og mundu það margir ætla að vér bræður mundum þetta fyrri gert hafa að því skaplyndi sem vér höfum.'* (p. 171 / ch. 40)

This is a hint at the horrible events to come. With Þórðr, foster-father of the *Njálssynir*, the first member of the 'inner circle' of Bergþórshváll engages in the bloodshed, and at the same time, he is the most unlikely candidate to do so. Þórðr's action makes it painfully obvious how the saga's protagonists are getting caught in a maelstrom of violence that no one can avoid, no matter if he lusts for blood or not.

Maybe because he is the son of a freed slave, Þórðr feels the need to prove his worthiness within Icelandic society. He seems to be strictly bound to a code of honour, more than many other men. Instead of slaying Brynjólfr in an ambush, he allows him to take up his weapons and stages a fair fight (CS 11: The second murdered free man): *Þórður mælti: 'Ver þú þig Brynjólfur því að eg vil eigi níðast á þér.'* (p. 171 / ch. 39)

After killing Brynjólfr rósta on Bergþóra's command, Þórðr himself is slain by Sigmundur Lambason and his Swedish companion Skjöldr. Gunnarr pays compensation to Njáll, but this does not end the case, at least not for the sons. Vagrant women tell how they have seen them: *'Skarphéðinn hvatti öxi, Grímur skefti spjót, Helgi hnauð hjalt á sverð, Höskuldr treysti mundriða í skildi.'* (p. 175 / ch. 44) Weapons that have not been used for a while are made battle-ready – Njáll's sons adjust to the dynamics of feuding, and the preparation of weapons is also a preparation of mind and heart. When Sigmundur's slanderous verses become known at Bergþórshváll, they set out to restore their honour and avenge their foster-father. Remarkably, when Njáll follows them to ask about their plans, he talks to Skarpheðinn individually, not to all four of them as a group: *'Hvert skal fara Skarphéðinn?'* (p. 177 / ch. 44)

After leaving their half-brother Höskuldr behind, Skarpheðinn, Grímr and Helgi attack Sigmundur and Skjöldr. Skarpheðinn deems Sigmundur the more dangerous enemy, and takes him on himself: *'En eg ætla mér Sigmund. Þykir mér það karlmannlegt.'* (p. 177 / ch. 45) Before, when Sigmundur and Skjöldr killed Þórðr, they showed no interest in fair

fighting: [S]egir Þórður, 'gakk þú til einvígis við mig.' 'Eigi skal það,' segir Sigmundur, 'þess skulum vér njóta að vér erum fleiri.' (p. 173 / ch. 42) Consequently, Grímr and Helgi neither show any mercy to Skjöldr. The fight of the three men – all of them “comrades-at-arms”, according to Lönnroth's typology – is of marginal interest, recounted with only a few words, and used as a bracket to the scene's central fight. After the initiating sentence – *Skjöldur sneri í mót þeim Grími og Helga og börðust þeir í ákafa.* (p. 177 / 45) –, the focus shifts to the actions of Skarpheðinn and Sigmundur. Only after these two have reached a decision, the comrades-at-arms bring their fight to an end: *Grímur hjó á fótinn Skildi og tók af í ristarliðnum en Helgi lagði sverði í gegnum hann og hafði hann þá bana.* (p. 178 / ch. 45)

In contrast to the unfair way in which Sigmundur and Skjöldr dealt with Þórður, Skarpheðinn upholds a certain code of honour. Before he attacks, he allows Sigmundur to take up weapons and helmet and get ready for the fight. This reminds of the fair behaviour his foster-father had shown when he attacked Brynjólfr, as described above. Sigmundur himself remarked on the courage both Þórður and Skarpheðinn possess: *'En eigi er kynlegt að Skarphédinn sé hraustur því að það er mælt að fjórðungi bregði til fósturs.'* (p. 173 / ch. 42)

Sigmundur is thus fully equipped when the fight starts, with spear, sword, shield, helmet, and a leather armour for the upper body. Nevertheless, he loses his life. The encounter lasts only for a few movements, which are described in detail:

Sigmundur hafði hjálm á höfði sér og skjöld á hlið og gyrður sverði og hafði spjót í hendi, snýr nú í mót Skarphéðni og leggur þegar spjótinu til hans og kemur í skjöldinn. Skarphédinn laust í sundur spjótkaftið og færir upp öxina í annað sinn og höggur til Sigmundar og kom í skjöldinn og klauf ofan öðrum megin mundriða. Sigmundur brá sverðinu hinni hægri hendi og höggur til Skarphédins og kom í skjöldinn og festi sverðið í skildinum. Skarphédinn snaraði svo fast skjöldinn að Sigmundur lét laust sverðið. Skarphédinn hjó þá enn til Sigmundar með öxinni Rimmugýgi. Sigmundur var í pansara. Öxin kom á öxlina og klauf ofan herðarblaðið. Hann hnykkir að sér öxinni og féll Sigmundur á kné bæði og spratt upp þegar. 'Laust þú mér nú,' segir Skarphédinn, 'en þó skalt þú í móðurætt falla áður við skiljum.' 'Það er illa þá,' segir Sigmundur. Skarphédinn laust á hjálminn Sigmundar og hjó hann síðan banahögg. (p. 177-178 / ch. 45)

Þórður's influence on Skarpheðinn shows itself not only in the fair behaviour before the fight, but also in the similarities in their fighting style. Both use an axe in combat; their tactic is to let the opponent attack first, shatter the incoming weapon and follow up immediately with a second strike. Þórður does so successfully against Brynjólfr in (CS 11): *Brynjólfur reið að Þórði og hjó til hans. Þórður hjó í mót með öxi og í sundur skaftið fyrir framan hendur honum Brynjólfi og hjó þegar í annað sinn til hans* (p. 171 / ch. 39) Against

his two opponents in scene (CS 12), he is not quick enough to wound one of them. Nevertheless, his basic movement pattern remains the same, that is, destroying the incoming weapon: *Síðan sækja þeir að honum og brýtur hann spjót fyrir hvorumtveggja þeirra.* (p. 173 / ch. 42). Skarpheðinn makes his revenge perfect when he uses his foster-father's 'trademark move' against Sigmundr – where Þórðr failed, Skarpheðinn succeeds. All of the movements in this fight are not only plausible, but well observed and described.¹⁰⁸ Sigmundr's first thrust triggers a direct counter action from his opponent. The tip of his spear may have penetrated into Skarpheðinn's shield: *leggur þegar spjótinu til hans og kemur í skjöldinn.* Even if it got stuck just a little bit, being fixated between shield and Sigmundr's hands would make the shaft of the weapon susceptible to be hacked off. Skarpheðinn's next action, wresting the sword out of Sigmundr's hand once it got stuck in the shield, uses the leverage of the turning shield: *Skarphéðinn snaraði svo fast skjöldinn að Sigmundur lét laust sverðið.* The shield can even be pushed in a circle to the front and outside, attacking the sword wielder's hand with the shield edge and putting him further under pressure. Once unarmed, Sigmundr stands no chance against Skarpheðinn, who follows up with a strike to the shoulder that drops him to his knees. Sigmundr jumps to his feet again, and Skarpheðinn finds time for a laconic remark, before dealing him another blow to the helmet, and then the fatal blow, which is not exactly described. All in all, it takes five strikes with the axe to finish the fight, which are systematically bereaving Sigmundr of his capability to attack and defend. Skarpheðinn walks over his opponent like a steamroller, moving from the perimeter of Sigmundr's reach to his center: 1. destruction of the spear; 2. destruction of the shield (disarming of the sword); 3. blow to the body; 4. blow to the head; 5. killing blow. By the way the blows and their effects are described, we may assume that all five of them, or at least the more detailed first four, are dealt on the basic attack angle common to human combat behaviour – that is, in a diagonal to vertical line, from the right shoulder downwards (on a clock face, roughly from the 1 or 2 to the 7 or 8, for a right handed person).¹⁰⁹ Especially since Skarpheðinn uses a shield, this basic striking angle makes sense, allowing him to swing the axe without hindrance. Of course, more elaborate ways of striking are possible by coordinating weapon and shield around each other – but obviously, Skarpheðinn is not in need of elaborate technique. His skill is not based on flashy moves, but on aggressive simplicity, on speed, power, timing and

108 For a discussion of the relative difficulty of splitting an enemy's shield, see Short (2009, p. 41).

109 This way of striking is what almost all people, also those untrained in combat, refer to instinctively as a first option when using an impact weapon. As a result, a significant part of battle related head traumata occur to the upper left side of the head, where such blows typically land. See, e. g., Kjellström (2009).

accuracy. This relates to his use of violence in general: Once Skarpheðinn decides to fight, he does so without hesitation, and in the most direct way. This shows also in his next fight, where he sets out to avenge Gunnarr.

(CS 19: 'Högni and Skarpheðinn avenge Gunnarr'): Gunnarr's death had come as a shock to his family and friends, and blood needs to be spilled: *Þeir spurðu hvort Njáli þætti nokkuð eiga að lýsa vígsök Gunnars og búa mál til. Hann kvað það ekki mega er maður var sekur orðinn og kvað heldur mundu verða að veita þeim í því vegskarð að vega nokkura í hefnd eftir hann.* (p. 214 / ch. 78) Soon later, dead Gunnarr is heard quoting poems in his grave mound, and Njáll sends Skarpheðinn to do what has to be done: *Eftir það talaði hann lengi hljótt við Skarphéðin. Síðan tók Skarphéðinn öxi sína og fer með þeim til Hlíðarenda.* (p. 215 / ch. 78) At Hlíðarendi, Skarpheðinn and Gunnarr's son Högni become witnesses to Gunnarr happily singing in his grave mound. For Skarpheðinn, the meaning is clear: Gunnarr urges the two men to avenge him, and he guarantees his help to still doubtful Högni, according to a promise Njáll had given to Gunnarr. As if he had been only waiting for Högni to make up his mind, Skarpheðinn urges now for quick action: *'Nú skulum við fara þegar í nótt því að ef þeir spyrja að eg er hér þá munu þeir vera varari um sig.'* (p. 216 / ch. 79) This logic seems a bit weird, bearing in mind that Skarpheðinn had obviously stayed for quite a while at Hlíðarendi: *Rannveig bað að hann væri þar lengi. Hann hét því. Þeir Högni gengu út og inn jafnan.* (p. 215 / ch. 78). Once the decision for fighting is made, Skarpheðinn is in no mood to wait for further support or the perfect opportunity. He trusts in his skill and in his comrade, and he is willing to create the right opportunity himself.

The scene that started with Gunnarr as a revenant is laden with further supernatural symbols: Before their attack, Högni arms himself with his father's *atgeirr*. The weapon 'sings' when he takes it from the wall, a sure sign that men will soon be killed. Riding to Oddi, where their first two targets live, they have foreboding company: *Hrafnar tveir flugu með þeim alla leið.* (p. 216 / ch. 79) However, when they arrive, the scene loses all supernatural connotations. Driving sheep towards the farm, they lure Hróaldr Geirsson and Tjörvi outside. In the dark of the night, the attack comes as a surprise to the victims who are killed without much ado:

'Eigi þarft þú að hyggja að, jafnt er sem þér sýnist, menn eru hér.' Síðan höggur Skarphéðinn Tjörva banahögg. Hróaldr hafði spjót í hendi. Högni hleypur að honum.

Hróaldr leggur til Högna. Högni hjó í sundur spjótskaftið með atgeirinum en rekur atgeirinn í gegnum hann. (p. 216 / ch. 79)

The two friends continue to their second target, the farm at Þríhyrningr. Again, Skarpheðinn plays on the victims' care for their property to lure them out of the house: *Skarphéðinn hleypur á hús upp og reytir gras og ætluðu þeir er inni voru að fénaður væri.* (p. 216 / ch. 79) Starkaðr Barkarson and his son Þorgeirr show even less resistance than Hróaldr and Tjörvi, even though they, too, are carrying weapons. They are quickly disposed of: *En er Starkaður sér Skarphéðin hræðist hann og vildi aftur snúa. Skarphéðinn höggur hann við garðinum. Þá kemur Högni í mót Þorgeiri og vegur hann með atgeirinum.* (p. 216 / ch. 79) The third encounter is with Mqrðr Valgarðsson, at Hof. Mqrðr awaits the avengers outside the house and pleads for mercy; somewhat astoundingly, he is not attacked. Self-judgement is granted to Högni, and Mqrðr's life is spared.

Several things are remarkable about the fights: First, Skarpheðinn's sudden reliance on ambush and deceit. Whereas he granted a fair fight to Sigmundr in (CS 13), he shows no hesitation in murdering his surprised victims, even when they try to run away from him. Second, this is the only scene where both Gunnarr's *atgeirr* and Skarpheðinn's axe *Rimmugýgr* are used in one fight, side by side. At Oddi, Högni employs a tactic similar to Skarpheðinn in (CS 13), by first shattering the shaft of the incoming spear, then attacking the body. At the same time, he carries on his father's legacy, using the *atgeirr* both for slashing and for thrusting, and driving it through his enemy. Gunnarr was the dominant figure in all his fights. When comrades fought by his side, none of them ever killed as many enemies as Gunnarr. The same is true for Skarpheðinn; whenever he is engaged in a fight, the focus remains on him, even if the great Kári is with him. (CS 19) is different. Högni with Gunnarr's *atgeirr*, and Skarpheðinn with *Rimmugýgr* fight at eye level. The scene's focus remains on both of them, and they kill the same number of enemies. Fitting for his temper, Skarpheðinn seems a little bit more pressing – on both occasions, he is the first one to attack. But this is equalled out by the details we get on Högni's movements against Hróaldr. It is not possible to decide who of the two is the 'hero', and who the 'comrade-at-arms'. A few sentences after the scene, Högni is *úr sögunni* (p. 217 / ch. 80), and with him the *atgeirr* he planned to bring to his dead father, *og hafi hann til Valhallar og beri þar fram á vopnapingi.* (p. 216 / ch. 79) The scene, therefore, does not only satisfy the reader's wish for a revenge for Gunnarr. It also has to be understood as a *translatio* of the role of the saga's dominant warrior from Gunnarr – via his heir Högni – to Skarpheðinn.

They may never truly fight side by side, but in (CS 19) there is a short overlap between the two men's eras. And while Gunnarr's is now definitely ended, Skarpheðinn's has only just begun.

(29: Njáll's sons avenge their brother Hǫskuldr): Skarpheðinn's fears that his half-brother might be in great danger on his lone trips become reality when Hǫskuldr is killed by Lýtingr and his men. Now, both Hǫskuldr's and their own mother urge the sons of Njáll to take revenge for the killing, and to do it quickly. Once again, when blood needs to be spilled, Skarpheðinn is the one among the brothers who is addressed personally: *'Þér fel eg á hendi Skarphéðinn að hefna bróður þíns og vænti eg að þér muni vel fara þó að hann sé eigi skilgetinn og þú munir mest eftir ganga.'* (p. 244 / ch. 98)

There is no further need to incite Njáll's sons, and they set out to kill Lýtingr and his brothers. Before starting a surprise attack – *'Förum vér nú hljótt því að eg heyri mannamál upp með ánni.'* (p. 244 / ch. 99) – they discuss who shall attack whom. Grímr and Helgi decide to go for Lýtingr, while Skarpheðinn is supposed to take care of Hallgrímr and Hallkell. He warns his brothers not to let Lýtingr escape, and the combination of this warning and the quite insensible distribution of numbers in the fight to come (one against two and two against one) provoke a feeling on the reader's side that something will go wrong.

The attack happens quickly and without warning:

Skarphéðinn hleypur þegar yfir lækinn og í melbakkann öðrum megin. Þar stóð Hallgrímur á uppi og þeir bræður. Skarphéðinn höggur á lærið Hallgrími svo að þegar tók undan fótinn en þrífur Hallkel annarri hendi. Lýtingur lagði til Skarphéðins. Helgi kom þá að og brá við skildinum og kom þar í lagið. Lýtingur tók upp stein og laust Skarphéðin og varð Hallkell laus. Hallkell hleypur þá upp á melbakkann og kemst eigi á upp annan veg en hann skýtur niður knjúnum. Skarphéðinn slæmir til hans öxinni Rimmugýgi og höggur í sundur í honum hrygginn. Lýtingur snýr nú undan en þeir Grímur og Helgi eftir og kemur sínu sári á hann hvor þeirra. Lýtingur kemst út á ána undan þeim og svo til hrossa og hleypir til þess er hann kemur í Ossabæ. (p. 244 / ch. 99)

The scene is a description of a quick and brutal clash, and there is nothing exaggerated or unrealistic in the movements of the participants. Skarpheðinn fulfils his part of the plan: Chopping off Hallgrímr's leg, he starts the fight. Even though he comes under pressure from Lýtingr, he gets a swing at Hallkell with the axe, and cuts down the enemy who tries to escape from him, like before in (CS 19). Here, the scene is even more brutal. Hallkell is down on all four, trying to climb up the riverbank. The image is one of complete

helplessness; on hands and knees, Hallkell reminds the reader of a small child – however, he can hope for no mercy from Skarpheðinn.

Helgi is there at the right moment to protect his brother from Lýtingr's attack with the spear. But apart from that, he and Grímr are not much good in the fight. They wound Lýtingr, but they cannot prevent him from escaping. Later, when they are back home at Bergþórshváll, Njáll makes no secret of his disapproval of their failure: '*Ekki mundi Höskuldur hafa skotið skildi fyrir hann,*' segir Njáll, '*ef þú hefðir drepið hann þá er þér var ætlað.*' (p. 245 / ch. 99)

This fits into a general pattern. Grímr and Helgi are good men as 'comrades-at-arms'. They are never afraid to fight, but still, they are no true heroes. As such, it is beyond their capability to kill one of the main antagonists. Their fight record is not very impressive:

- In (CS 22), Kári comes to their help against the Scottish pirates, a battle they might have lost otherwise;
- in (CS 26), they are captured by Jarl Hákon;
- in (CS 13, 27, 29), they team up to kill a single enemy (and fail to do so in Lýtingr's case);
- in (CS 28), they take part in the slaying of Höskuldr;
- in (CS 37), Helgi disguises in women's clothes to escape the *brenna* (and is beheaded).

Grímr's and Helgi's incompleteness as warriors highlights in contrast Skarpheðinn's martial capabilities. As long as he is alive, he is the outstanding warrior among the men of Bergþórshváll, including Kári. But even that cannot save him from his impending doom.

(CS 37: The *brenna*): When Flosi and his men approach Bergþórshváll, Skarpheðinn correctly predicts their will to win by any means, even by the use of fire. At first, he objects his father's plan to wait inside the house for the attackers: '*Eg er og þess ófús að láta svæla mig inni sem melrakka í greni.*' (p. 278 / ch. 128). However, he changes his mind and obeys Njáll's wish – fully knowing it will mean their death, a death he is not afraid of: '*En vel má eg gera það til skaps föður míns að brenna inni með honum því að eg hræðist ekki dauða minn.*' (p. 278 / ch. 128) The reasons for this change of mind can be explained in different ways: As a supreme act of freedom, like Sveinsson saw it: "It is just as though

life has become clear and transparent for him. He can see through it, weigh its values, and make a conscious, deliberate choice. He knows what his love for his father will cost, but he makes his choice nevertheless.” (Sveinsson, 1971, p. 154) As an act of obedience to Njáll, after the shock of Høskuldr's death. Or as a suicidal act of self-punishment, an attempt to redeem his soul from the sin of slaying Høskuldr - *‘Trúið þér og því að guð er miskunnsamur og mun hann oss eigi láta brenna bæði þessa heims og annars,’* (p. 280 / ch. 129) as Njáll puts it.

Be it as it may: Skarpheðinn prepares to die, but not without doing as much damage to the enemy as he can. One last time, he proves his fighting skill:

Hróaldur Össurarson hljóp að þar sem Skarphéðinn var fyrir og lagði til hans. Skarphéðinn hjó spjótið af skafti fyrir honum og hljóp að honum og hjó til hans og kom öxin ofan í skjöldinn og bar að Hróaldi þegar allan skjöldinn en hyrnan sú hin fremri tók andlitið og féll hann á bak aftur og þegar dauður. (p. 279 / ch. 128)

Helgi may chop off a leg, and Kári, Grímr and Helgi *særðu marga menn* (p. 279 / ch. 128) with their spears, but Skarpheðinn is the only one able to kill one of the attackers. Kári articulates Skarpheðinn's role as the outstanding fighter of their family: *‘Lítt dró enn undan við þig Skarphéðinn og ert þú vor fræknastur.’* (p. 279 / ch. 128)

Skarpheðinn utilizes the same tactic like in his very first fight – shattering the opponent's incoming weapon –, and adheres to the fighting style that has worked so well for him throughout the saga: forward pressure, combined with powerful blows with *Rimmugýgr*. Again, his movements – counterattack to the incoming weapon, immediate follow-up to the enemy's head – are completely realistic. The description of the lethal strike can be interpreted in two ways: Either the blow of the axe alone has enough power to press the shield towards Hóaldr's body, maybe split the shield rim, and hit the face. Or maybe Skarpheðinn uses his body mass to slam into the opponent, thereby pressing the shield into him and then delivering the killing strike: For a last time, Skarpheðinn throws himself against the enemy with everything he has.

After Hróaldr is killed and many attackers wounded, Flosi has to realize how impossible it is to defeat Njáll's family in open fighting, and orders his men to burn the house and those within. Even amidst the flames, with Njáll and Bergþóra preparing to die and Helgi beheaded, Skarpheðinn, Kári and Grímr will not stop fighting: *Þá tóku þeir Skarphéðinn og Kári og Grímur brandana jafnskjótt sem ofan duttu og skutu út á þá og gekk því um hríð. Þá skutu þeir spjótum inn að þeim en þeir tóku öll á lofti og sendu út aftur.* (p. 281 / ch.

129) The attackers stop their futile attempts to use their spears and wait for the fire to do its work. Kári and Skarpheðinn decide to try an escape, but both seem doubtful from the beginning that Skarpheðinn will be able to make it – Kári knows about his own lightfootedness and agility (see below), and that few men can compete with him in this respect. It comes as they suspected: While Kári is quick and nimble enough to run up one of the smouldering beams and flee, the same beam breaks under Skarpheðinn's feet. Throughout the saga, Skarpheðinn had been described as big and strong and powerful; he had been compared to a troll, and both his character and his combat tactics reminded the reader of a raging bull. Now, his massive physique becomes his downfall. He understands that the end is near: *‘Séð er nú hversu vera vill.’* (p. 282 / ch.130) But while his life is lost, his honour is not. When Gunnarr Lambason tries to insult Skarpheðinn, he pays for it immediately:

‘Hvort grætur þú nú Skarphédinn?’ ‘Eigi er það,’ segir Skarphédinn, ‘en hitt er satt að súrnar í augunum. En hvort er sem mér sýnist, hlærð þú?’ ‘Svo er víst,’ segir Gunnarr, ‘og hefi eg aldrei fyrr hlegið síðan þú vóst Þráin á Markarfljóti.’ Skarphédinn mælti: ‘Þá er þér hér nú minjagripurinn.’ Tók hann þá jaxl úr þússi sínum er hann hafði höggvið úr Þráni og kastaði til Gunnars og kom í augað svo að þegar lá úti á kinninni. Féll Gunnarr þá ofan af þekjunni. (p. 282-283 / ch.130)

Sveinsson interpreted the sequence as an example of the grim humour which, according to him, “seems more fitting in a farce than in a tragedy” (Sveinsson, 1971, p. 76). And he concluded that “the greater the earnest of a situation, the closer it is to becoming humorous; and when mirth and gaiety are at their height, death is often lurking nearby.” (Sveinsson, 1971, p. 76). There might indeed be some black humour to the scene, and irony, as well. Allen has pointed out that Skarpheðinn's way of killing Þráinn earlier in the saga, splitting the head right to the teeth, is a symbolic cure for Þráinn's loose tongue (Allen, 1971, p. 104). Gunnarr himself links the scene to Þráinn, and Þráinn's tooth remains the symbol of punishment for slanderous remarks. The comical effect lies in the immediate consequence Gunnarr has to suffer, and the turning upside down of the relation between Skarpheðinn and Gunnarr: The Njállsson might have looked as if he was crying, but it is Gunnarr's eye that leaks out.¹¹⁰

110 There are more examples for such a symbolic, sometimes comical meaning of the wounds in *Njáls saga*, as Allen (1971, pp. 103–104) noted: “Later one Sigurðr Hog-Head offers to spy on Gunnarr's movements and the death wound he receives from Gunnarr's arrow shot [to the eye] is a swift judgement on what is fitting compensation for spies [...]. One of Þráinn Sígfusson's troubles has been a loose tongue, but Skarpheðinn Njálsson cures that for him [by hitting his axe in Þráinn's head, so that the teeth fall out]. [...] Þráinn need no longer worry that his impulsive words and swaggering manners will lead him into difficult situations.”

But the scene is also testament to Skarpheðinn's desperate will not to give up, and to take the fight to the very end.¹¹¹ Before he dies, he buries the head of his axe *Rimmugýgr* in the wall, so deep that the fire will not damage it: *Hann hafði rekið öxina í gaffhlaðið svo fast að gengið hafði allt upp á miðjan fetann og var hún ekki af því dignuð.* (p. 288 / ch. 132) This is significant. Even if the burning house would not be hot enough to melt the weapon, the steel could get brittle,¹¹² and lose its quality as a weapon. If Njáll had been the head and mouth of his family, Skarpheðinn had been the weapon hand and fighting spirit. He hopes for someone to avenge his family, and he makes sure the legacy of his fighting spirit lives on, embodied in *Rimmugýgr*. When his body is found among the remains of Bergþórshvall, he leans with his back against the wall. His legs, which were not able to carry him to safety like Kári's, are burned up to the knees, but the rest of his body is unaffected. The symbol is clear: Though he could not escape his fate, Skarpheðinn's will is unbroken, and even in death, he remains standing. To use Sveinsson's romantic words: "He died with seeing eyes, undefeated, and free." (Sveinsson, 1971, p. 155)

When comparing Skarpheðinn's combat scenes with each other, we can observe great differences concerning the level of 'unfairness' and brutality he displays. His first and his last fight (CS 13, 37) stand in stark contrast to the other four (CS 19, 27, 29, 36).

While avenging Þórðr (CS 13), he upholds his foster-father's code of honour, allowing his opponent to arm himself and prepare for the fight. No matter whether he did so to honour Þórðr, or to gain more prestige, or because he still believed in fair fighting at this point of his 'career', he employs very different methods afterwards. In the next fights, he leaves his enemies no chance, resorting to surprise attacks and a 'first strike doctrine'. Tjörvi and Starkaðr Barkarson are lured out of their houses in the middle of the night and killed without further ado (CS 19), even when Starkaðr attempts to turn and flee. Þráinn is caught unaware by Skarpheðinn's famous ice-skating move (CS 27), not yet prepared for battle and with his helmet in his hands. Hallgrímr and Hallkell are also caught by surprise (CS 29), and Hallkell is brutally slain from behind when he tries to crawl away on all four. And finally, Skarpheðinn's merciless behaviour reaches its horrible climax in the slaying of Hǫskuldr (CS 36). Only at the *brenna* (CS 37), Skarpheðinn acts in self-defence, and against an enemy who is fully aware of what is happening. The author underlines these

111 Recently, Torfí Tulinius interpreted Skarpheðinn's end in the light of a *Freudian* death wish, see Tulinius (2015, pp. 111–113).

112 This is what happens to Kári's sword; see below.

differences by the actual fighting tactics Skarpheðinn uses. Only in his first and his last fight, he allows his opponent to have the first strike, shatters the incoming weapon and then counter-attacks. At the *brenna*, Skarpheðinn presents himself as the technically accomplished and emotionally controlled fighter he had been in the beginning. In all the other four cases, he hits straight at the opponent's body, to injure and kill. It is the 'trollish' part of his character that reveals itself in these attacks, especially when killing the helpless who try to flee from him. As we can see, Sigmundur may not have been totally correct in mathematical terms when he assumed that Skarpheðinn resembled his foster-father to one fourth. But with a ratio of two 'fair' to four 'trollish' fights, he was close enough.

We have seen how the author of *Njáls saga* constructed the *translatio* of the role of the dominant warrior from Gunnarr to Skarpheðinn not as a sudden break, but as a more gentle shift. To do so, he used Gunnarr's *atgeirr*, wielded by his son Hǫgni, as a symbol for Gunnarr's continuing presence beyond his death. In one combat, the *atgeirr* and Skarpheðinn's *Rimmugýgr* fought side by side to avenge Gunnarr, before both Hǫgni and the *atgeirr* are out of the saga. After the *brenna*, the role of the dominant warrior has to be shifted once again, to one of the remaining figures. The obvious choice is Kári, who was hitherto outshone by Skarpheðinn's aggressive fighting style, but who has been presented as a capable warrior nevertheless (most of all in *scene 22: 'against Scottish pirates'*). And again, the shift is softened by the mediation of a substitute figure that uses an already known weapon. When Skarpheðinn's burnt body is found, his axe, and the question who should wield it from now on, are in the centre of interest:

Síðan var hann út borinn og öxin. Hjalti tók upp öxina og mælti: 'Þetta er fágætt vopn og munu fáir bera mega.' Kári mælti: 'Sé eg mann til hver bera skal öxina.' 'Hver er sá?' segir Hjalti. 'Þorgeir skorargeir,' segir Kári, 'sá er eg ætla nú mestan mann í þeirri ætt vera.' (p. 288 / ch. 132)

Rimmugýgr is no ordinary weapon, according to Hjalti. Its troll-like aura, presumably a result of a larger than average size, the shape of the blade, and maybe some decorations, reflected Skarpheðinn's troll-like mindset and appearance in conflict – weapon and wielder are one, on a symbolical level. This is very much evident in the confrontation of Skarpheðinn and Þorkell hákr at the *alþingi*. As Alois Wolf noted:

“Diese Konfrontation gipfelt in der Heroisierung Skarheðins, dessen Axt über das Schwert Þorkels triumphiert; dieser muss sein Schwert einstecken, was ihm weder vorher noch nachher passierte. Die Waffen werden dabei gleichsam zu Wesenheiten”. (Wolf, 2014, p. 96)

Unlike Gunnarr's *atgeirr*, *Rimmugýgr* is not a magical weapon per se. If both are present in one single scene, the interest is on the *atgeirr*: *Eftir það tóku þeir vopn sín þá er allir menn voru í rekkjum. Högni tekur ofan atgeirinn og söng í honum hátt.* (p. 216 / ch. 79) The axe is not even mentioned here. But even though *Rimmugýgr* does not 'sing' by itself, it does sometimes indicate when bloodshed is at hand:

- (CS 13: Njáll's sons avenge Þórðr): *En um kveldið er Njáll var kominn í rekkju heyrði hann að öx kom við þilið og söng í hátt* (p. 176 / ch. 44)

- (CS 27: Fight on the ice): *En þann morgun [...] vaknaði Njáll snemma og heyrði að öx Skarpheðins kom við þili.* (p. 235 / ch. 92)

Rimmugýgr is the outstanding weapon of Njáll's family, the manifestation of their ability to use violence for their ends.¹¹³ This is reflected in Njáll's armament, when he rides to the þing after the slaying of Hǫskuldr: *Njáll var í blárri kápu og hafði þófahött á höfði og taparöxi í hendi.* (p. 263 / ch. 118) We should suppose that a man of Njáll's wealth would carry a sword, the most expensive weapon of the time, to underline his social standing. Instead, he has a "small tapering axe" (Jónsson, 1954, p. 625) with him, one that may not even be a proper weapon for actual combat. But Njáll never was a fighter himself, and he carries the axe for a symbolic reason. By resembling Skarpheðinn's well known *Rimmugýgr*, it connects him to his sons and the crime they have committed. Carrying an axe is Njáll's statement that, even in this most difficult situation, he stands behind his family.¹¹⁴

For all these reasons, Skarpheðinn's axe cannot be swung just by anybody. The new owner has to fit *Rimmugýgr* in terms of physical strength, character, and blood line. For Kári, there is only one man that fulfils these requirements: Njáll's nephew Þorgeirr skorargeirr Þórisson. The axe changes owner, from the dead man to the living. One of the reasons that the dead Skarpheðinn is better to get along with than many had suspected (p. 288 / ch. 132) may be that the material symbol for the trollish side of his character is not with him anymore.

113 The use of an axe, as well as an *atgeirr*, as central weapons in a saga underline the author's interest in fighting and combat equipment. Both weapons are rather exceptional in such a central symbolic function, and they are carefully chosen for their narrative value. The standard weapon to play a central role in saga (and other literature) is, of course, the sword. *Njáls saga* goes beyond this stereotype.

114 Such a small axe is used earlier in the saga for symbolic reasons as well: In ch. 22, Njáll instructs his friend Gunnarr to carry a small axe as part of his disguise as Kaup-Héðinn. The figure of Kaup-Héðinn, although annoying and quarrelsome, is a comical one, and is not supposed to be felt as a threat. The small axe supports Gunnarr's disguise.

Þorgeirr skorargeirr, on other hand, is not easy to get along with, at least not for his enemies. At Kári's side, he soon proves being worthy to carry *Rimmugýgr*. His opponents fear him. As Síðu Hallr says: *‘En engi þeirra, er mál þessi eiga, munu þora að sitja að búum sínum í Fljótshlíð ef þeir eru utan sætta því að það verður þeirra bani. Og er það að vonum við skaplyndi Þorgeirs.’* (p. 325 / ch. 146) Þorgeirr takes part in two fights: (CS 40: The battle at the *alþingi*) and (CS 41: Waking up the Sigfússýnir). He is mentioned in three of the sub-scenes at the *alþingi* (CS A3, A5, A7), but only in the first of these (CS A3), his movements are described in any detail:

Þorgeir skorargeir kom að þar er fyrir var Hallbjörn hinn sterki. Þorgeir lagði til hans svo fast með annarri hendi að Hallbjörn féll fyrir og komst nauðulega á fætur og sneri þegar undan. Þá mætti Þorgeir Þorvaldi Þrum-Ketilssyni og hjó þegar til hans með öxinni Rimmugýgi er átt hafði Skarphéðinn. Þorvaldur kom fyrir sig skildinum. Þorgeir hjó í skjöldinn og klauf allan en hyrnan sú hin fremri rann í brjóstið og gekk á hol og féll Þorvaldur þegar og var dauður. (p. 317 / ch. 145)

The author reminds the audience that Þorgeirr is the new owner of *Rimmugýgr*, and he lets him wield it in a way Skarphéðinn would have approved of. After a demonstration of his physical strength – knocking over Hallbjörn ‘the strong’ with one hand –, he kills his opponent with a single blow that first shatters Þorvaldr's shield, then enters his body with the upper point of the axe head. Like Skarphéðinn in most of his fights, Þorgeirr does not wait to defend, deflect or evade an incoming attack. Sharing his cousin's preferred tactic – “the best defence is a god offence” –, he attacks immediately, once the enemy is in proper distance. The shattering of Þorvaldr's shield duplicates Skarphéðinn's first fight (CS 13: Njáll's sons avenge Þórðr), while using a single motion to hammer down the opponent's shield and inflict the lethal wound with the tip of the axe head is a copy of Skarphéðinn's last kill (CS 37: the *brenna*). The very same technique is used again by Þorgeirr in his second fight (CS 41: Waking up the Sigfússýnir), when he kills Leiðólfr ‘the strong’: *Þorgeir hafði höggvið tveim höndum með öxinni Rimmugýgi og kom hin efri hyrnan í skjöldinn og klofnaði hann í sundur en hin fremri hyrnan tók viðbeinað og í sundur og reist ofan í brjóstið á hol.* (p. 324 / ch. 146) Everyone who enters his reach becomes a target, and there is almost a comical side to Þorgeirr's power:

Þorgeir skorargeir hleypur þar að sem fyrir var Þorkell Sigfússon. Í því bili hljóp maður að baki honum og fyrr en hann gæti unnið Þorgeiri nokkurn geig þá reiddi Þorgeir tveim höndum öxina Rimmugýgi og rak í höfuð þeim öxarhamarinn er að baki honum stóð svo að hausinn brotnaði í smán mola. Féll sá þegar og var dauður. En er hann reiddi fram öxina hjó hann á öxl Þorkatli og klauf frá ofan alla höndina og féll Þorkell dauður niður. (p. 323 / ch. 146)

Two of the enemies Þorgeirr defeats easily are called by the nickname 'the strong', making him 'the stronger', so to say. It is obvious that Þorgeirr's physical strength, fighting tactic and the very techniques he uses in combat are carefully designed to make him a 'second Skarpheðinn', thus allowing Njáll's blood to take revenge for the *brenna*. And while Skarpheðinn's actions overshadowed Kári's combat skill in the fights they fought together, Þorgeirr and Kári are equal – together, they defeat their last enemy, Leiðólfr, two against one. Like Hogni Gunnarsson before, Þorgeirr's function is to help shifting the role of the dominant warrior from one (recently killed) person to another.

Kári

Kári enters the saga shortly after Gunnarr's death, and his introduction is a first indication of his qualities as a warrior. When Grímr and Helgi are vastly outnumbered by pirates in a naval battle (CS 22: Against Scottish pirates), Kári appears as *deus ex machina* to help them out, in a scene that duplicates both the setting and the very moves of the fight in which the *atgeirr* was acquired:¹¹⁵

hleypur Kári upp á skip til Snækólfs. Hann snýr í móti Kára og höggur til hans. Kári hleypur yfir slá eina er lá um þvert skipið aftur öfugur. Snækólfur hjó í slána svo að fal báða eggteina sverðsins. Kári höggur til hans og kom sverðið á öxlina og varð höggið svo mikið að hann klauf frá ofan höndina og hafði Snækólfur þegar bana. (p. 220 / ch. 84)

Compare Gunnarr in (CS 7: Gunnarr earns the *atgeirr*):

Þeir Hallgrímur hljópu á skip til Gunnars. Gunnar sneri í mót Hallgrími. Hallgrímur lagði til hans með atgeirinum. Slá ein var um þvert skipið og hljóp Gunnar aftur yfir öfugur. Skjöldur Gunnars var fyrir framan slána og lagði Hallgrímur í hann og í gegnum og svo í slána. Gunnar hjó á hönd Hallgrími og lamdist handleggurinn en sverðið beit ekki. Féll þá niður atgeirinn. Gunnar tók atgeirinn og lagði í gegnum Hallgrím. (p. 158 / ch. 30)

As has been pointed out before, Kári's role in the combat scenes is overshadowed by Skarpheðinn after his first, quite spectacular appearance on the battle grounds of *Njáls saga* – significantly so in the slaying of Höskuldr, where Kári is but a follower, not a leader.

However, right after Skarpheðinn's death, Kári's martial qualities are highlighted. The ashes of Bergþórshváll are not yet cold, when Flosi and his men learn of Kári's escape and hear Geirmund's prophetic words: '*Hafði hann sverðið Fjörsváfni,*' segir Geirmundur, '*og var blánaður annar eggteinninn og sögðum við Bárður að dignað mundi hafa en hann*

¹¹⁵ For a more detailed discussion of the naval battles and pirate scenes in the saga, see below.

svaraði því að hann skyldi herða í blóði Sigfússona eða annarra brennumanna.' (p. 283 / ch. 130) Whereas Skarpheðinn had to make sure his axe survives the *brenna* to become part in his posthumous revenge, Kári could allow his sword to become brittle in the fire – he himself is the weapon that will carry out the next killings, and his sword a constant reminder of the *brenna*. Flosi knows what threat the lone survivor is to the men of his party: *Skuluð þér það nú og hugsa Sigfússýnir og aðrir vorir menn að svo mikið eftirmál mun hér verða um brennu þessa að margan mun það gera höfuðlausan* (p. 283 / ch. 130) They have good reason to expect the worst. As Flosi knows, Kári is the man *‘er næst gengur Gunnari að Hlíðarenda um alla hluti.*' (p. 283 / ch. 130)

During the course of the saga, Kári takes part in eleven battles, fights and killings:

- (CS 22: Against Scottish pirates)
- (CS 23: Battle of Duncansby)
- (CS 27: Fight on the ice)
- (CS 36: The slaying of Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði)
- (CS 37: The *brenna*)
- (CS 40: The battle at the *alþingi*)
- (CS 41: Waking up the Sigfússýnir)
- (CS 42: Kári and Björn, part I)
- (CS 43: Kári and Björn, part II)
- (CS 44: Kári murders Gunnarr Lambason)
- (CS 46: The counting head)

And although Flosi could not know it on the morning after the *brenna*, by the end of saga, he is proven right. Based on the number of killed enemies, Kári is second only to Gunnarr. His vendetta provides plenty of opportunities to prove that Flosi's comparison was correct – not only in numbers, but also when Kári's martial skills are compared with Gunnarr's.

Like Gunnarr, Kári is able to fight ambidextrously with two weapons, one in each hand (CS 41). Even though the *atgeirr* is a singular weapon in the saga, Kári's combination – spear in the right and sword in the left hand – is obviously reminiscent of Gunnarr's simultaneous wielding of *atgeirr* and sword (CS 14, 16). Gunnarr's extraordinary speed with the weapon

is matched by Kári's actions, e. g. in (CS 42): *Grani Gunnarsson þreif spjót og skaut að Kára en Kári skaut niður við skildinum svo að fastur stóð í vellinum en tók með hinni vinstri hendi spjótið á lofti og skaut aftur að Grana og tók þegar skjöld sinn hinni vinstri hendi.* (p. 330 / ch. 150) Catching and throwing back spears is something we have also seen from Gunnarr (CS 14). Both men can deliver blows so powerful that they cut their enemies in half:

- (CS 16): *Gunnar sér þetta og varpar sér skjótt til höggs við Austmanninn og sníður hann í sundur í miðju.* (p. 199 / ch. 63);
- (CS 42): *Hann [Kári] fékk séð Þorstein og slæmdi til hans sverðinu um þverar herðarnar svo að í sundur tók manninn.* (p. 331 / ch. 150)

So: is there a difference between Gunnarr's and Kári's combative behaviour? Or do the mentioned similarities falsify the hypothesis that there are individual ways of fighting, and both Gunnarr and Kári are just stereotyped examples of the 'perfect warrior'?

There is a difference, indeed, and an important one. When Gunnarr's physical abilities are described, we hear of his skill to jump to his own height, and as far backwards as forwards. But he uses this skill only two times in combat: in (CS 7: Gunnarr earns the *atgeirr*), to create distance to the attacker, and in (CS 14: First skirmish at the Rangá), to evade a blow to the lower leg. Kári, on the other hand, can hardly keep his feet on the ground: He jumps over a beam in (CS 22) (the duplication of Gunnarr's move mentioned before); over a spear thrown at him during the fight on the ice (CS 27); over a blow to his foot during the battle at the *alþingi* (CS A2); and over a thrust with a spear, breaking the weapon's shaft by landing on it (CS 41). If he does not avoid attacks by jumping over them, he quickly withdraws his endangered foot (CS A6), withdraws one leg and breaks a spear shaft with a kick (CS 43), or quickly turns and ducks to a squatting position, gathering momentum for the next leaping attack (also CS 43).

So, even if the saga finds Gunnarr's ability of jumping worth to mention explicitly, it is Kári who mainly applies this ability. His method of evading attacks by agile leaps and perfect footwork is his trademark, and unmatched in the saga. The vivid descriptions evoke images of an almost artistic character before the reader's inner eye. Gunnarr probably *could* use the same tactic, but rather wants to stand his ground and fight, while Kári uses mobility to not be hit. These characteristics in combat are reflected by Gunnarr's death, and Kári's escape from the *brenna*, respectively. Gunnarr had the chance to leave the

country and take himself out of the line of fire, but he chose to stay and fight. Kári, on the other hand, is the only one who can escape Njáll's burning house. Where deception fails (Helgi's masquerade as a woman is immediately discovered), and Skarpheðinn is too big and heavy to escape, Kári's lightfootedness is the only way to safety. Once again, he leaps out of harm's way.

Though Kári's feet are light in combat, his blows are not. To rephrase Muhammed Ali's famous quote, Kári 'floats like a butterfly, but hits like a sledgehammer'. As we can see from the tables 1.1 and 1.2, he has an impressive score of chopping off limbs and driving weapons through bodies:

- (CS 22: Against Scottish pirates): Snækólfr's arm chopped off;
- (CS 40: The battle at the *alþingi*): (A2) Árni's shoulder and collar bone shattered, sword enters chest cavity; Hallbjörn's shield cut to pieces, toe cut off; unspecified wound to nameless man / (A6) shield and leg of nameless man cut apart / (A14) thrown spear penetrates Eyjólfur;
- (CS 41: Waking up the Sigfússýnir): spear penetrates Sigurður and leaves body between shoulder blades; Mjörður almost cut in half; Þorgeirr's leg chopped off;
- (CS 42: Kári and Björn, part I): Móðólfr's cross guard and hand hacked off; Grani's leg penetrated with a spear throw and pinned to the ground; nameless man cut in half; Lambi penetrated with the sword, blade leaves body between shoulder blades; Þorsteinn cut in half;
- (CS 43: Kári and Björn, part II): Glúmr's leg cut off; both of Ábrandr's legs chopped off
- (CS 44: Kári murders Gunnarr Lambason): Gunnarr's head chopped off
- (CS 46: The counting head): Kolr's head chopped off

Only in four of his combat scenes, Kári does not hack pieces off an enemy. Of those four, only one (CS 27) gives any details at all on the wounds he inflicts – there might be more dismemberment we are not told of:

- (CS 23: Battle of Duncansby): (unspecified wound dealt to Jarl Melsnati)
- (CS 27: Fight on the ice): sword blow enters chest cavity

- (CS 36: The slaying of Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði): (Kári's share not specified)
- (CS 37: The *brenna*): (unspecified wounds to several attackers)

The pattern behind this distribution is obvious. Kári is shown one time in his full potential when introduced in (CS 22), but then steps to the second row behind Skarhédinn, as described above. After the *brenna*, when he takes over the role of the dominant warrior, he can fully demonstrate his capacity for destruction. Fuelled by a lust for revenge, it seems that his aim is not only to defeat or kill his enemies, but to physically annihilate them. The reader can visualize how Kári's blows are not only driven by a powerful body, but also by raging emotions.

At the same time, the drastic violence is counterbalanced by several comical features, most notably with the figure of Björn úr Mork. He is yet another an example of the “comrade-at-arms” type; however, in contrast to the other “comrades-at-arms” of *Njáls saga*, Björn fulfills the role of the ‘comical sidekick’. Following Allen, he can be understood as a narrative tool to lighten the story's grim mood :

Each vengeance that Kári takes diminishes the burden of retribution he has shouldered upon himself. A whole set of typical themes and actions that were developed to sinister effect in the former episode are in this latter altered in tone and made to contribute to the sense of lightening and relief that enters the saga towards the end. Kári enlists the help of Björn, the free grandson of a thrall who once belonged to Njáll's mother. Björn is the coward without malice, the boaster without viciousness, and as soon as these terms are applied to him, they must be qualified, for Björn does stick by Kári and he does help him. Even in the midst of killing, Kári's fights take on a certain slapstick tone as Björn assists from behind the shelter of Kári's back. Verbal abuse, which has led to dire events earlier, now becomes comic as Björn bravely threatens and rails at the men whom Kári has put to flight. Even Björn's spying errands and reports of rumors now work to bring the saga nearer to its peaceful close whereas in prior episodes rumor had worked to stir up new conflicts. (Allen, 1971, pp. 125–126)

Sveinsson supported this view, always eager to underline the saga's outstanding literary quality. Concerning the scenes with Björn, he writes: “Nowhere in the saga is the irony so subtle, so sophisticated, nowhere is the comedy more refined and purer: and indeed, this is one of the most masterful passages in this great artistic masterpiece.” (Sveinsson, 1971, p. 80)¹¹⁶

Even though the fights that Kári and Björn fight together are no less bloody than others in the saga, their tone is lighter. They are also different from all the violence that happened

¹¹⁶ On Björn úr Mork, see Ker (1908, pp. 262–263) and Nordal (1919).

before insofar as they do not result in negative consequences, neither for Kári nor for Björn. There is no foreboding of a violent rebound, and Kári, Björn and audience alike can go on a quest for revenge that will not further endanger the protagonists. In the story's narrative logic, all evil that could be inflicted to Kári has been inflicted already. It is a relief for the reader. Finally, he can fully identify with a hero and delight in his martial exploits, just like Björn does when he decides to follow Kári into battle. When Gunnarr is wounded for the first time in combat several chapters earlier, this is a foreshadowing of his downfall – his next fight will also be his last. The saga puts Kári and Björn in direct contrast. Both of them are wounded in their second fight (CS 43: Kári and Björn II): *Í þessi svipan urðu þeir sárir báðir, Kári og Björn.* (p. 332 / ch. 151) Yet their wounds are unspecified – we know neither who inflicted them, nor how gravely and where the two companions were hit –, and remain without consequences. Neither do they have to be tended to after the fight, nor are they an indication that more evil will befall the two friends. Later on, after the killing of Gunnarr Lambason (CS 44), the saga shows very clearly that Kári is no longer the target of violence, but only its agent, as none of the jarl's men wants to act against him: *Sigurður jarl kenndi manninn þann er vegið hafði vígið og mælti: 'Takið þér Kára og dregið hann.'* *Kári hafði verið hirðmaður Sigurðar jarls og var allra manna vinsælastur og stóð engi upp að heldur þó að jarl ræddi um.* (p. 336 / ch. 155) Even Flosi shows understanding: *'Gerði hann það að sem hann átti.'* (p. 337 / ch. 155)

Horrible as it was, the *brenna* had a kind of cathartic effect. Now the frontlines are known to everyone, there is a general understanding in the community that the burning was beyond the limits of acceptable behaviour, and the story is now arranged on a one-way track that leads towards a conciliatory ending. Kári is thus being transformed from a regular player in the Commonwealth's power politics into the near-mythical figure of the wandering avenger.

Kári comes upon his enemies like a vengeful spirit, though his last killings have a macabre, comical quality. The beheading of Gunnarr Lambason happens at a *júl* feast, right in front of the jarl; his severed head flies through the hall and lands on King Sigtryggr's table. The scene plays with the negation of socially adequate behaviour towards power and nobility, and with the shocking yet amusing image of a bloody head slamming on ale tankards and Christmas pudding (or whatever the King might have had at the feast). The killing of Kolr Þorsteinsson (CS 46: The counting head) has a similar effect.

Lönnroth has analysed the scene and compared it with the brutal slaying of Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði; he stresses the difference between the two accounts:

The hero Kári attacks this man [Kolr Þorsteinsson] just as he is about to make a business transaction in a British port [...] In *this* case we are obviously meant to be amused rather than moved and shocked, although the deed in itself is analogous [to the slaying of Hǫskuldr], and there is no overt editorializing in either case. How, then, should we account for the difference in effect? First, the victims are very different in stature. Second, the situations are significantly different: being killed while counting money abroad somehow appears less atrocious than being killed while sowing grain on one's own land, and it is definitely more dignified and moving to die with a prayer than with a trivial utterance about property. Third, the killing seems somewhat less brutal in the latter case, since it is done more quickly and in a neater way and by only one man. The most important difference, however, lies in the staging, which is more elaborate in the first case, involving careful preparations and foreshadowings, a fairly extensive dwelling on incidental details of the setting, and a solemn, almost biblical tone. The killing of Kolr, on the other hand, is told so swiftly and abruptly that there is no time at all to feel sorry for the victim. It is the suddenness of the whole incident, rather than anything else, which makes it comic instead of tragic. (Lönnroth, 1976, pp. 96–97)

The lightening of tone is the prerequisite for the final reconciliation between Kári and Flosi, and Kári's comical killings are the last convulsions of the fever that shook the Icelandic society.

The triad of dominant warriors

As has been shown, it is possible to establish a lineage of three outstanding warrior figures, each of whom dominates a certain part of *Njáls saga*. The transitions between these characters are softened by figures of the “comrade-at-arms” type. Together with the iconic weapons of the main characters, the comrades help transferring the role of the dominant warrior from one to the next. The lineage thus reads:

I. Gunnarr (*atgeirr*)

(transitional phase) Hǫgni Gunarrson (*atgeirr*) & Skarpheðinn (*Rimmugýgr*)

II. Skarpheðinn (*Rimmugýgr*)

(transitional phase) Þorgeirr skorargeirr (*Rimmugýgr*) & Kári (*Fjǫrsváfnir*)

III. Kári (*Fjǫrsváfnir*)

The lineage of weapons ends with Kári's sword *Fjǫrsváfnir* ('he who puts life to sleep'). It is significant that neither the *atgeirr* nor *Rimmugýgr* play a role in the saga once the transition to the next dominant warrior is completed. They are a part of their wielder's character, both in a narrative sense and in the eyes of their owners. Thus, their role in the saga ends when

the periods of their original wielders have ended. Kári's sword, on the other hand, opens up a different time horizon. While the stories of the *atgeirr* and *Rimmugýgr* find their definite ends, *Fjörsváfnir* travels in a symbolic circle from wholeness to destruction to recreation. In the *brenna*, both Kári and his sword are burned, and partly damaged, and in a state of weakness: 'var brunnið af honum hárið og svo klæðin.' 'Hafði hann nokkuð vopna?' segir Flosi. 'Hafði hann sverðið Fjörsváfni,' segir Geirmundur, 'og var blánaður annar eggteinninn og sögðum við Bárður að dignað mundi hafa en hann svaraði því að hann skyldi herða í blóði Sigfússona eða annarra brennumanna.' (p. 283 / ch. 130) But in the revenge killings, Kári and *Fjörsváfnir* prove that they have overcome this damage and can fulfil the task Kári has set for them. When Kári tells Geirmundur he would re-harden the sword in the blood of his enemies, both men know that this is metallurgical nonsense, but a metaphor: Kári, the almost killed victim, will change back to the fearsome warrior he was known to be. It is significant that in this scene the name of the sword is mentioned for the first and only time in the saga, when it is referred to Flosi via Geirmundur. Before this moment, we did not even know that Kári owns an outstanding weapon, its quality indicated by the fact that it carries a name. Now that Skarpheðinn is dead, Kári is ready to become the dominant warrior in the saga. His fighting skills are in the spotlight, just like his weapon. This correlates with the fact that neither is *Rimmugýgr*'s name ever mentioned while Gunnarr is still alive. And the name that suddenly pops up, *Fjörsváfnir*, "he who puts life to sleep", is not given randomly. When Njáll accepted his fate in the *brenna*, he lay himself down to die as if he would go to sleep. The sword's name is a grim joke on that, a reflection of Njáll's death, and a threat of revenge. *Fjörsváfnir* will inflict on the arsonists what they have done to Njáll's family. Once brittle from the fire, the sword fulfils this task perfectly. The blade is never mentioned to be close to breaking, and until the last of the saga's killings – the beheading of Kolr – it holds its edge. Only at the very end of the saga, Kári lays down his sword, and both can rest.

The transformations of both Kári and the sword correspond with the development of the whole Icelandic society, as *Njáls saga* portrays it. In a functioning state at the beginning, it enters a phase of destruction. This phase, in which society is burned and damaged, slowly ebbs off in convulsions of violence that decrease in size and intensity. Kári's last two killings take the violence outside Iceland, moving first to the Orkneys, then even further away to Norway, and the grim bloodshed of his first revenge slayings turns into the almost comical beheading of Kolr. With these two narrative twists – moving the violence away

from Iceland, and ridiculing it at the same time –, the author paves the way for the reconciliation between Kári and Flosi, that means, for a pacification of Icelandic society, and the recreation of a stable, functioning social order.

Similarly, the lineage of the three dominant warriors can therefore be read as the story of the transformation of the Icelandic society from an old to a new order in three steps. Gunnarr, wielder of a spear-like weapon symbolically connected to Óðinn, is the protagonist of the old (heathen) order. Although the most accomplished warrior, he calls himself ‘*mér þykir meira fyrir en öðrum mönnum að vega menn.*’ (p. 190 / ch. 54) Meaning: He fulfils the ideal of an intact society that cherishes men who are martially able, but without bloodthirst. The troll-like Skarpheðinn with ‘Battle-Ogress’, his brutal slayings and his aggressive combat style are the symbol of the downfall of the old order, where bloodlust overcomes restraint. Kári, in the end, is the figure who is able to find a way out of the circle of violence. He is still a warrior, no doubt about that; but one that is able to reconcile and put down the sword. The symbolic meaning of the three heroes' weapons underlines this threefold model: From the magical (that is, heathen), but skillfully used *atgeirr* to the brutish, troll-like *Rimmugýgr* to the sword *Fjörsváfnir*, the cross-shaped, iconic weapon of the new, Christian order.

Allen correctly pointed out that

[i]t is no coincidence that Kári fights with much the same dexterity and nimbleness as Gunnarr [...] It is a deliberate parallel, for Kári is Gunnarr's replacement; he is the hero who brings *Njáls saga* to its conclusion; his manner and appearance are similar to Gunnarr's and he is explicitly compared to him on several occasions. (Allen, 1971, p. 59)

And he remarks “that *Njáls saga* divides into two halves. It is less easy, however, to state without reservation just where this division falls. [...] There is thus a certain overlap between the two halves of the saga.” (Allen, 1971, pp. 116–117) The model of the three dominant warriors, setting Skarpheðinn as a sharp contrast between the similar figures of Gunnarr and Kári, contests the notion that *Njáls saga* consists of only two parts. Instead, it suggests a threefold story pattern – from ‘old order’ to ‘chaos’ to ‘new order’. This interpretation strongly supports Wolf's reading of the *Njáls saga* as a founding myth of the Icelandic society,¹¹⁷ and the threefold pattern reminds us of the structure of the *rites de passage* as postulated by Arnold van Gennep (van Gennep, 1909): One status of an entity

117 “Diese Saga ist das vollwertige isländische Gegenstück zur norwegischen Königsgeschichte, wie sie in der *Heimskringla* vorliegt - aber als Prosaepos. Darin kämpft nicht mehr ein einzelner Isländer gegen die Königsmacht an [...], sondern das isländische Gemeinwesen als solches, mit sich selbst beschäftigt, steht zur Disposition.” (Wolf (2014, p. 53)) For a general discussion of the *Íslendingasögur* as founding myths of the commonwealth, see Ebel (1995, pp. 119–135).

– in this case, the Icelandic society – cannot simply be turned into another one, but has to be transformed ritually. At the heart of such a ritual transformation lies the “liminal phase”, in which everyday order is turned upside down, and social bonds are cut. Often, it is marked by suffering for those who shall be transformed. Furthermore, the liminal phase is a time when chaotic forces from the outside are able or even allowed to touch or possess a human being. Thus, the slaying of Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði, the shameful act of the *brenna*, the battle at the *alþingi*, and Skarpheðinn's suddenly troll-like appearance can be understood as parts of a liminal phase which constitutes the center of *Njáls saga* and contributes to its dimension as a historio-political myth.¹¹⁸

The battle at the alþingi

As Wolf points out, the *þing* is the center of the Icelandic community in *Njáls saga*. (Wolf, 2014, p. 65) It is therefore no wonder that unsettling the Icelandic society will also culminate in chaotic scenes at the *alþingi* (CS 40).

Even before the *alþingi* starts, violence is a constant threat, while the parties are on their way to the *þingvellir*. Flosi and his men make halt at the farm of Ásgrímr Elliða-Grímsson, father in law of the slain Helgi Njálsson, and provoke him by abusing his hospitality. In the liminal phase, the old rules of social conduct are no longer followed. The host is full of rage: *Ásgrímur þagði um matmálið og var svo rauður á að sjá sem blóð.* (p. 296 / ch. 136) He grabs a carpenter's hatchet and tries to slay Flosi, but the attempt proves futile (CS 39). Once more, the axe is the symbol for uncontrolled violence. But in contrast to Skarpheðinn's *Rimmugýgr*, the hatchet is only an improvised weapon, a working tool that cannot properly do its job, and Glúmr quickly disarms Ásgrímr. A spontaneous outburst is not enough to stop Flosi.

The next time they meet, Ásgrímr has himself better under control. When Flosi and his men notice the approach of the family and friends of Njáll at the *alþingi*, they get ready for

118 It is tempting to compare this ritual structure to the mythic narrations of the *ragnarök*. As Würth (2000, p. 584) pointed out, the pattern and imagery of the *ragnarök* are open to be used as metaphor for most times of crisis: “Die Ragnarökdarstellung, die die Endzeit und ihre Vorzeichen so allgemein formuliert, dass sich jeder Rezipient, der sich in einer Krisensituation befindet, darin wiederfinden kann, ist offenbar in unterschiedlichen zeitlichen Kontexten verwendbar und kann immer wieder von neuem angepasst werden. Auch in der Version der *Völuspá*, die im Codex Regius überliefert ist, bezieht sich die Ragnarökdarstellung offenbar nicht auf eine konkrete Krisensituation, sondern steht hier in einem allgemein weltgeschichtlichen Zusammenhang, wobei die Weltgeschichte hier mit Bildern aus der eigenen Überlieferung illustriert wird.” The figure of Þórðr leysingjason, a peaceful man turned into a killer, and the slaying of Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði by his own foster-brothers remind of the merciless bloodshed of the *fimbulveti*, where *bræðr munu beriaz / oc at þonom verðaz* (Kuhn (1962, p. 10)), the *brenna* of the world's burning, Njáll's self-sacrifice and the reconciliation between Kári and Flosi of the vision of a golden new age with Christian prefixes.

combat: *Flosi og menn hans hljópu til vopna allir og var þá við sjálft að þeir mundu berjast en þeir Ásgrímur og þeirra sveit gerðust ekki til þess og riðu til búða sinna.* (p. 298 / ch. 137) And by stating explicitly [*v*]ar nú kyrrt þann dag svo að þeir áttust ekki við (p. 298 / ch. 137), the saga shows that fighting is already close at hand. The tense atmosphere is to be felt throughout the next pages, for example when Bjarni Brodd-Helgason recommends: *‘Vér skulum og ganga með vopnum til allra lögskila* (p. 298 / ch. 138) Snorri goði adds fuel to the fire with his words, and has already devised a detailed tactic for the impending fight. (p. 302-303 / ch. 139) Obviously, he deems the battle inevitable. The others share his view – when the men attend the law suit, they go there fully armed, and with field signs on their helmets to tell apart friend from foe. (p. 305-306 / ch. 142)

The tension finally erupts into violent action when Þórhallr Ásgrímsson, foster-son of Njáll, kills Grímr inn rauði (CS A1). Þórhallr is notorious for his bodily reactions to emotional distress. When he learns of Njáll's death earlier in the saga, *hann þrútnaði allur og blóðbogi stóð úr hvorritveggju hlustinni og varð eigi stöðvað og féll hann í óvit.* (288-289 / ch. 132) Only when he falls unconscious, that means, when he cannot think any longer about what happened, the bleeding stops. Later at the *alþingi*, Þórhallr's foot is so badly swollen that he cannot join his family and friends before the court.¹¹⁹ When his father and the others leave him behind, *var andlit hans sem í blóð sæi en stórt hagl hraut úr augum honum. Hann bað færa sér spjót sitt. Það hafði Skarphéðinn gefið honum og var hin mesta gersemi.* (p. 306 / ch. 142) Although one of the three most knowledgeable men on Iceland when it comes to law – Þórhallr had been a foster-son of Njáll and learned the law from him (p. 155 / ch. 27) –, Þórhallr has to sit in his *þing*-booth and wait for messengers to bring him news about the events at the court. When he learns of the ill outcome – the law suit is lost, the suitors have to fear being banned – he gets mad with rage. With Skarphéðinn's spear in both hands, he pierces his own foot and rips out the necrotic flesh, and *blóðfossinn fellur og vogföllin svo að lækur féll eftir gólfinu.* (p. 316 / ch. 145) According to Kaiser “löst dieser von allem physischen und psychischen Druck befreiende chirurgische Eingriff bei Þórhallr den Reflex zum Kampf aus”. (Kaiser, 1998, p. 185) He leaves the booth *óhaltur* (p. 316 / ch. 145), runs to the *fimmtadómr*, and kills the first of Flosi's men who gets in his way, Grímr inn rauði: *jafnskjótt sem þeir fundust lagði Þórhallur til hans spjótinu og kom í skjöldinn og klofnaði hann í sundur en spjótið hljóp í gegnum hann svo að oddurinn kom út á milli herðanna. Þórhallur kastaði honum dauðum af*

119 For a medical discussion of the swelling, see Kaiser (1998, pp. 182–185). Kaiser points at further narrative functions: The swelling forces the use of a messenger between court and Þórhallr, and helps thus to break up the otherwise rather dreary court case. If not for the swelling, Þórhallr would have most likely won the case.

spjótinu. (p. 316 / ch. 145) This first killing gives the start signal for the fighting everybody has been waiting for.

Þórhallr's disability to walk is synonymous with his family's inadequate dealings in the law suit, where Flosi remains one step ahead of them. But Skarpheðinn's gift, the spear, allows Þórhallr to overcome this inactivity and take revenge. Even though he is no longer alive, Skarpheðinn is still the embodiment of his family's fighting spirit. Driven by rage, Þórhallr thrusts the spear through Grímr with a power that would have befitted Skarpheðinn. In this spirit, Kári and the others take up the fight.

As table 1.2 indicates, the battle at the *alþingi* consists of several sub-scenes, since the fighting wages back and forth for a longer time. The text says nothing about the number of combatants, but we can safely assume that the author had some hundred men in mind: When Njáll's enemies gather to plan the *brenna*, they alone are one hundred (p. 273 / ch. 124), and there is obviously a far larger number of warriors engaged at the *þingvellir*.

Several men are killed during the battle (individually mentioned are Grímr inn rauði, Árni Kolsson, a nameless man killed by Kári, Þorvaldr Ketils son þryms, Sǫlvi, Brúni Hafliðson, Ljótr Hallsson, Eyjólfur Bǫlverksson), five of them by (thrown) spears. Eyjólfur Bǫlverksson is the last one to get killed. He was the one who, paid by and on behalf of Flosi, turned down the law suit and threatened to drive the prosecutors into the ban, thus provoking the outbreak of the battle (even though Þórkell started it physically). Once Eyjólfur is dead, the fight can find an end.

Taken into account how many men take part in the battle, it has a surprisingly low death toll. There is a lot of agitation; men shout, warriors and whole troops run back and forth, and thrown spears are the dominant weapon in the battle. This can be taken as a rather realistic description of how warbands without proper military training and discipline move in a skirmish.¹²⁰ In the battle proper – that means, leaving the killing of Grímr inn rauði and the gruesome death of Sǫlvi aside – only two men are referred to wound anyone at close range: Kári, the now-dominant warrior, and Þorgeirr skorargeirr, wielding *Rimmugýgr*, the vengeance incarnate of Njáll's family.

The killing of Sǫlvi in the boiling broth (CS A11) is probably the most macabre of all deaths in the saga:

¹²⁰ Scenes from the film *Dead Birds* come to mind. In Robert Gardner's classic anthropological documentary from 1964, warring tribes in New Guinea front each other in long battle lines, just outside each other's reach. From these lines, warriors run towards the enemy, throw their spears or shoot their arrows, and quickly return to safety.

Þar var maður úti hjá búð nokkurri er Sölvi hét. Hann sauð í katli miklum og hafði þá upp fært úr katlinum en vellan var sem áköfust. Sölvi gat að líta hvar þeir flýðu Austfirðingarnir og voru þá komnir mjög svo þar gegnt. Hann mælti þá: 'Hvort munu þessir allir ragir Austfirðingarnir er hér flýja? Og jafnvel rennur hann Þorkell Geitisson og er allmjög logið frá honum er margir hafa það sagt að hann væri hugur einn en nú rennur engi harðara en hann.' Hallbjörn hinn sterki var þar nær staddur og mælti: 'Eigi skalt þú það eiga til að segja að vér séum allir ragir' og þreif til hans og brá honum á loft og rak hann að höfði í soðketilinn. Dó Sölvi þegar. (p. 319 / ch. 145)

The whole scene seems unreal: While hundreds of men are fighting, Sölvi rather takes care of his lunch. He does not hesitate to insult a fully armed troop of men, agitated from combat, and is repaid immediately. Hallbjörn has just enough time to halt his running, put Sölvi's head in the broth, and continue the flight. Sveinsson suggested that

the battle at the General Assembly is full of grim humor. Some poor wretch, who is cooking something in a kettle, taunts the men from the East Fjords for running away. They reply by dumping him headfirst into the kettle of boiling water. [...] [T]he greater the earnestness of a situation, the closer it is to becoming humorous; and when mirth and gaiety are at their height, death is often lurking nearby. (Sveinsson, 1971, p. 76)

We must remember that the last time we saw Hallbjörn inn sterki, 'the strong', he was almost knocked out single handedly by Þorgeirr skorargeirr (CS A3). Together, the two sub-scenes shed light on Hallbjörn and ridicule him: Like many people who deem themselves extraordinarily strong, he flees a better fighter, and turns against a weaker man to let out his frustration. It may be too far-fetched to call the spectacular killing a martyr's death; but nevertheless, Sölvi is brutally murdered for telling the truth.

The most fascinating motif of the battle of the *alþingi*, permeating the whole scene, is that of the injured leg, the disability to walk or even stand, the losing of balance:

- (CS A1): Þórkell spontaneously heals his own leg, thus regaining ability to walk;
- (CS A2): Hallbjörn aims for Kári's foot, but Kári jumps over the attack; Kári chops off Hallbjörn's toe;
- (CS A3): Þorgeirr knocks Hallbjörn down, Hallbjörn has to struggle to regain his footing;
- (CS A6): Bjarni aims at Kári's foot, but Kári evades; Kári slits open the leg of an enemy, the man falls down and is crippled for life; Kári thrusts at Bjarni, Bjarni lets himself fall to the ground to evade the attack;

- (CS A9): Ásgrímur throws a spear after Skapti; the weapon goes through both calves, Skapti falls down, cannot get up and has to be dragged away;
- (CS A13): Flosi's leg is heavily hit, he falls down, but gets up again immediately.

Of the 13 wounds described in detail (including the boiling of Sólvi), four are dealt to legs or feet, almost a third. This ratio is far higher than the totals in the saga, compare table 3.

In the aforementioned perspective of *Njáls saga* as a founding myth for the medieval Icelandic social order, it is tempting to interpret all the stumbling, falling and wounded legs as symbols for a community that is close to a collapse, and on the verge of falling into chaos. But a closer look reveals that such an interpretation is not entirely correct. For it is only on Flosi's side of the battle that men find it impossible to remain on their feet – exactly the opposite is true for Kári, who once again demonstrates expert footwork and balance, and symbolizes *pars pro toto* the strength of his side. Unlike many of the other wounds to the legs that are inflicted throughout the saga, none of the leg wounds at the battle at the *alþingi* is lethal. In contrast, the author plays with the humiliating quality of these wounds. The underlying notion is 'impotence', the impotence of the arsonists and their helpers:

Hallbjörn fails in hitting Kári's foot, but is hit himself. His big toe, which Kári chops off, may be a phallic symbol. Definitely a lost big toe makes it extremely hard for the human body to walk in balance. It is no wonder Hallbjörn falls down when Þorgeirr hits him in the next sub-scene. A second attempt to hit Kári's leg fails, and again, he repays the attack immediately. The man whose leg he slits open is crippled for life. Thus, Kári does not only dominate his enemy during this fight, but for all his days to come. And Bjarni finds no defence against the hero's attack but to throw himself to the ground, a shameful admittance of inferiority. When Ásgrímur's spear pierces both of Skapti's calves, the latter has to be dragged to a sword cutler's booth. Kári later calls it a juggler's booth in his poem – the proud Skapti suddenly has to seek shelter among the low class of society.

For Flosi's side, the battle is a nightmarish scene. All attempts to attack Kári, the warrior they are the most afraid of, remain without success. Instead, his men can hardly stay on their feet. The most famous of the arsonists (Flosi, Skapti), their strongest fighters (Hallbjörn) and their followers (the nameless man in (CS A6)) are hit in the legs, fall down or get crippled. Finally Eyjólfur, their leader in terms of the law, gets killed. When mass movement is described, it is always Flosi's men who have to retreat (CS A4, A7, A10). And even when they decide to value life more than honour, and try to flee from the battle, they

are denied an escape. Snorri and his men bar the way and drive them back towards the enemy: '*Gerid þér nú hvorttveggja að þér höggvið og leggið til þeirra og keyrið þá í braut héðan.*' (p. 318 / ch. 145) Snorri claims that it is not him who denies the escape, but two long dead evildoers. Making fun of Flosi in that way, Snorri proves that he does not take him serious, not even in this utterly serious situation.

In (CS A8), Þorvarðr Tjorvarson receives a heavy wound to the arm from a thrown spear. But although *ætluðu menn að skotið hefði Halldór son Guðmundar hins ríka* (p. 317 / ch. 145), the saga mentions that Þorvarðr would never in his life receive any compensation. Usually, such judicial consequences (or the lack of them, in this case) would be discussed in the aftermath of a fight. But at this moment, the text transcends its focus on time and space of the battle, thus highlighting the discrepancy between power and powerlessness of the two struggling parties. An uncompensated wound will remain a stain on Þorvarðr's honour for all his days.

The only hope for the inferior party lies in their leader. When Flosi receives a severe wound to the leg, he too falls to the ground, but immediately gets on his feet again. This separates him from his companions: *Hallbjörn komst nauðulega á fætur* (p. 317 / ch. 145); Skapti has to be carried away, the nameless man is crippled afterwards. Flosi is the leader of the arsonists, and the antagonist of the hero Kári. Nevertheless, he is not evil to the core, but an honourable man entangled in a net of evil deeds. As Allen puts it:

[T]he saga's central event [...] would be lost if Flosi were simply a malevolent (illgjarn) man like Mqrðr. Flosi must be represented as an admirable man who is driven by circumstances beyond his control into taking a vengeance he rather would have avoided. [...] The saga-man [...] [has to] show the Burning as the appalling and inevitable deed it is, and yet [...] establish the Burner as a man who is admirable in Icelandic terms. (Allen, 1971, pp. 110–111)

Flosi's behaviour in the battle contributes to this image. He is on the losing side, of course. But he himself struggles and keeps himself upright, no matter what the odds are. Others on his side do not possess the same qualities, and the scene hints at his rehabilitation at the end of the saga. His companions fare far worse. The battle is a turning point, in which the friends of Njáll regain the upper hand. Those on Flosi's side who are not humiliated, severely injured, or even killed during the battle, have to reckon with Kári's revenge afterwards. Many of them will not survive it.

The battle at the *alþingi* is the last step in a three-step-pattern of escalation. The escalation starts with the slaying of Hqskuldr, where one man is killed, over the *brenna*, where one

hundred men attack a household, to the countless men fighting at the *þingvellir*. It marks the final stage of chaos breaking into Icelandic society, and is on the verge of growing to catastrophic dimensions. Yet, there is a rest of restraint among the combatants. Even though men are killed, an all out fighting is avoided. Snorri, for example, clearly decides for one side and helps to handle Flosi and his men. But he would not send his own followers into battle. He is interested in controlling the situation, not in slaughtering the opponents. This restraint is a second explanation for the attacks to legs and feet, and one that argues from the perspective of the protagonists. There is a certain (not total, but definitely perceivable) reluctance to kill among the men. From table 3 we know that practically all hits to the head or the torso in *Njáls saga* are fatal. Some of the combatants at the *alþingi* avoid such lethal consequences. As said before, the battle's death toll is surprisingly low.

At the *alþingi* of the year 1000, before the *siðaskipti* is decided, Þorgeirr Ljósvetningagoði speaks the famous words: '*Svo líst mér sem málum vorum sé komið í ónýtt efni ef vér skulum eigi hafa ein lög allir. En ef sundur skipt er lögunum þá mun sundur skipt friðinum og mun eigi mega við það búa.*' (p. 252 / ch. 105) Paradoxically, in (CS 40) the situation escalates exactly because everybody is under one law, a law that is applied in such a way that it leads to unbearable injustice. The *fimmtadómr* had been introduced on Njáll's initiative, Þórkell Ásgrímsson had been trained by Njáll in the law – it seems unbearable that Njáll's family should lose the case of the *brenna*. With other words, the battle is thus 'merely the continuation of a law suit by other means'.

What remains is the feeling that the law alone is not enough to guarantee justice. The dispute has to be taken to another level. This level is extremely dangerous for the integrity of society, and therefore has to be handled with utmost caution. It is Snorri who instigates Kári and his friends to fight. But when he himself uses his forces only to bar Flosi's way, he makes sure that the violence is contained both in space and in personnel. Snorri *weist Flosi in die Schranken*, in the literal meaning of the German expression, which is 'to send someone inside the barriers of judicial combat ground'. It fits the situation perfectly: The battle takes on the character of a oversized judicial combat. The saga underlines this by the sudden end of the fighting. Once Flosi is severely wounded, and Eyjólf killed, the battle quickly abates. Now Snorri sets his men into motion and separates the two parties. A ceasefire is negotiated, and on the next day the different fractions try to reach a settlement. Síðu Hallr offers to forgive the death of his son Ljótr without any compensation. In a long and intense speech, Snorri convinces the men of his side to accept. (p. 321 / ch.

145) Everybody agrees, except Kári and Þorgeirr skorargeirr – the sword *Fjörsváfnir* and the axe *Rimmugýgr* are still with them, and the blood thirst of men and weapons alike is not yet quenched.

Ultimately, both *alþingi* scenes, the *siðaskipti* and the battle, are a proof that the Icelandic society is able to take care of itself, while admitting at the same time that violence is a constant threat. If it happens, it has to be contained, and stronger and weaker parties have to be re-integrated into a functioning system afterwards. On the other hand, the peaceful self-regulation at the *siðaskipti* stands in direct contrast to the appearance of Christendom in the shape of the foreign missionary Þangbrandr.

Þangbrandr

The German cleric Þangbrandr is well attested in several Icelandic sources. (Padberg, 2005) He arrives in Iceland as missionary:

Þetta hið sama haust kom skip út austur í Fjörðum í Berufirði þar sem heitir Gautavík. Hét Þangbrandur stýrimaður. Hann var son Vilbaldús greifa úr Saxlandi. Þangbrandur var sendur út hingað af Ólafi konungi Tryggvasyni að bjóða trú rétta. (p. 246 / ch. 100)

The cleric is no man of peace, this is clear from the beginning. Þangbrandr's companion is Guðleifr Árason, who *var vígamaður mikill og manna hraustastur og harðgeri í öllu.* (p. 246 / ch. 100) Síðu-Hallr receives Þangbrandr well and invites him to his farmstead, and the missionary's promise of St. Michael's friendship convinces the influential chieftain of Christendom. Although the archangel is described in the scene as a judge of souls, saga man and audience were surely aware of his role as the most bellicose character of all the heavenly host.

As Síðu-Hallr's conversion shows, Þangbrandr's mission is not altogether unsuccessful. During the following spring, many men follow Hallr's example. But he also meets strong resistance, which he is not shy to answer violently. During their short time on Iceland, Þangbrandr and Guðleifr kill five men (CS 30: Þangbrandr's holmganga; CS 31: Hunt on Galdra-Heðinn; CS 32: Quick work of Vetriði skáld;¹²¹ CS 33: Failed ambush on Þangbrandr; CS 34: Þangbrandr and the *berserkr*). To a modern reader, it seems ironic that a Christian missionary excels in killing those he should convert. But at the same time, we must understand that with these killings, Þangbrandr and Guðleifr prove how their new

121 As a macabre twist, the *skáld's* slaying is commented on with a stanza.

faith fits into the Icelandic social fabric – turning the other cheek is no real option in the island's power politics.

When they think about continuing their mission in the Westfjords, the newly baptised Gestr warns them that *þar vera menn harða og illa viðureignar*. (p. 250 / ch. 103) Obviously, Gestr foresees that Þangbrandr is not exactly the right man to negotiate peacefully with the stubborn Westerners, and, even more, that the Christianization of Iceland has to come from within, not from some foreign power: *‘en ef það er ætlað fyrir að trúa þessi skuli við gangast þá mun á alþingi við gangast og munu þar þá vera allir höfðingjar úr hverju héraði.*’ (p. 250 / ch. 103) A foreigner has no standing at the *alþingi*, as Þangbrandr already understood. He answers: *‘Flutti eg á þingi [...] og varð mér þar erfiðlegast um.*’ (p. 250 / ch. 103) His work was crucial to prepare the ground for the *siðaskipti*, as Gestr admits: *‘Þó hefir þú mest að gert [...] þó að öðrum verði auðið í lög að leiða. En það er sem mælt er að eigi fellur tré við hið fyrsta hög.*’ (p. 250 / ch. 103) But at the same time, his meddling with intra-Icelandic politics, and with central questions of self-understanding and custom, almost necessarily resulted in violence. Thus, Þangbrandr and Guðleif leave Iceland, and the final decision in the question of religion is left to the Icelanders themselves. In contrast to the German missionary, they are able to negotiate this question without bloodshed. Of course, one might argue that the community at the *alþingi* is aware of King Óláfr's power, and afraid to enrage him. But the central idea behind the *siðaskipti*-passage is the ability of an intact Icelandic social order to follow a unifying law and keep the peace even in the (until then) most tense situation of its history. Þangbrandr and the Battle at the *alþingi* stand for the threats to this ‘peace under law’, both from outside, and from the within. It is important that in both cases the threat can lead to violence, but not to a collapse, and that the *status quo* is being quickly re-established. Such a message of stability and Icelandic self-sufficiency can, again, be read as part of *Njáls saga* as a founding myth, and the construction of an Icelandic identity. And Würth's interpretation of the political implications of the *ragnarök*-images could be equally applied here. She argued that in the figure of the returning Baldr, the foreign – that is, Christian ideas – and the own – the heathen tradition – are unified to represent a new, successful (world) order:

In der Völuspá wird dieses die herrschende Macht bestätigende Bild sehr geschickt vermittelt: hier wird impliziert, dass die Rettung (=Baldr) aus der eigenen Vergangenheit bzw. der vorchristlichen Religion kommt, aber diese „germanische“, d.h. nicht-römische und damit nicht-fremdkulturelle Figur wird in Übereinstimmung mit der christlichen Lehre dargestellt, so dass letztendlich doch die herrschende katholische Theologie bestätigt wird. (Würth, 2000, p. 586)

In *Njáls saga*, the 'old ways' are represented both by their human protagonists (central: Þorgeirr Ljósvetningagoði) and their supernatural protectors (the *landvættir*). They merge with the foreign Christian faith to form a new, forward-looking actualization of the Icelandic society. In this process, the *alþingi* plays the role that Baldr has in Würth's perspective on *vǫluspá*, as the figure in which two separate traditions become one. The dominance of the Catholic faith, on the other hand, is not questioned by the saga: *En þessi heiðni var af tekin öll á fárra vetra fresti að eigi skyldi þetta heldur gera leynilega en opinberlega.* (p. 252 / ch. 105)

In this perspective, Þangbrandr's role is that of an agent of the change to come. For a missionary, this is not very astounding. But it tells us something about the saga's mindset, that the first result of change is violence. In depicting this violence, the text suddenly raises the 'level of the supernatural' significantly. The attempted assassination of Þangbrandr via magic (p. 247 / ch. 101) is one of the most 'phantastic' episodes of *Njáls saga*. It is not simply two different world views that clash, but forces more powerful than man, and beyond his comprehension. The supernatural is the energy that is set free in this clash.

When Þangbrandr's ship sinks in a storm, the woman Steinunn attributes this to the god Þórr, who, according to her, had challenged Christ to a *hólmganga*, which Christ was afraid of. The situation between Þangbrandr and Steinunn resembles in itself a ritualized duel. Both of them speak for a long time, and try to dismantle the opponent's faith. The missionary seems to lack a fitting answer to the woman's insulting stanzas. Unfortunately for him, her gender marks her also as an inappropriate target for his proven strategy of discussion: killing the opposition. In two instances, the missionary demonstrates that he is willing to 'step into the ring' for his faith, and that his god indeed protects him. In (CS 30: Þangbrandr's *hólmganga*), a certain Þorkell, who *mælti mest í móti trúnni* (p. 247 / ch. 101), challenges Þangbrandr to a duell. Instead of the traditional shield, the latter carries a crucifix – a significant, almost suicidal disadvantage in a *hólmganga*.¹²² Nevertheless, he wins the fight. Interestingly, the scene is not described in detail, which might seem unusual for a text as fascinated with combat as *Njáls saga* is. The reason for this sparsity in the description might be that the author consciously split up a single stock motif into two scenes. *Hólmganga* and *berserkr* are a standard combination in Old Norse literature, especially when the hero faces a dangerous villain from outside the community. (Wetzler,

122 For a detailed discussion of the *hólmganga*, see Wetzler (2014b).

2014b, pp. 366–368) In the Þangbrandr episode, this combination is broken up into two parts. Þorkell is not a *berserkr*, whereas the fight in (CS 34: Þangbrandr and the *berserkr*) is not a *hólmganga*. Steinunn's reference to Þórr's challenge of Christ underlines the topic of ritualized combat between protagonists of the old and the new ways. Reading their 'duel of words', it appears that Steinunn is an intelligent, rhetorically well versed opponent for Þangbrandr. The desire to prove her wrong may spur him on in his fight against the *berserkr* Ótryggr. While it is socially impossible to fight against Steinunn, Ótryggr is the perfect aim for his wrath. Defeating him demonstrates the worth of Christian faith to and for the Icelandic society. The fight in (CS 34) is remarkable insofar, as the heavenly powers interact directly:

Þá var sagt að þar væru fyrir tvö hundruð heiðinna manna og þangað væri von berserks þess er Ótryggur hét og voru allir við hann hræddir. Frá honum var sagt svo mikið að hann hræddist hvorki eld né egg og voru heiðnir menn hræddir mjög. Þá spurði Þangbrandur ef menn vildu taka við trú en allir heiðnir menn mæltu í móti. 'Kosti mun eg yður gera,' segir Þangbrandur, 'að vér skulum reyna hvor betri er trúan. Vér skulum gera elda þrjá. Skuluð þér heiðnir menn vígja einn en eg annan en hinn þriðji skal óvígður vera. En ef berserkurinn hrædist þann einn eldinn er eg vígi en veður hina báða þá skuluð þér taka við trú.' 'Þetta er vel mælt,' segir Gestur, 'og mun eg þessu játa fyrir mig og heimamenn mína.' Og er Gestur hafði þetta mælt þá játuðu miklu fleiri. Þá var sagt að berserkurinn færi að bænum og voru þá gervir eldarnir og brunnu. Tóku menn þá vopn sín og hljópu upp í bekkina og biðu svo. Berserkurinn hleypur að með vopnum og inn í dyrnar. Hann kemur innar í stofuna og veður þegar þann eldinn er hinir heiðnu menn höfðu vígðan og svo hinn óvígða. Hann kemur að þeim eldinum er Þangbrandur hafði vígt og þorir eigi að vaða og kvaðst brenna allur. Hann höggur sverðinu upp á bekkinn og kom í þvertréið er hann reiddi hátt. Þangbrandur laust með róðukrossi á höndina og varð jartegn svo mikil að sverðið féll úr hendi berserkinum. Þá leggur Þangbrandur sverði fyrir brjóst honum en Guðleifur hjó á höndina svo að af tók. Gengu þá margir að og drápu berserkinn. (p. 250 / ch. 103)

Ótryggr is a typical example of the *berserkr* figure: Invulnerable against iron and fire, and a threatening outsider to society. Beyond the intertextual connection to the use of this motif in other sagas, *Njáls saga* intratextually connects the fight against Ótryggr to several other combat scenes within the text and creates its own distinct '*berserkr* pattern'.

Berserks and ship battles

The fight in (CS 34) consists of three sequences – Ótryggr is unable to step through the hallowed fire; Ótryggr, Þangbrandr, and Guðleifr swing their weapons at each other; the crowd jumps in and kills the helpless Ótryggr. The middle sequence, the core of the fight, can be further split into its smallest components:

Ótryggr (*supernaturally protected villain*) wants to swing his sword, but the blade gets stuck in a beam (*weapon stuck*); Þangbrandr uses his crucifix (*significant weapon*) to hit his arm (*attack to the weapon arm*); Ótryggr drops his weapon (*lost weapon*); obviously made vulnerable to iron by the hit with the crucifix (that is, by the power of Christ), Ótryggr receives a wound to the chest from Þangbrandr, and has his arm chopped off by Guðleifr (*dismemberment / lethal wounds*).

As mentioned above, Allen has rightfully commented on the parallels between Gunnarr and Kári in their combat styles. But the scenes in which their way of fighting is most similar, or almost identical – “Kári fights with much the same dexterity and nimbleness as Gunnarr – both leap backwards over the beam and then strike their opponents’ arms as their weapons embed themselves in the wood.” (Allen, 1971, p. 59) –, are also the scenes that are made up of the same components we just described for (CS 34). If we trace these components throughout *Njáls saga*, we become aware of the aforementioned pattern, which could be called ‘*berserkr*/pirate pattern’ after the featured villains. The following combat scenes can be subsumed under this pattern:

- (CS 1: Against pirates);
- (CS 7: Gunnarr earns the *atgeirr*);
- (CS 21: Hunt for the viking Kolr);
- (CS 22: Against Scottish pirates);
- (CS 34: Þangbrandr and the *berserkr*);
- and finally, although to a lesser degree, some subscenes of the Battle of Clontarf concerning the viking Bróðir (CS C1, C2, C7).

The relevant parts of the scenes can be put into the following table 4.

| | (CS 1: Against pirates) | (CS 7: Gunnarr earns the <i>atgeirr</i>) | (CS 21: Hunt for the viking Kolr) | (CS 22: Against Scottish pirates) | (CS 34: Þangbrandr and the <i>berserkr</i>) | Bróðir (CS C1, C2, C7) |
|---|---|---|--|---|--|--|
| <i>Supernaturally protected villain</i> | Pirate Atli; no supernatural protection | Pirate Hallgrím; can only be wounded by his own <i>atgeirr</i> | Pirate Kolr; no supernatural protection | Pirate Snækólfr; no supernatural protection | <i>Berserkr</i> Ótryggr; invulnerable against iron and fire | Pirate Bróðir; former deacon, now apostate; sorcerer; wears an armour impenetrable by iron (ch. 155) |
| <i>Weapon stuck</i> ¹²³ | [Atli's blow splits Hrútr's shield top to bottom] | <i>Atgeirr</i> is thrust through Gunnarr's shield into a beam, gets stuck | [Kolr's blow splits Hrútr's shield top to bottom] | Snækólfr's sword gets stuck in a beam | Ótryggr's sword gets stuck in a beam | – |
| <i>Attack to the weapon arm</i> | Stone hits Atli's arm | Gunnarr hits Hallgrím's arm; no cut, but the arm is stunned | Stone hits Kolr's arm | Kári chops off Snækólfr's arm | Þangbrandr hits Ótryggr's arm with a crucifix | – |
| <i>Lost weapon</i> | Atli drops his sword | Hallgrím drops the <i>atgeirr</i> | Kolr drops his sword | [weapon arm chopped off] | Ótryggr drops his sword | – |
| <i>Significant weapon</i> | Thrown stone; Hrútr's own sword | Hallgrím's own <i>atgeirr</i> | Thrown stone | – | Crucifix | [Bróðir caught with huge branches] |
| <i>Dismemberment / lethal wounds</i> | Leg chopped off; then lethal wound | [penetrating thrust] | Leg chopped off; group (“they”) kills Kolr; head chopped off | Chopped-off arm is also lethal wound | Arm chopped off; penetrating thrust to the chest; group (“many”) kills Ótryggr | [disembowelment] |

Table 4: The berserkr/pirate pattern of *Njáls saga*

(Entries in brackets [] indicate that the component is not met exactly, but reflects in the text – e. g., in (CS 1) Atli's sword does not really get stuck, but it splits Hrútr's shield from top to bottom. We can imagine a very powerful blow, one that exposes Atli's sword arm for a significant time, thus fulfilling the same function like the component “*Weapon stuck*”.)

¹²³ Scene (CS 5: Gunnarr against pirates I) does not really fit into the pattern. But even there, the sword of a pirate gets stuck, which leads to his death: *Í móti Gunnari gekk Vandill og hjó þegar til hans og kom í skjöldinn. Gunnar snaraði hart skjöldinn er sverðið festi í og brotnaði sverðið undir hjöltunum.* (p. 157 / ch. 30)

The pattern that connects the first five combat scenes in the table is evident. Even when the villains are not protected supernaturally, the fights are still designed accordingly. E.g., Atli in (CS 1) and Kolr (CS 21) are both hit on the weapon arm with a stone, a resemblance of the motif that an edge will do no good, and that a *berserkr* must be attacked with a blunt impact weapon. Libermann pointed out the close connection between *vikingr* and *berserkr*, in the perspective of those who wrote the sagas:

The word *berserkr* developed along the same lines as did the word *vikingr* ‘viking’: both became terms of abuse. When the activities of the vikings came to an end, professional soldiers lost their occupation and status and degenerated into ruffians preying on farmers. The plundering rabble of the Icelandic sagas is fact, not fiction, the near formulaic nature of the episodes notwithstanding. Bands of able-bodied men in their prime, unused to agricultural pursuits and trade, wandered all over Scandinavia and made life of farming communities miserable. [...] Perhaps these vagrant bullies were smart enough to appropriate a name famous in legend, but *berserkr* may have become slang for ‘gang member’. (Liberman, 2005, p. 408)

Such an overlap of the pirate and the *berserkr* figure can explain *Njáls saga's* use of a single narrative pattern to recount the combat scenes involving one or the other.

The sub-scenes that describe the slaying of the various pirates are not the only thing highly repetitive about the the ship battles of *Njáls saga*. As Allen writes, naval combat in itself follows a set pattern. His comparison between (CS 1) and (CS 21) is worth quoting in length:

Chapter five of *Njáls saga* presents a scene (counterparts of which are found throughout saga literature) which must have been close to the hearts of a Norse audience - a shipboard fight with pirates. [...] Sailing for Oresund, Hrútr sights the lurking ships of Atli Arnviðarson, a notorious outlaw. Hrútr confers about tactical dispositions with his mate, Úlfr the Unwashed (1 - the hero sights the enemy and takes measures). The scene shifts to Atli who also consults with his men about his dispositions (2 - the enemy sights the hero). The fleets converge and the two sides identify themselves and exchange boasts (3 - meeting, identification, boasting). Battle ensues; it follows a standardized pattern. After an initial stand-off (4 - stand off), Atli succeeds in boarding Hrútr's ship and hacks his way towards Hrútr and Úlfr (5 - one side boards the other):

‘Hrútr turned now to face Atli; he hacked at once at Hrútr's shield and cleaved it through from top to bottom {6 - the main opponents face each other}. Then Atli was hit on the hand by a stone and his sword fell to the deck. Hrútr seized the sword and sliced off Atli's leg; then Hrútr gave him his deathblow {7 - death of foe}.’

Hrútr and his men are victorious and seize much booty (8 - spoils of victory).

In chapter eighty-two Þráinn Sigfússon [...] comes into collision with another piratical outlaw, one Kolr (1):

‘The weather was good. Then Kolr sighted the ships, which were approaching, and said that he had dreamt about Earl Hákon [...] and said these must be his men and ordered his own men to take up their weapons {2}.’

The sagaman, according to his option, omits (3) the exchange of identity and boasts. They fight for a long time with no decisive results (4):

‘Then Kolr leapt aboard Þráinn's ship {5} and cleared his way and kills many men; he had a gold helmet on. Now Þráinn sees that his side is not prevailing; he urges on the men around him, and he himself goes first to meet up with Kolr. Kolr hacked at Þráinn and the blow struck Þráinn's shield and cleaved it through to the bottom {6}. Then Kolr was hit on the hand by a stone; his sword fell to the deck. Þráinn struck at Kolr; the blow struck his leg so that it came off; after that they killed Kolr {7}. Þráinn cut off his head but threw the body overboard and kept the head. The seized a lot of booty {8}.’

Other viking fights in *Njáls saga* (there are five altogether) follow this pattern. (Allen, 1971, pp. 57–58)

Not only the structure of these viking fights is repetitive. They also share a common mood, one that is defined by the named use of the *berserkr* motif, by a fascination for the amazing – e. g., the golden helmets worn by heroes and villains alike in (CS 21, 22), or an anchor used to sink a ship (CS 5) –, and by a standard terminology of exaggeration:

- *Úlfur gekk vel fram og gerði ýmist að hann skaut eða lagði.* (p. 130 / ch. 5);
- *gerði hver að slíkt er mátti. Gunnar gerði ýmist að hann hjó eða skaut og hafði margur maður bana fyrir honum.* (p. 157 / ch. 30);
- *Kolur hljóp þá upp á skip Þráins og ruddist um fast og drepur margan mann.* (p. 218 / ch. 82);
- *Helgi sneri þá til móts við Grím og ráku þeir ofan alla víkinga og jafnan voru þeir Njálssynir þar er mest þurfti.* (p. 220 / ch. 84)

In other words, in the ship battles and the use of the *berserkr* motif, *Njáls saga* approaches the fabulous modes of combat that are described in the previous chapters. The colourful details and the slaying of the *berserkr* resemble the ‘adventurous mode of combat’, the heroes hacking their way through the enemy lines parallel the ‘heroic mode’. In these scenes, more than anywhere else, the combat descriptions of *Njáls saga* are schematic and standardized, because the author links them to a wider and well known literary pattern. It is thus quite inappropriate to judge the totality of the saga's combat scenes by these examples, as their rules do not apply to the rest of the text.

The shift towards a fabulous mode of combat is accompanied by the shift of the scene of action. With the example of (CS 34: Pangbrandr and the berserkr), the fabulous mode is applied when fighting takes place outside Iceland, on high waters, or in Ireland. For the exceptional (CS 34), one could argue that it is the *berserkr* Ótryggr himself that represents ‘the outside’, an outside that bears a potential for the supernatural. However, the shift towards the fabulous is nowhere as complete as in the description of the Battle of Clontarf.

The Battle of Clontarf

The historical Battle of Clontarf took place near Dublin on Good Friday, 24th of April 1014, when the Irish King Brian Bóru, *imperator scottorum*, fought against the coalition of Máelmorda, King of Leinster, Jarl Sigurðr of the Orkneys, and Sigtryggr Óláfsson, King of Dublin. The battle took a high death toll, and must have made a lasting impression on the Nordic people.¹²⁴

All preliminary action taken into account, the battle is the largest single combat scene in *Njáls saga*. It is depicted as a clash between the forces of good and evil, between the Christian god and the devil, and its description is accompanied by supernatural events that foreshadow and reflect it:

The ships of heathen pirate-sorcerer Bróðir are the target of a rain of boiling blood, of weapons coming to life, and of demonic ravens in three consecutive nights. As their former companion Óspakr can easily interpret: *‘En þar sem hrafnar sóttu að yður, það eru óvinir þeir er þér trúið á og yður munu draga til helvítis kvala.’* (p. 338 / ch. 156) On Good Friday, the day of the battle, the true dimension of the events is shown when the bloodshed reverberates in frightening visions all over the northern world. Dǫrruðr in Caithnes and Brandr Gneistason on the Faeroe Islands witness the terrible weaving of the *valkyrjur*, and their famous song: *þar voru konur inni og höfðu færðan upp vef. Mannahöfuð voru fyrir kljána en þarmar úr mönnum fyrir víftu og garn, sverð var fyrir skeið en ör fyrir hræl.* (p. 340 / ch. 157) Blood falls on the robe of the priest of Svínafell, and the abyss of the deep sea opens next to the altar of Þvátta church. The dead Jarl Sigurðr rides on the Orkneys, taking a living man with him; and Jarl Gilli of the Hebrides has prescient dreams. The date for the battle is set according to Bróðir's sorcerous premonition. And on the day before the bloodshed, *reið maður að þeim Kormlöðu á apalgrám hesti og hafði í hendi pálstaf. Hann*

124 For a discussion of the similarities of the Clontarf episode in *Njáls saga* and *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*, and the possibility of a lost **Brjáns saga*, see Lönnroth (1976, pp. 226–236).

talaði lengi við þau Bróður og Kormlöðu. (p. 339 / ch. 157) We may assume that it is Óðinn who pays a visit to the heathen champion. Even in the raging battle, Hrafn inn rauði, one of the combatants, has a vision of the punishments that wait for his soul. But when he promises the apostle Peter a pilgrimage to Rome, the devils dragging him to hell retreat.

Once the fighting begins, we do not encounter detailed descriptions of the combatants' movements comparable to those found during scene (CS 40: Battle at the *alþingi*). Instead, the author uses expressions which remind us of the 'heroic mode of combat', when he draws the picture of the outstanding warriors on both sides ploughing their way through the enemy lines (all on p. 339 / ch. 157):

- *Fallast nú að fylkingarnar. Varð þá orusta allhörd. Gekk Bróðir í gegnum lið og felldi þá alla er fremstir stóðu en hann bitu ekki járn.*
- *Kerþjálfaður gekk svo fast fram að hann felldi þá alla er fremstir voru. Rauf hann fylking Sigurðar jarls allt að merkinu og drap merkismanninn.*
- *Varð þá enn orusta hörð. Kerþjálfaður hjó þenna þegar banahöggvi og hvern að öðrum þá er í nánd voru.*
- *Óspakur hafði gengið um allan fylkingararminn. Hann var orðinn sár mjög en látið sonu Brjáns báða áður. Sigtryggur konungur flýði fyrir honum. Brast þá flótti í öllu liðinu.*
- *Hljóp hann [Bróðir] þá úr skóginum og rauf alla skjaldborgina og hjó til konungsins.*

Bróðir's gruesome death after the battle is another parallel to the 'heroic mode' and its depiction of atrocities against captured enemies: *Úlfur hræða reist á honum kviðinn og leiddi hann um eik og rakti svo úr honum þarmana og dó hann eigi fyrr en allir voru úr honum raktir. Menn Bróður voru og allir drepnir.* (p. 340 / ch. 157)

Details are only given when they highlight the battle's supernatural dimension, for example concerning the men carrying the heathen banner and the fate that befalls them. The banner is connected to Óðinn, and, as comparison with other texts shows, is supposed to grant victory, even though the banner bearer himself must fall.¹²⁵ Unfortunately for Jarl Sigurðr and his men, only the second of these magic properties comes into effect. Towards the end of the battle, Bróðir chops off the head of King Brján and the hand of his son Taðkr with a single blow, but contact with the king's blood closes the princes' wound. After the

125 See Naumann (2005, p. 340).

battle, the king's head even reattaches itself to the dead body. Bróðir himself cannot be injured with iron, but that doesn't do him much good against Brján's brother, Úlfr hræða. Three times, Úlfr's blows send him to the ground before the heathen can flee to a nearby forest. This is the only instance where the description of the Battle of Clontarf reminds us of the Battle at the *alþingi*, the losing party being unable to remain on their feet, and seeking to escape their enemy.

It is evident that the battle is shaped by the influence of the supernatural, with the Christian god prevailing over the heathen devils. Thus, the laconic remark *Fimmtán menn af brennumönnum féllu í Brjánsorustu* (p. 340 / ch. 157) can be read as a heavenly judgement on the killers of Njáll and his family.

Like the *berserkr* scenes and ship battles, the Battle of Clontarf falls out of *Njáls saga*'s usual mode of combat descriptions. These scenes were designed to fulfil a certain literary purpose, different from that of other combat scenes in the saga. They tell of a heroic cosmos, beyond the scope of the usual, intra-Icelandic feud killings. This has to be kept in mind when discussing the 'realism' of combat depicted in the text.

Narrative functions – conclusions

As we have seen, the combat scenes of *Njáls saga*, and the specific design of each single one of them, can fulfil narrative functions on many levels:

- They are supposed to entertain their audience, and their entertainment value stems from careful combination of realistic descriptions and exaggerated or even supernatural features on the one hand, of a mixture of innovation and literary pattern on the other.
- They are a tool for the characterization of the protagonists, and a window to their inner life. They can underline the significance and meaning of a situation, like the Battle at the *alþingi*.
- Finally, they link the saga to the literary cosmos of the North, both to widespread motifs, like the *berserkr* episodes, or to other genres, like the 'heroic mode of combat' at the Battle of Clontarf.

If we aim to understand the meaning of a given combat scene for the text, we have to read it closely – alone for itself, in the context of its saga, and as a node in a network of

intertextual dependencies. Especially for a text as rich in combat scenes as *Njáls saga*, it is inappropriate to pick out a small number of scenes and use them to oversimplify the matter, as Allen did:

It is evident that viking fights in *Njáls saga* follow a stereotyped pattern and are made up of combinations of smaller motifs, here the specific details of close combat, and I will not belabor the point. This is a stock situation, one in which the same phrases often (but not always) occur for the same motifs. The objection might be made that such scenes are perforce structured and stereotyped. Given the nature of Norse weapons and the limited choice of tactics in shipboard fighting, there is a limited choice of ways men can meet in battle and die beneath weapons. If two men are having at one another with heavy swords, it is likely that one will thrust and the other parry until someone's guard fails and opens the way to the decisive blow. But as Peter Hallberg forcefully points out, these scenes from the classical sagas are certainly refined from reality.¹²⁶ They are idealized battle scenes where blows are delivered once and for all and men bite the dust cleanly, often with an appropriate quip.

The battle scenes in *Njáls saga*, particularly when compared with the contemporary descriptions of battles in *Sturlunga saga*, strongly suggest that in this area of representation *Njáls saga* is working with artistically wrought narrative forms. [... T]he extent to which *Njáls saga* is made up of stock motifs and scenes, which combine into oft-repeated patterns, needs emphasis. (Allen, 1971, pp. 59–60)

Allen's first observation is correct: The "viking fights" (subsumed here under the 'berserkr/pirate pattern') are indeed remarkably similar. But the stringent application of a literary pattern to the combat scenes is the exception, not the rule for *Njáls saga*. The 'viking fights' are unlike the other fights in the text, and cannot be read *pars pro toto*. Furthermore, Allen's explanation of this pattern as a reflection of actual combat behaviour is incorrect. Hoping one's enemy will be hit on the weapon arm by chance or luck is not an appropriate answer to the lethal realities of edged weapons close quarter combat. The 'viking fights' are actualizations of a narrative model that is, indeed, idealized. But a closer look on the scenes listed in table 1.1 shows that this is not the rule for the saga. Skarpheðinn breaking the spine of an enemy crawling away on all four (CS 29), can hardly be called a 'clean bite in the dust'. The same is true for the sixteen wounds Hǫskuldr Njálsson receives from the group of his murderers, who have serious problems to take him down (CS 28). On the other hand, the fact that a man who receives a full axe blow to the unarmoured head dies on the spot (CS 2: Hallgerðr's first husband killed) is no literary exaggeration.

Throughout *Njáls saga*, we will inevitably find motifs borrowed from the cosmos of Old Norse saga literature. But they are adapted by conscious decision. On many occasions,

¹²⁶ Hallberg (1962, pp. 32–33).

the text proves its ability to invent individual and original features on top of these stock motifs. These original features are much more important for the story than the standards used next to them. They can mark a combat scene as a single, outstanding moment of the saga, or include it into a cluster of scenes that are intratextually connected and must be understood as a whole. The aim of this chapter was to demonstrate how such clusters can be defined and analyzed, what narrative purpose they have within *Njáls saga*, and how they stand apart, overlap, or interweave. Characters make up their own clusters (e. g., Gunnar and Kári), as do weapons (e. g., the symbol of the axe in various applications) and situations (e. g., ship battles). Thus, the combat scenes of *Njáls saga* structure the text in a significant way.

E. Paul Durrenberger maintained that “Sagas do not tell stories, they describe patterns. There is no suspense in a pattern - there is repetition until one sees and understands it.” (Durrenberger, 1992, p. 14) One does not have to share Sveinsson's almost erotic affection for *Njáls saga* to reject this statement. Reducing, e. g., the shocking violence of the slaying of Hǫskuldr (CS 35) to a mere variation of the martyr pattern will result in negating any emotional impact the text can have, even on a modern reader. The joy of reading or hearing the combats scenes of *Njáls saga* comes from (at least) two mechanisms: At first, the audience will experience an emotional reaction to the action, be it delight, awe, or horror. In a second step, it may be able to identify the literary patterns the scenes belong to, enjoying a more intellectual satisfaction. René Wellek's and Austin Warren's famous thought on genres in literature can be easily applied here, *mutatis mutandis*:

Men's pleasure in a literary work is compounded of the sense of novelty and the sense of recognition. [...] The totally familiar and repetitive pattern is boring; the totally novel form will be unintelligible - is indeed unthinkable. The genre represents, so to speak, a sum of aesthetic devices at hand, available to the writer and already intelligible to the reader. The good writer partly conforms to the genre as it exists, partly stretches it. (Wellek & Warren, 1962, p. 235)

c) Realistic descriptions of combative movements in *Njáls saga*

By analysing the narrative purposes of the combat scenes of an *Íslendinga saga* like *Njáls saga*, we can show that their aim is not first and foremost to give an realistic description of medieval close quarter fighting. Instead, the protagonists' combat actions may follow the necessities of these narrative purposes, they may be stock motifs of saga storytelling, or

may be used to establish a pattern within the text. Nevertheless, a close look also reveals how accurately many of the scenes picture the technicalities of armed combat. This accuracy lies at the core of the assumed 'factual mode of combat': Most of the time, the combatants' actions are plausible at least on a micro level. Individual techniques and movements are comprehensible, both intellectually and physically. Considering the immense stress humans usually experience in close quarter fighting, it is debatable if the saga author based the more intricate details of the descriptions on the real life combat he had seen (or heard of). Some of them, like the Gunnarr's shifting of his weight in (CS 16), may rather stem from another source: the author's – quite likely practical – knowledge of fencing training, and martial arts technique. It is in training that a fencer has the time and the relaxed mind necessary to develop an understanding of effective combative movement, not in all-out fighting itself.¹²⁷

The realism on the micro level does not mean that a fight scene must necessarily be also plausible on a macro level. There might still be exaggerations e.g. in terms of numbers, of singular deeds of arms, or of the capacity to resist pain and injury. But the way the protagonists use their weapons, and the damage they inflict, correspond largely to historical reality.

According to Ólason,

[w]hen we study how a particular narrative describes reality, or creates an illusion of a recognizable world, we assume that what inspires and informs authors is of two kinds: their experience of life, and their experience of other texts [...] Narrative conventions must certainly be taken into account when we consider our texts, medieval sagas, and yet the world they describe must also stand in some relation to lived extra-textual experience, the experience of the saga-man and his audience, the writer and his readers. (Ólason, 2007, p. 28)

And he noted that, in the process of saga creation, "experience, fantasy, and convention are united" (Ólason, 2007, p. 29) to varying degrees. Obviously, the 'knightly mode of combat' is governed by convention and the 'adventurous mode' by fantasy. It is unclear why Ólason did not recognize experience as one of the sources of *Njáls saga's* combat scenes when he wrote the following lines:

It has been maintained by people knowledgable about martial arts that it is not impossible that a well-trained warrior could repeat Gunnarr's actions, and indeed, circus

¹²⁷ This is also true for witnesses who do not take an active part in a fight. Most people without combat training have a hard time describing the actions of a violent assault adequately. Combat movements are often too quick to be intelligible to the untrained eye, and on top of that, the human psyche reacts with severe stress to violence, even if not directly involved.

artists and contemporary samurais perform the most unlikely feats. It is, however, quite incredible that the farmer Gunnarr would have been able to conquer and put to flight as many of his peers as he is said to have done with Kolskeggr's help at Knafahólar. Narratives about near-contemporary events, like the sagas of the *Sturlunga* compilation, or even the less stylized older sagas of Icelanders, never show anything that comes close to what a Gunnarr or an Egill Skallagrímsson is able to do. Trying to calculate whether descriptions of fighting in the sagas are in some sense 'true' is of course beside the point, however. What these descriptions show is the author's imaginative strength and dexterity with words as well as his knowledge of the literary conventions governing descriptions of fights. (Ólason, 2007, p. 41 fn. 30)

Exaggeration and fantasy exist only in contrast to the real. And while exaggeration, fantasy and convention have been discussed in the sub-chapters before, we will now analyse some of the combat scenes in respect to their realism on a micro level. The underlying question is, in how far the author of *Njáls saga* based them on an actual understanding of the anatomical characteristics and physical dynamics of the human body, and on a knowledge of fighting technique and combative behaviour.

Combat in (CS 2, 3, 4): The Þjóstólfr episode

The scenes involving Þjóstólfr, faithful and over-motivated servant of Hallgerðr, are the first combat scenes in *Njáls saga* that take place on Iceland. In their laconic violence, they create a contrast to scene (CS 1: Against pirates), which followed the 'pirate pattern'. Similar to Skarpheðinn's *Rimmugýgr*, Þjóstólfr's axe indicates a quick and merciless method of fighting – "Þjóstólfr zieht mit seiner Axt, die das dominierende Dingsymbol der Þjóstólfr-Szenen ist, los [...]." (Wolf, 2014, p. 68)

(CS 2: Hallgerðr's first husband killed):

Þjóstólfr kom að í því og hljóp upp á skútuna og hlóð með honum og mælti: 'Bæði ert þú að þessu lítilvirkur og óhagvirkur.' Þorvaldur mælti: 'Hyggst þú munu betur gera?' 'Það eitt munum við að hafast að eg mun betur gera en þú,' segir Þjóstólfr, 'og er sú kona illa gift er þú átt og skyldu ykkrar samfarar skammar vera.' Þorvaldur þreif upp handsax eitt er var hjá honum og leggur til Þjóstólfs. Þjóstólfr hafði öxina á öxl sér og laust á mót og kom á hönd Þorvaldi og brotnaði handleggurinn en saxið féll niður. Síðan færði Þjóstólfr upp öxina í annað sinn og hjó í höfuð Þorvaldi og hafði hann þegar bana. (p. 138 / ch. 11)

The situation in this scene escalates quickly. Þjóstólfr is notorious for his violent behaviour: *Hann var styrkur maður og vígur vel og hafði margan mann drepið og bætti engan mann*

fé. (p. 135-136 / ch. 9), and carries his axe ready on his shoulder. Þorvaldr seems to know what is coming. Having only a knife at hand, he desperately tries to take the initiative, and get in the first hit. But Þjóstólfr has anticipated that, hits and breaks Þorvaldr's weapon arm, followed by the death blow. Carrying an axe over one's shoulder may be a comfortable way of transportation. But at the same time, it is a perfect loading position for a heavy blow. The counterattack against the weapon-wielding hand or arm is a standard method of weapon based fighting systems. However, the blow does not chop off the arm, but breaks the bone, as the text explicitly says. This shows how exactly the author imagined the scene: When one carries an axe over the shoulder, its blade will naturally hang down due to its own weight. Thus, a direct strike from this position will not hit with edge, but the back of the head, and make for a blunt impact. After the first blow, a trained fighter like Þjóstólfr will then turn the weapon and bring in the edge for a more devastating effect.

(CS 3: Hallgerðr's second husband killed):

Glúmur mælti: 'Án er illt gengi nema heiman hafði. Eg skal taka hæðiyrdi af þér þar sem þú ert þræll fastur á fótum.' Þjóstólfrur mælti: 'Það skalt þú eiga til að segja að eg er eigi þræll því að eg skal hvergi undan þér láta.' Þá reiddist Glúmur og hjó til Þjóstólfs með saxi en hann brá við öxinni og kom í fetann og beit í ofan um tvo fingur. Þjóstólfrur hjó þegar með öxinni í móti og kom á öxlina og tók í sundur axlarbeinið og viðbeinað og blæddi inn úr sárinu. Glúmur greip til Þjóstólfs annarri hendi svo fast að hann féll við. Glúmur mátti ekki halda því að dauðinn fór á hann. (p. 145 / ch. 17)

Þjóstólfr's tactic is the same like in his first fight: He insults his opponent and provokes him to attack first, and then counters with a direct hit to the incoming weapon, instead of evading or deflecting. He combines the calm mind of an experienced fighter with an aggressive fighting style once combat has started. When short sword and axe meet edge on edge, the blades cut into each other, and the weapons get entangled for a moment. The higher momentum of the heavy axe head makes it hard to control the sword and retract it quickly enough for another blow or defence. Glúmr is too slow, and the axe sinks deeply into his body, from whence it is hard to be wrenched free. This allows the lethally wounded to close the distance, get hold of Þjóstólfr, and bring him to the ground. Unfortunately for Glúmr, this does still not prevent his death.

(CS 4: Þjóstólfr's death)

Hrútur hafði vakað og kippti upphávum skóm á fætur sér, fór í treyju og tók sverð í hönd sér. Hann vafði möttli um vinstri hönd sér og upp um handlegginn. [...] ‘Hví reiðst þú hingað?’ segir Hrútur. ‘Hallgerður sendi mig til þín,’ segir Þjóstólfur. ‘Eigi veldur hún þessu þá,’ segir Hrútur og brá sverðinu. Þetta sá Þjóstólfur og vill eigi verða seinni og höggur þegar til Hrúts. Hrútur brást skjótt undan höggvinu og laust vinstri hendi utan á hlýr öxinni svo snart að öxin hraut úr hendi Þjóstólfi. Hrútur hjó með hægri hendi á fót Þjóstólfs fyrir ofan knéið og hljóp að honum við og hratt honum. Féll Þjóstólfur á bak aftur en fóturinn lodd. Þá hjó Hrútur annað högg hann til bana og kom það í höfuðið. (p. 146 / ch. 17)

This scene is a demonstration of excellent fencing skill – both by Hrútr, and by the author. The action is described in such detail that a skilled martial artist has no problem in visualizing it. Actually, one could even turn the sequence into a training drill. Once again, Þjóstólfr tries his proven ‘provocation & counter hit’ tactic, as described above. But Hrútr is far better prepared than Þjóstólfr’s less fortunate other opponents. With his sword at hand and his cloak wrapped around his left arm, he initiates the fight. The arm protection allows him to slap aside Þjóstólfr’s attack. The method of using one’s cloak in such a manner is well known from later European fencing manuals (Anglo, 2000, pp. 144–145), and there is no reason to believe it was not already used in earlier centuries.

We can imagine Hrútr’s complete movement as one fluid motion, that could, for example, look like this: He draws his sword with his right hand to a loading position over the right shoulder; at the same time his left hand moves from the left to the right, hitting the axe head flat on the side. The torque twists the blade from Þjóstólfr’s hand and sends it flying. Hrútr’s momentum carries him forward; the left foot steps far to the front, outside of and behind Þjóstólfr’s legs, bringing the opponents hip to hip, while the hand is sent forward to Þjóstólfr’s head or left shoulder. Assuming Þjóstólfr is standing right foot forward, a scissor-like pushing of Hrútr’s left leg and hip to the front, and of his arm to the back will make Þjóstólfr fall backwards – a throwing technique that is well known in several martial arts. At the same time, Hrútr’s sword arm is free to strike. It is sensible for him to attack Þjóstólfr’s legs instead of head or body, to eliminate the possibility of hitting his own left arm, and to reduce Þjóstólfr’s chance to grapple the weapon with his free hands.

Thus, for Þjóstólfr, not all good things come in three. Each of his opponents is better armed than the one before (knife – short sword – sword and arm protection), each time his own first blow has less effect (broken arm – edge-edge-contact – loss of own weapon), and the hits landed on him get worse and worse (none at all – pulled to the ground – throw

and killing blow). But nonetheless, he fulfilled an important role: the demonstration of the author's ability for detailed movement analysis.

Combat in (CS 8, 9, 10): The first slayings of a feud

The first two men to be killed in the feud between Hallgerðr and Bergþóra are the thralls Svartr and Kolr. Kolr is infamous as a *hið mesta illmenni* (p. 164 / ch. 36), and he lives up to his ill reputation by murdering Svartr in cold blood in (CS 8: The first murdered thrall): *Hann steig þar af baki og beið í skóginum þar til er þeir höfðu borið ofan viðinn og Svartur var einn eftir. Hleypur Kolur þá að honum og mælti: 'Fleiri munu kunna að höggva stórt en þú einn' og setti öxina í höfuð honum og hjó hann banahögg.* (p. 164-165 / ch. 36)

Kolr does not have much time to enjoy his victory; he is soon killed himself by the free man Atli in (CS 9: The second murdered thrall): *Atli mælti: 'Það átt þú eftir er erfiðast er, en það er að deyja.' Síðan lagði Atli spjóti til hans og kom á hann miðjan. Kolur sveiflaði til hans öxi og missti hans. Síðan féll Kolur af baki og dó þegar.* (p. 167 / ch. 37) Of course, it is only a matter of a few pages until Atli in return finds his doom in (CS 10: The first murdered free man):

Hann sá kolreyk mikinn austur frá bænum. Ríður hann þangað til, stígur af baki hestinum og bindur hann en hann gengur þar sem mestur er reykurinn. Sér hann þá hvar kolgröfin er og er þar maður við. Hann sá að hann hafði sett spjót í völlinn hjá sér. Brynjólfur gengur með reykinum allt að honum en hann var óður að verki sínu og sá hann eigi Brynjólf. Brynjólfur hjó í höfuð honum með öxi. Hann brást við svo fast að Brynjólfur lét lausa öxina. Þá þreif Atli spjótið og skaut eftir honum. Brynjólfur kastaði sér niður við vellinum en spjótið flaug yfir hann fram. 'Naust þú nú þess er eg var eigi við búinn,' segir Atli, 'en nú mun Hallgerði vel þykja. Þú munt segja dauða minn. En það er til bóta að þú munt slíkan á baugi eiga brátt enda tak þú nú öxi þína er hér hefir verið.' Brynjólfur svaraði engu og tók öxina eigi fyrr en Atli var dauður. (p. 169 / ch. 38)

None of the scenes include combat in the narrow sense. Instead, they describe murder. And this is exactly what constitutes their realism. As has been pointed out before, real life violence has the tendency to happen in imbalanced situations. Afraid that the dynamics might turn against him, the attacker tries to minimize his own remaining risk, by a sudden attack (CS 8), control of distance (CS 9), or ambush (CS 10).

Combat in (CS 11, 13, 37): Þórðr Sigtryggson, Skarpheðinn, and the axe

As discussed before in the sub-chapter on Skarpheðinn, the behaviour of Þórðr Sigtryggson in (CS 11: The second murdered free man) stands in stark contrast to the malicious killings of the scenes before. He warns Brynjólfr to get ready for the fight, thus setting himself apart from the methods of men like Kolr, Atli, or Brynjólfr. This may be read as an idealization of a man bound by a code of honour, or as the realistic description of one who is too gentle for a cold-blooded murder. No matter which reading one may prefer, Þórðr's way of fighting reflects actual combat technique. Not unlike Þjóstólfr before him, he counter-attacks the incoming weapon, a spear, with his axe. The spear shaft shatters, and Þórðr's second strike is the killing blow. Skarpheðinn's tactics in (CS 13: Njáll's sons avenge Þórðr) and (CS 37: The *brenna*) follow this pattern, and elaborate on it (see above).

Combat in (CS 14, 18): Gunnarr's fights in Iceland

At the beginning of this chapter stood a discussion of one of Gunnarr's fights, the fight at Knafahólar (CS 16: second skirmish), where we have seen how precisely the author of *Njáls saga* understood and depicted human movement in combat. But Gunnarr's shifting of his weight (to initiate a turning towards an enemy in his back), and his other actions at Knafahólar are not the only examples for this precision.

Though outnumbered by his enemies in (CS 14: first skirmish), Gunnarr has no troubles to dominate this fight. Most of his moves are far beyond the ordinary, for example the way he deals with the first attacker, Hallbjörn:

Gunnar skaut fyrir skildinum en Hallbjörn lagði í gegnum skjöldinn. Gunnar skaut svo fast niður skildinum að hann stóð fastur í jörðunni en tók til sverðsins svo skjótt að eigi mátti auga á festa og hjó með sverðinu og kom á höndina Hallbirni fyrir ofan úlflið svo að af tók. (p. 189 / ch. 54)

The author's foremost intention is to amaze his audience with Gunnarr's outstanding skill. But to do so, he clads the amazing into details which make it possible to draw a clear picture of how the combatants move. Manipulating the enemy's weapon, once it is caught in one's own shield, is a very practical combat manoeuvre. Having Gunnarr then draw his sword with the left hand, instead of simply using the *atgeirr* he carries in the right, is showing off his supreme speed and dexterity. Nevertheless, the drawing and striking for Hallbjörn's hand combines with his next motions into a fluid sequence:

Skammkell hljóp á bak Gunnari og höggur til hans með mikilli öxi. Gunnar snerist skjótt að honum og lýstur við atgeirinum og kom undir kverk öxinni og hraut hún úr hendi honum út á Rangá. Gunnar leggur í annað sinn atgeirinum og í gegnum Skammkel. (p. 189 / ch. 54)

A possible interpretation in detail could be: Gunnarr carries his sword most likely in the regular way, on his left hip, while he has the *atgeirr* in the right hand. When he draws the sword, it is obviously with the left hand. This can be a rather awkward undertaking, but Gunnarr – having pinned down Hallbjörn's spear with his shield – can allow himself an exposed position for a short moment. Once the sword is drawn, he pulls it down and cuts off Hallbjörn's hand. Gunnarr would then naturally follow the direction of the sword blow for his turning towards Skammkell, and use the turning of the body to generate power for his next strike. He catches Skammkell's axe right at the *kverk*, that is, the angle between axe head and shaft. This is a perfect spot to hit and manipulate an opponent's axe, and strike it out of its attacking angle. When it flies out of Skammkell's hands, Gunnarr pulls back his *atgeirr*. He keeps the tip pointing towards the enemy, and immediately brings in the fatal thrust.

Another short, but very precise description can be found in (CS 18: Gunnarr's last stand):

Þá hljóp upp Ásbrandur bróðir hans. Gunnar leggur til hans atgeirinum og kom hann skildi fyrir sig. Atgeirinn renndi í gegnum skjöldinn og svo meðal handleggjanna. Snaraði Gunnar þá svo fast atgeirinn að skjöldurinn klofnaði en brotnuðu báðir handleggirnir og féll hann út af veggnum. (p. 213 / ch. 77)

Again, Gunnarr's action is extraordinary, but well within the possibilities of armed combat. A shield cannot grant absolute security from an enemy's attacks; weapons can and do penetrate it. Instead of using the often repeated image 'hand chopped off', the author gives vivid details of how the bones in Ásbrandr's arm are broken in two steps. At first, the straight thrust goes through the arm and injures the bones. Gunnarr's second move, the forceful twisting, breaks the bones and the shield. Twisting (and pulling) a weapon after a thrust makes sense, and is practised in some martial arts systems. Firstly, the twisting helps to yank the blade free, out of the opponent's body, or his shield or armour, and to ready it quickly for the next blow. Secondly, the turning is intended to maximize the damage done to the opponent, either by enlarging the wound channel and increasing the loss of blood, or by destroying inner structures, as in the case of Ásbrandr's bones.

Empty hands against a weapon in (CS 39: Failed attack on Flosi)

Even a scene in which no one is hurt can tell us something about the author's interest in combative movement:

Bolöx lá í pallshorninu. Ásgrímur þreif hana tveim höndum og hljóp upp á pallsstokkinn og hjó til höfuðs Flosa. Glúmur Hildisson gat séð tilræðið og hljóp upp þegar og gat tekið öxina fyrir framan hendur Ásgrími og sneri þegar egginni að Ásgrími því að Glúmur var rammur að afli. (p. 297 / ch. 136)

Empty hand disarming of armed attackers are trained in many martial arts systems, but are very hard to apply. Glúmr's action, however, is of text-book quality. He reacts immediately, gets a precise hold on the weapon and uses both his strength and torque to twist the hatchet out of Ásgrímr's hand.

More examples for such precise descriptions of actual combat technique can be found throughout *Njáls saga*. It may need a trained eye to comprehend what kind of martial techniques lie behind the text. But if one is willing to look for them, the reader will find that there is much more to these scenes than mere exaggeration, play on the incredible, or repetition of literary patterns.

7.5. The ‘factual mode of combat’ reconsidered

A close reading of *Njáls saga* has shown that the postulated ‘factual mode of combat’ with its four characteristics, derived from (CS 16: second skirmish/Kanafhólar) and (CS 27: Fight on the ice), is the guideline for the vast majority of combat scenes in the text. At its basis lies an interest in realistic description – (I) *plausible description of tactics*; (II) *plausible fighting techniques* – which is sometimes, but not always, combined with an artistic desire for exaggeration and heroism – (III) *unrealistic level of self control*,¹²⁸ (IV) *(possibly) exaggerated martial skills*.

In a direct comparison, the ‘factual mode of combat’ conveys much more credibility than the three ‘fabulous modes of combat’ described earlier. Or, in other words, it makes it easier for the audience to let themselves ‘fall into the story’, and, at least for the time of the listening/reading, accept the alternative reality of the story as truth. This is the reason why, for example, the slaying of Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði by Skarpheðinn and his companions is far more shocking for us than the atrocities done to the troll woman Arinnefja of *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*: the violence in *Njáls saga* raises questions about the violence in our real world. At the same time, it is also the reason why a trained fencer can enjoy the combat scenes here on a very different level than those in, e. g., *Rémundar saga keisarasonar*. He can relate them to his own physical abilities.

On the other hand, a text like *Njáls saga* retains the freedom to shift the ‘mode of combat’ towards the fabulous, both for entertainment, and for narrative purposes. The one, single ‘*Njála* mode of combat’ does not exist. Therefore, all judgements derived from only a small sample of scenes, or from a superficial look at their most obvious characteristics, result in oversimplifications which cannot do justice to the combat scenes’ complexity. Any scene following the ‘factual mode of combat’ combines aspects of realistic description (experience), exaggeration (fantasy), and intra-/intertextual references (convention). Only

128 The foremost example of (III) is the “posturing” described by Andersson (1967, p. 62): “He [the author] retains one last device with which to enhance the climax and set it above the rest of the narrative. It is generally an act of laconic but supreme heroism on the part of the doomed man just before he is slain. Since it is usually a symbolic display of the spartanism that characterizes the hero, some flamboyant and memorable gesture of endurance, I have called the act posturing. It is heroic to be sure, a last flash of spiritual as well as martial grandeur, but it is often so improbably and theatrically heroic that the term posturing is not out of place. It is the point at which the author is most apt to depart from a realistic presentation in the interest of writing something indelible on the reader’s imagination.” Similarly, we may add here the many examples where a superior fighter makes a laconic remark before killing the enemy.

detailed analysis can separate these aspects from each other, and make them available for comparison and interpretation.

Njáls saga is an extraordinary text in many ways, and not the least in the richness and detail of its combat scenes. Yet, readers who are familiar with the complete corpus of *Íslendingasögur* will easily recognize the ‘factual mode of combat’ in other sagas. The limited space of this study does not allow to analyse more of them as thoroughly as has been done with *Njáls saga*. Nevertheless, two other sagas shall be briefly discussed, to see in how far the model can be applied to them, as well. At the same time, this will offer the opportunity to show how differently each text employs the combat scenes, using them for varying narrative aims.

a) Grettis saga

The saga of Grettir Ásmundarson is on a par with *Njáls saga* as one of the very famous (and long) examples of the genre of *Íslendingasögur*; main manuscripts are AM 551 a, 4to; AM 556 a, 4to; AM 152, fol.; DG 10, fol. In contrast to *Njáls saga*, its focus is not on the development of the feuds between a large cast of protagonists, but on the – very unlucky – fate of its hero Grettir. Grettir's troublesome character makes him countless enemies, and a large part of the saga is dedicated to his struggle for survival as an outlaw. He is known as “Grettir the strong”, and his strength and fighting ability are extraordinary. Combining the figure of a powerful warrior with the dangerous status of an outcast is, of course, a recipe for a text abundant in combat scenes. In the case of *Grettis saga*, they can have a variety of undertones: realistic description, comical excess, shockingly brutal violence, or fantastic encounters with the supernatural.

One against many

After stealing sheep and cattle from several farmers, a large group of men bands together to attack Grettir, who is accompanied by two more men:

Mýramenn réðu þegar til atgöngu og létu gildlega. Grettir bað fylgdarmenn sína að geyma að þeir gengju eigi að baki honum. Ei máttu í senn allmargir að honum ganga. Varð þar hörð viðureign með þeim. Grettir hjó á tvær hendur með saxinu og varð þeim eigi auðvelt að sækja að honum. Féllu þá sumir Mýramenn en sumir urðu sárir. Þeir urðu seinir utan yfir ána því að vaðið var ei allnær. Ei höfðu þeir lengi barist áður en þeir hurfu frá. Þórarinn frá Ökrum var gamall maður mjög, svo að hann var ekki í atsókninni. En er úti var bardaginn þá kom að Þrándur son Þórarins og Þorgils

Ingjaldsson bróðurson Þórðar og Finnbogi son Þorgeirs Þórhaddssonar úr Hitardal og Steinólfur Þorleifsson úr Hraundal. Þeir eggjuðu menn mjög til atsóknar. Gerðu þeir enn harða hríð.

Grettir sá nú að annaðhvort varð að gera, flýja eða hlífast ekki við. Gengur hann nú svo hart fram að öngvir héldust við því svo var mannmargt að honum þótti ósýnt til undankomunnar utan sem vinna sem mest áður en hann félli, vildi og hafa þann einnhvern fyrir sig er honum þótti manntak í vera. Hljóp hann þá að Steinólfi úr Hraundal og hjó til hans í höfuðið og klauf hann í herðar niður og þegar annað högg hjó hann til Þorgils Ingjaldssonar og kom á hann miðjan og tók nálega í sundur. Þá vildi Þrándur fram hlaupa og hefna frænda síns. Grettir hjó til hans á lærið hægra svo að úr tók allan vöðvann og varð hann þegar óvígur. Eftir það veitti hann Finnboga mikinn áverka.

Þá kallaði Þórarinn og bað þá frá hverfa 'því að því verra munuð þér af honum fá sem þér berjist lengur en hann kýs menn úr liði yðru.' Þeir gerðu svo og sneru frá. Þar voru fallnir fimm menn en fimm sárir til ólífis og örkumla. En flestir höfðu nokkurar skeinur þeir sem á fundinum höfðu verið. Grettir var ákaflega móður en lítt sár. Leituðu Mýramenn við þetta undan og höfðu fengið mikinn mannskaða því að þar féllu margir röskvir menn. (p. 1047-1048 / ch. 60)

The scene reminds us of the fights Gunnarr fought in *Njáls saga*. Outnumbered by a large group of enemies, the hero does not hesitate to rush towards the foe and take up the fight. Grettir's tactical assessment of the situation leads to a simple conclusion: either to flee, or to attack with full force. It has a fatalistic undertone, as he does not deem his own chance of survival too high, but wants to kill at least as many opponents as possible. His fighting style is based on direct, powerful blows. Fitting for his character, Grettir does not use elaborate techniques, nimble footwork, or any special tricks. He rushes head-on into combat and hacks at anyone near him. Grettir's strength is beyond that of most other men, and the effects of his blows are thus quite drastic. He splits Steinólfr's head down to the shoulders, nearly cuts Þorgils in two parts, and severs all muscles in Þrándr's calf. Yet, as we have discussed above concerning Gunnarr, such blows are well within the possible for a well-trained man with a sharp weapon.

On other occasions, the combatants try to devise tactics that are a little bit more elaborate than 'kill as many as possible':

[Grettir] settist niður og drap úr geirnaglann því að hann vildi eigi að Þorbjörn mætti aftur senda. Þá mælti Þorbjörn: '[...] mun eg ganga að honum framan og sjá hversu til tekst með okkur því að eg treysti mér við hvern mann ef eg á einum að mæta. En þú gakk á bak honum og högg tveim höndum í milli herða honum með öxinni. Þarftu eigi að varast að hann geri þér mein síðan er hann snýr baki að þér.' Öngvan hafði Þorbjörn hjálm og hvorgi þeirra. Grettir gekk á mýrina og þegar hann kemur í skotmál við þá skaut hann spjóti að Þorbirni. En það var lausara á skaftinu en hann ætlaði og

geigaði á flauginni og hljóp af skaftinu og niður í jörðina. Þorbjörn tók skjöldinn og setti fyrir sig en brá sverðinu og sneri á móti Gretti er hann kenndi hann. Grettir brá þá saxinu og sveipaði því til nokkuð svo að hann sá hvar pilturinn stóð á baki honum og því hafði hann sig lausan við. Er hann sá að pilturinn var kominn í höggfæri við sig þá reiddi hann hátt saxið. Laust hann bakkanum saxins í höfuð Arnóri svo hart að hausinn brotnaði og var það hans bani. Þá hljóp Þorbjörn mót Gretti og hjó til hans en hann brá við buklara hinni vinstri hendi og bar af sér en hann hjó fram saxinu og klauf skjöldinn af Þorbirni og kom saxið í höfuðið honum svo hart að í heilanum stóð og féll hann af þessu dauður niður. Ekki veitti Grettir þeim fleiri áverka. (p. 1027-1028 / ch. 48)

Grettir wants to make the most of his weapons, and manipulates his spear, whereas Þorbjörn and Arnórr seek to attack their opponent by surprise. However, none of these plans work out. Grettir's spear does not fly the way it should, and Arnórr is discovered before he can attack. Once Grettir has become aware of Arnórr, he keeps moving, but leaves his back turned. Arnórr is lured into striking range, and is surprised by Grettir's sword swung up and backwards over his shoulder. The back of the blade hits the head and breaks the skull, as the *sax* – be it the Viking utility blade, or, as suggested, a *Messer*-type sword or falchion – is usually a single edged weapon, and will not cut if swung in such a manner. Yet, a blow like this can be devastating. Then, after deflecting Þorbjörn's attacks with his buckler, Grettir strikes a single powerful blow, sufficient to smash both shield and head of the enemy.

Unarmed fighting

Grettis saga pays special interest to unarmed fighting, both for sport and for serious combat. The wrestling match of Grettir against two brothers at the *þing*, or his nightly fight against the undead *draugr* Glámr are famous. Wrestling will be discussed in chapter 8; for now, we shall look at the many scenes where an unarmed defender uses his bare hands against weapon attacks.

Grettir has a long personal history in self defence against armed assailants. He is still a boy when he plays a painful trick to his father Ásmundr, with consequences: *Grettir sér nú hvar stóðu ullkambar í setinu, tekur upp kambinn og lætur ganga ofan eftir baki Ásmundar. Hann hljóp upp og varð óður við og vildi ljósta Gretti með staf sínum en hann skaust undan.* (p. 969 / ch. 14) A couple of years later, Grettir again needs to evade a blow from a stick:

Grettir varð reiður við þetta og þótti Auðun vilja leika á sig, sækir þó knöttinn, kemur aftur og þegar hann náði til Auðunar setur hann knöttinn rétt framan í enni honum svo

að sprakk fyrir. Auðun sló Gretti með knattgildrunni er hann hélt á og kom lítt á því að Grettir hljóp undir höggið. Tókust þeir þá á fangbrögðum og glímdu. Þóttust menn þá sjá að Grettir var sterkari en menn ætluðu því að Auðun var rammur að afli. Áttust þeir lengi við en svo lauk að Grettir féll. Lét Auðun þá fylgja kné kviði og fór illa með hann. Hlupu þeir þá til Atli og Bersi og margir aðrir og skildu þá. (p. 971 / ch. 15)

The scene pictures the stereotypical young male fighting, well-known from schoolyards and sports grounds all over the world. A first strike misses, the fight turns into wrestling, and once one of the boys is on the ground, the other one holds him down and punishes him. The description is simple but accurate, especially when we hear that Auðunn puts his knee on Grettir's stomach. This is a good position to pin someone to the ground; in fact, 'knee-on-stomach' is a standard term in modern submission wrestling.

After the two attacks with rather harmless, blunt sticks, Grettir soon has to prove himself against a potentially lethal attack: *Skeggi greip þá öxi og hjó til Grettis. En er Grettir sá þetta þreif hann vinstri hendi öxarskaftið fyrir framan hendur Skeggja svo að þegar varð laus. Grettir setti þá sömu öxi í höfuð honum svo að þegar stóð í heila. Féll húskarl þá dauður til jarðar. (p. 973 / ch. 16)* The technical details remind us of (CS 39: failed attack on Flosi) in *Njáls saga*. One might assume a dependency of one from the other, or both being variations of a standard phrase. But this is not necessarily so. As shown in the discussion of the *Njáls saga* scene, the description can also correspond to techniques trained in martial arts to defend oneself against weapon attacks. Grettir gets hold of the weapon *fyrir framan hendur Skeggja*, which may be understood as 'right before the hands' – a necessary position for a quick disarming.

Later in the saga, Grettir has again to defend himself empty handed against an axe: *Þorgeir reiddi þá upp öxina. Í því hljóp Grettir undir Þorgeir og færði hann niður allmikið fall. (p. 1031 / ch. 50)* This time, Grettir does not wait for the blow, but lunges forward as soon as the axe is raised for the strike. A quick level change combined with forward momentum and a tight grip around the opponent's legs belongs to the standard repertoire of many grappling systems, and can make it difficult for the thrown one to use his weapon. Especially if the grappler lifts his opponent's legs while he is already falling, the impact with which the upper body – or, in the worst case, the head – hits the ground can be tremendous, and result in a knock-out. The saga is therefore not exaggerating when Grettir *færði hann niður allmikið fall*, and has Þorgeirr asking for Þormóðr's help.

Another unarmed defence follows a little later:

Þóttist hann nú vita að Grettir mundi sofnaður og stillti að rekkjunni hljóðlega og seildist til saxins og tók ofan og brá. Í því hljóp Grettir fram á gólfíð og greip saxið í því

er hinn reiddi en annarri hendi í herðar Grími og rak hann niður svo mikið fall að hann lá nær í óviti. (p. 1039-1040 / ch. 55)

Again, the hero intercepts the blow once the weapon is drawn and brought up for the strike, sensibly not waiting for the blow to be on the way. We can assume that Grettir either gets hold of his attacker's hand, or of the sword pommel. The words *annarri hendi í herðar Grími og rak hann niður svo mikið fall* can indicate a variety of throws.

The saga is well aware that the unarmed defence against a sword is possible only with the perfect timing that Grettir displays. If the defender moves too late, he will be hit on the arm. Such wounds to the forearm are common, also in modern forensics: *Síðan hjó Grettir til Þorbjörns en hann bar við hendinni og ætlaði svo að bera af sér höggið. En höggið kom á höndina fyrir ofan úlfliðinn og síðan hljóp saxið á hálsinn svo að af fauk höfuðið. (p. 1013 / ch. 37)*

Obviously, the earlier a fighter acts in combat, the greater his advantages tend to be. Therefore, the unarmed Grettir sometimes even takes the initiative against an armed enemy:

Kafaði Grettir nú sem næst bakkanum svo að Þórir mátti ekki sjá hann þar til sem hann kom í víkina að baki honum og gekk þar á land. Við þessu gat Þórir eigi séð. Fann hann eigi fyrir en Grettir tók hann upp yfir höfuð sér og færði niður svo hart að saxið hraut úr hendi honum og fékk Grettir tekið það og hafði ekki orða við hann og hjó þegar höfuð af honum og lauk svo hans ævi. (p. 1041 / ch. 56)

The short fight implies how fed up Grettir is with the constant attempts on his life. Lifting Þórir up and smashing him down with all his might, catching the sword and beheading him in one move, and all of that without saying a word – there is some black humour to the way he kills the man without further ado.

Comical violence, horrifying brutality

There are several combat scenes in *Grettis saga* with a comical undertone. For example, when Grettir is mistaken for a monster and wreaks havoc to a small band of men:

Grettir ræður nú inn í húsið og vissi ekki hverjir fyrir voru. Kuflinn var sýldur allur þegar hann kom á land og var hann furðu mikill tilsýndar sem tröll væri. Þeim sem fyrir voru brá mjög við þetta og hugðu að óvættur mundi vera. Börðu þeir hann með öllu því er þeir fengu til og varð nú brak mikið um þá en Grettir hratt fast af handleggjum. Sumir börðu hann með eldibröndum. Hraut þá eldurinn um allt húsið. Komst hann við það út með eldinn og fór svo aftur til féлага sinna. Lofuðu þeir mjög hans ferð og frækleik og kváðu engvan hans jafningja mundu vera. (p. 1015 / ch. 38)

It is noteworthy that nobody is using a proper weapon, which the men presumably would do against a monster. The fight resembles more a pub brawl, with the punchline of Grettir's comrades complimenting him for his courageous deed, which, after all, resulted in burning down a house for no good reason.

Only a few pages later, Grettir finishes off the brigand Snækoll in a most spectacular manner, and with him, the literary figure of the evil-doing *berserkr* itself. It is customary for saga heroes to fight and win against *berserks*, but nobody else ever does it with Grettir's nonchalant attitude:

Berserkurinn fann nú undandrátt í málinu. Tók hann þá að grenja hátt og beit í skjaldarröndina og setti skjöldinn upp í munn sér og gein yfir hornið skjaldarins og lét allólmlega. Grettir varpaði sér um völlinn. Og er hann kemur jafnfram hesti berserksins slær hann fæti sínum neðan undir skjaldarsporðinn svo hart að skjöldurinn gekk upp í munninn svo að rifnaði kjafturinn en kjálkarnir hlupu ofan á bringuna. Hann hafði þá allt eitt atriðið að hann þreif í hjálminn vinstri hendi og svipti víkinginum af baki en hægri hendi brá hann saxinu er hann var gyrður með og setti á hálsinn svo af tók höfuðið. En er þetta sáu fylgdarmenn Snækolls flýði sinn veg hver þeirra. Ekki nennti Grettir að elta þá því hann sá að engi var hugur í þeim. Þakkaði bóndi honum vel fyrir þetta verk og margir menn aðrir. Þótti þessi atburður bæði vera af hvatleik og harðfengi unninn. (p. 1017-1018 / ch. 40)

Grettir's denial of his martial abilities before the fight – ‘*Jafnkomið er á með okkur bónda því að hér er hvorgi skefjumaður.*’ (p. 1017 / ch. 40) – is soon proven a lie, when he ‘explodes’ into action from a static, defensive position. All of Grettir's movements happen as one swift flow, almost at once and too fast to follow. Like Gunnarr in *Njáls saga*, Grettir is not only ‘the strong’, but also ‘the quick’. Yet, on a micro-level, his movements are described in such detail that they can be easily visualized. They exaggerate Grettir's physical abilities, but remain within the boundaries of the possible.

Climax of comical violence in *Grettis saga* is most likely the famous quote of Atli, who comments on the fatal stab to his belly with the words: ‘*Þau tíðkast hin breiðu spjótin.*’ (p. 1023 / ch. 45) But the text also knows of the horrifying reality of violence. Like the slaying of Hǫskuldr in *Njáls saga*, some scenes shock the audience with their sudden, asymmetric, and wholly plausible brutality:

Það var eitt sinn að Þorbjörn öngull sat að tafl. Þá gekk stjúpmodir hans hjá og sá að hann tefldi hnettafl. Það var stórt halatafl. Henni þótti hann óþrifinn og kastaði að honum nokkurum orðum en hann svarar illa. Hún greip þá upp töflina og setti halann á kinnbein Þorbirni og hljóp af í augað svo að úti lá á kinninni. Hann hljóp upp og þreif til hennar óþyrmelega svo að hún lagðist í rekkju af og af því dó hún síðan og sögðu menn að hún hefði verið ólétt. Síðan varð hann mesti óeirðarmaður. (p. 1063 / ch. 70)

The same Þorbjörn ǫngull who is introduced with this atrocity is also the man who leads the final assault on Grettir, and a thoroughly evil character. Arriving on Grettir's island, he forces the servant Glaumr to betray his master by threatening him with death. But when Glaumr fearfully complies, he is nevertheless made fun of by the smirking Þorbjörn, and almost beaten to death. The actual attack on Grettir – made defenceless by his festering leg wound – is equally ruthless. The hero is hacked to pieces, while his defeated brother Illugi has to watch. Even after his victory, Þorbjörn knows no mercy. Like a madman, he hacks at Grettir's corpse, hewing his head off, thereby ruining the edge of Grettir's famous sword *Kársnaut*: *Þá tók Öngull saxið tveim höndum og hjó í höfuð Gretti. Varð það allmikið högg svo að saxið stóðst ei og brotnaði skarð í miðri egginni. [...] Hjó hann þá á háls Gretti tvö högg eða þrjú áður af tæki höfuðið.* (p. 1080 / ch. 82) Even his companions cannot understand his behaviour: *Þeir báðu hann ráða og létu sér þó fátt um finnast því að öllum þótti óprúðlega að unnið.* (p. 1080 / ch. 82) The scene shows both, Þorbjörn's lack of self-control and honour, and his inadequacy at wielding a weapon, especially in comparison to his enemy. At the beginning of the attack, Grettir uses the very last blow of his life to cut an opponent clear in two, demonstrating his combat skill for a last time: *Grettir hjó með saxinu til Víkars fylgdarmanns Hjalta Þórðarsonar og kom á öxlina vinstri í því er hann hljóp í tóftina og sneið um þverar herðarnar og niður hina hægri síðuna og tók þar sundur þvert manninn og steiptist búkurinn ofan á Gretti í tvo hluti.* (p. 1079 / ch. 82) Þorbjörn, on the other hand, is not even able to behead a dead man without complications, or without damaging the sword that had served Grettir perfectly in so many fights. He then goes on to behead both Illugi and Glaumr without remorse.

There is a ruthless tone to this scene, an utter lack of compassion for the fellow human being that we do not find, for example, in the *Njálsbrenna*. Even though a burning was considered the most shameful of violent deeds, Flosi and his men retain a certain amount of respect for Njáll and his family, and the *brenna* leaves them not elated by victory, but in a rather depressed mood. Not so Þorbjörn – when he returns home, he *þóttist vel hafa fram gengið í þessari ferð.* (p. 1081 / ch. 82)

Berserks and the pirate pattern

As recounted above, Grettir defeats the *berserkr* Snækoll in a spectacular and comical manner: Kicking his shield into his face is, of course, a fine way to ridicule the well-known image of the raging *berserkr* biting his shield rim. But it is furthermore noteworthy how

Grettir turns Snækoll's unfastened helmet against him, pulling it to drag him from his horse, and how he then draws his opponent's sword and kills him with it. The scene is an application of the narrative rule "berserks can not be injured by iron / must be fought with their own weapons". We have seen a *berserkr*/pirate pattern at work in *Njáls saga*, and the very same pattern can be found in *Grettis saga*. The fight against Snækoll is a first example of it, but there are more obvious ones.

The saga begins with the episode of Qnundr, *víkingr mikill* (p. 954 / ch. 1), and the *berserkr* motif is present: *Þórir var hinn mesti berserkur og fullhugi. Var þar hin harðasta orusta af hvorumtveggjum. Þá hét konungur á berserki sína til framgöngu. Þeir voru kallaðir úlfhéðnar en á þá bitu engi járn.* (p. 954-955 / ch. 2, S. 399) Even though Qnundr is not called a *berserkr* himself, it takes a mishap for his enemies to wound him, comparable to the stuck weapon in combat scenes (CS 7, 22, 34) of *Njáls saga*: Qnundr slips while fighting, and his leg is chopped off. His wound heals, though, and he soon continues his adventurous life, which leads him into battle against the vikings Vígbjóðr and Vestmarr. Qnundr tricks his enemies into an unfavourable position, and has them attacked with huge rocks being hauled at them (motif: *significant weapon*). When Vígbjóðr and Qnundr clash, the similarities to the viking fights in *Njáls saga* are obvious; we find the motifs (*weapon stuck*), (*attack to the weapon arm*), and (*dismemberment / lethal wound*), as described above:

Það sá Vígbjóður og eggjaði með ákafa lið sitt. Sneri hann þá í móti Önundi og stukku flestir frá. Önundur bað sína menn sjá hversu færi með þeim því að Önundur var rammur að afli. Þeir skutu stubb nokkurum undir kné Önundi og stóð hann heldur fast. Víkingurinn sótti aftan eftir skipinu allt þar til er hann kom að Önundi og hjó að Önundi með sverði og kom í skjöldinn og tók af það er nam. Síðan hljóp sverðið í stubbann þann er Önundur hafði undir knénu og varð fast sverðið. Vígbjóður laut er hann kippti að sér sverðinu. Í því hjó Önundur á öxlina svo að af tók höndina. Þá varð víkingurinn óvígur. (p. 958 / ch. 4)

This use of the *berserkr*/pirate pattern is only one of several digressions from a more or less realistic 'factual mode of combat' in *Grettis saga*. A clear example of the application of the principles governing the 'adventurous mode of combat' is Grettir's fight against the giant. The hero dives through a waterfall and finds a huge cave behind it, and the horrible giant who dwells there (principle (IV): *fascination for the supernatural* / principle (II): *exaggeration*). The giant is armed with a *heptisax*, a kind of weapon obviously not used by the author and his audience, and fit to underline the extraordinary situation (principle (V): *intention to amaze*). However, this unusual weapon is not much help against Grettir:

Hann gekk þá inn í hellinn og var þar eldur mikill á bröndum. Grettir sá að þar lá jötunn ógurlega mikill. Hann var hræðilegur að sjá. En er Grettir kom að honum hljóp jötunninn upp og greip flein einn og hjó til þess er kominn var því að bæði mátti höggva og leggja með því. Tréskaft var í. Það kölluðu menn þá heftisax er þann veg var gert. Grettir hjó á móti með saxinu og kom á skaftið svo að í sundur tók. Jötunninn vildi þá seilast á bak sér aftur til sverðs er þar hékk í hellinum. Í því hjó Grettir framan á brjóstið svo að nálega tók af alla bringspalina og kviðinn svo að iðrin steyptust úr honum ofan í ána og keyrði þau ofan eftir ánni. (p. 1057 / ch. 66)

We see (principle (I): *graphic, gory violence*) at work. It is remarkable that, even though *Grettis saga* keeps a high level of violence throughout the whole text, we hear of floating entrails only here, in this ‘adventurous mode’ insertion. The only principle not at work is (principle (III): *imperfection of the hero*); it may be sufficient that Grettir amply displays his imperfection elsewhere in the saga.

Grettis saga: Conclusion

Like *Njáls saga*, *Grettis saga* shows great interest in physical combat. Obviously, all the four characteristics of the factual mode of combat are at work:

(I) *realistic description of tactics* (e. g., Þorbjörn and Arnórr trying to outmanoeuvre Grettir, ch. 48)

(II) *realistic fighting techniques* (e. g., Grettir's technique when defending empty handed against an armed attack, ch. 16)

(III) *unrealistic level of self control* (e. g., Illugi choosing death over life, ch. 82)

(IV) *exaggerated martial skills* (e. g., Grettir killing six, Hallmundr killing twelve men in one fight)

Within this frame, *Grettis saga* emphasizes some things which are not highlighted in *Njáls saga*, like the humorous aspects of fighting, and the importance of wrestling and empty hand combat skills. Grettir ‘the strong’ acts as much through his bare hands as through his weapons; he pulls, pushes, tears apart, and smashes to the ground. This reflects the saga's fascination for supernatural villains of inhuman strength (the *draugr* Kár, the *draugr* Glámr, the troll woman, the giant). It likens Grettir to these beings, even to the extent that, in the fight against the giant, the text shifts into ‘the adventurous mode of combat’.

b) *Víga-Glúms saga*

Víga-Glúms saga (mainly transmitted in AM 132, fol; AM 445 c, 4to) has its very own way to speak of violence and combat. Realistic description of fighting is well within the

capabilities of its author, as he demonstrates with Glúmr's slaying of Sigmundur. Here, Glúmr pretends to come as a friend, and his attack comes as a surprise: *Síðan fór hann í feldinn og tók spjótið í hönd sér. Síðan snarar hann að honum Sigmundi og brá spjótinu en hann spratt upp í móti en Glúmur hjó þegar í höfuð honum og þurfti Sigmundur eigi fleiri.* (p. 1917 / ch. 8) Sigmundur's action is tactically appropriate, and that of a trained fighter. Instead of backing off, which would be the natural human reaction, he jumps towards Glúmr. This makes sense; fighting unarmed against a weapon, the defender needs to close the distance, to gain control over the weapon and counter-attack the assailant. Backing off, or staying at the weapon's distance, would allow for follow-up attacks, especially against the variable reach of a spear. However, Sigmundur is not quick enough. Before he can try to wrestle for the weapon (like Grettir demonstrates several times), or hit Glúmr with the open hand, the latter can bring in an attack. Either because he succeeds in stepping out and keeping the distance, or by swift manipulation of the spear, Glúmr manages to injure Sigmundur severely, who dies on the spot.

Incompetent fighting, cowardice and deceitfulness

Yet, a closer look reveals that *Víga-Glúms saga* has much less interest in competent fighting, and the display of expert fighting skills, than, e. g., *Njáls saga*. In the whole text, there are only two scenes which describe 'proper' fighting, where the combatants face each other ready for combat, with appropriate weapons, and honourable behaviour. These are the *hólmganga* in chapter 4, and the fight between Glúmr and his men against Þórarinn's party in chapters 22/23. The *hólmganga* scene, however, is detached from the saga's other combat scenes in time, space and personnel. Glúmr is not yet born when his father Eyjólfur fights the duel, which takes place not in Iceland, but in Norway – as if to differentiate the competent fighting of the 'old days' from the hacking and slaying of the Icelanders at home.

In all other combat scenes, there is a taste of deceitfulness, or cowardice, or incompetence to the actions, which, in a way, seems to be much closer to the psychological realities of fighting than the heroic deeds of a Gunnar or Skarpheðinn. For example, combatants are glad when a third party steps in and separates them, allowing them to stop fighting without losing their reputation:

Og er ljóst var um morguninn þá kom Glúmur að ánni með sex tigu manna og vildi ríða yfir ána. En þeir grýttu á þá Esphælingar og gekk eigi fram reiðin og hvarf Glúmur aftur og börðust yfir ána með grjóti og skotum og urðu þar margir sárir en engir eru

nefndir. Og er héraðsmenn urðu varir við þá drifu þeir til um daginn og gengu í milli og var á komið sættum. (p. 1922 / ch. 11)

Glúmr himself is not too proud to run away from a superiorly armed enemy:

Skúta hafði sverð í hendi það er Flugá hét og hjálm á höfði, gengur að seldyrnunum og laust á vegginn og víkur síðan hjá selinu. Glúmur gengur út svo að hann hafði ekki í hendi, sér engan mann, snýr hjá selinu. Komst þá Skúta í milli hans og seldyranna. Þá kennir Glúmur manninn og hopar undan en árgljúfrin voru nær selinu. Skúta biður hann biða. Hann telur það jafnlegt ef þeir væru jafnbúnir við. Glúmur hopar að gljúfrunum en Skúta sækir eftir. (p. 1927-1928 / ch. 16)

At least to a modern reader, the scene has a comical undertone, hinted at by the rather profane sword name *flugá* ('fly', also 'bait'). Later, Glúmr is eager to avenge the shame of his flight. He quickly gathers sixty men and rides to attack Skúta. The latter, however, has thirty men around him, and awaits his enemy at superior position, *og er þar betra að verja með þrjá tigu manna en sækja að með sex tigum. (p. 1928-1929 / ch. 16)* Glúmr holds his personal honour in high esteem, but his life in an even higher one, and without a single blow dealt, he and his men ride home. *'Eg ætla að nú munum við skilja að sinni. Verður nú virt sem má í hvorn stað,' (p. 1929 / ch. 16)* he comments on his decision. At least his relative Arnórr is likely to understand Glúmr's decision. He runs away when a larger, well-armed group threatens him, and leaves them his malt: *Gengu þeir Þorgrímur í móti þeim með brugðin sverð. Og er þeir Arnór sáu það hver liðsmunur var þá hleypti hann á kaf og svo yfir ána en klyfjahestarnir voru fyrir vestan ána. (p. 1921 / ch. 11)*

When it does come to an attack in *Víga-Glúms saga*, the situation is usually asymmetric. Either one side is better armed, has the advantage of numbers, or launches a surprise attack; like in the aforementioned slaying of Sigmundur, the slaying of Bárðr by three men (p. 1932-1933 / ch. 19), the murder of Steinólfr (p. 1934 / ch. 21), and most likely also the killing of Kálfr, which is only indirectly referred by Glúmr (p. 1925 / ch.14).

The slaying of Bárðr is especially interesting. It tells a lot about how an underlying ideology of honour could influence fighting, and it illustrates perfectly the tension between concepts of honourable, that is 'fair', fighting, and the simple urge to win, and save one's own life:

Húskarl Bárðar sá eftirreiðina og mælti: 'Hart ríða þessir eftir, [...] Þar er Vigfús og vildi eg að við ríðum undan og er nú svívirðingarlaust meðan við vitum eigi hvað þeir vilja.' Bárður segir: 'Eigi mun Vigfús ráða á mig við þriðja mann ef þú ert eigi með mér. [...] Þú skalt ríða fyrir og gera menn vara við ef för mín verður seinni en líkindi séu á því að ekki mun skjótt um skipta með okkur Vigfúsi ef við skulum tveir á sjást en hann er betri drengur en hann muni með þriðja mann að mér ganga. En ef við erum tveir en þeir þrír þá munu þeir njóta liðsmunar.' Nú gerði hann sem Bárður mælti [...] Og er þeir fundust þá spyr Bárður hvert erindi þeirra væri. Vigfús sagði að þeir mundu eigi báðir af þeim fundi fara lífs. En Bárður kveðst búinn þess ef þeir skyldu tveir við

leikast 'en það er engi vaskleikur að þrír gangi að einum.' Þá mæltu Austmenn að þeir mundu heima hafa setið ef þeir vissu erindið en létust þó ekki lið veita mega ef menn kæmu til fulltings við Bárð er förunautur hans hleypti í brott. Vigfús bað þá sjá fyrst hversu færi. Síðan börðust þeir langa hríð og varð hvorgi sár en Vigfúsi horfði því óvænna að hann varð að hopa í hverju sinni áður hann næði höggfæri. Bárður hafði sverð og varði sig ágæta vel og varð ekki sár. Austmönnum sýnist ófarnaður mikill ef Vigfús er að jörðu lagður en þeir standi hjá en menn komi til fulltings við Bárð. Þá hlaupa þeir að Bárði og drepa hann. (p. 1932–1933 / ch. 19)

The ambivalent attitude towards violence is evident. The attack, though a breach of social order, still tries to follow society's norms. Caught in a decision between honour and certain victory, Vígfús has to find a way to maximize his chances of success without threatening his reputation. Bárðr, on the other hand, relies on Vígfús's honour to fight him one-on-one. A fatal mistake; facing imminent defeat, Vígfús turns to unfair methods. It is remarkable how both parties have a concept of which numerical proportions lead to immediate action, and which are dishonourable. Three against two would allow an attack, while a ratio of three against one has the Norwegians hesitate.¹²⁹ And even though the action is successful – Bárðr is killed –, Vígfús father Glúmr is wholly dissatisfied with its execution, once he hears what happened. After the deed follow the inevitable legal steps: a futile attempt on compensation from Vígfús's family, then a lawsuit at the *þing*, which has the three killers sentenced.

129 The connection between ‘strength in numbers’, ‘advantage in combat’, and ‘consequence for personal honour’ has been discussed by Falk (2014) under the headline *fjölmennr* (‘many-manned’) vs. *fámennr* (‘meagre-manned’). There is no honour in riding many-manned against a single enemy, as Þorkell Eyjólfsson states in *Laxdæla saga*: ‘*Þat þykki mér engi frami*, segir Þorkell, *at draga fjölmenni at einum manni*.’ (p. 1623 / ch. 57) On the other hand, refusing to gather men for help and relying on one's own strength is the mark of the hero. In *Njáls saga*, both Ólafr pái and Njáll warn Gunnarr to seek out safety in a band of warriors: ‘*far þú fjölmennur*’ (p. 195 / ch. 59); *bað hann aldrei fara við fámenni* (p. 196 / ch. 60) – a warning Gunnarr refuses to pay attention to. Falk's analysis of the “idiomatic variations in the ‘how many-manned will you ride?’ motif” (Falk (2014, p. 108)) shows how this seemingly simple question can be used to different ends, from encouraging military superiority, to warning against imminent danger, or questioning another man's loyalty to a common cause. The notion ‘strategically sound mode of action versus gain of prestige’ reverberates in the question. However, the connection of personal honour and self-reliance in terms of numbers is only relevant in respect to small-scale skirmishing. Once the involved war-bands outgrow a certain number of men (and are then no longer being perceived as collections of individuals but as military troops, as entities of their own right), even a massive outnumbering of the enemy will not be understood as dishonourable. On the contrary: The more men a leader can levy, the greater his prestige. The masses of men under his command become one, and equal a fighter's body, with the leader as their head. And just like it is not dishonourable, but praiseworthy for a hero to use his superior physical strength in small-scale skirmishing against weaker opponents, it is praiseworthy for a military leader to win a battle by strength in numbers. Falk (2014, p. 112) stated that “entourage size is typically framed in saga discourse: as a brute expression of political potency. Numbers are routinely assumed to serve no purpose other than to manifest one's power and ram through one's agenda, most often by naked force.” This is basically correct, but the negative undertone of Falk's comment does not entirely fit the judgement of the sagas, to which brute force is a threatening thing only in the hands of an *ójafnaðarmaðr*. In other cases, brute force can also be precisely the necessary tool; compare, e. g., Snorri *goði*'s actions at the Battle at the *alþingi* in *Njáls saga*.

Clubs, paddles, and improvised weapons

Víga-Glúms saga is especially fond of clumsy, improvised weapons, a sharp contrast to the magic swords and beautiful blades of other texts. They bring a touch of slapstick to the combat scenes, like in the fight against the *berserkr* Björn járnhús ('iron skull'). Glúmr drags down Björn's helmet, and swings at him with a burning log from the fire. There is a trace of the motif 'berserks are invulnerable to iron' to the scene, true. But the whole setting is comical, beginning with the notorious bully Björn going round and looking for trouble, only to be heftily insulted by Glúmr: *'út á Íslandi mundi sá maður kallaður fóll er þann veg léti sem þú lætur. En hér hefi eg vitað alla best orðum stilla.'* (p. 1914 / ch. 6) An insult that surely catered to an Icelandic audience's self image, including some laughs on cost of the cowardly Norwegians.¹³⁰ What follows reminds of a pub brawl, with Glúmr beating up the *berserkr*. The final escalation of violence is detached from the reader's view. Glúmr drags his opponent into the open, and only a couple of lines later we read that *Annan dag eftir er sagt andlát Bjarnar.* (p. 1914 / ch. 6) Comical is also the figure of the thrall Eiríkr, and his use of a club: *Eiríkur hét húskarl Þórarins. Hann var að verki sínu um morguninn. Hann hafði enga hlíf né vopn. Hann fær sér trélurk í hönd og fór til fulltings við Þórarin og varð Glúmi hið mesta ólið að honum því að menn og hlífar meiddust fyrir tré því er hann hafði að vega með.* (p. 1939 / ch. 23) Eiríkr is a subversive element. The important, wealthy men on whose behalf the skirmish is fought are proud of their expensive weaponry, and would hardly dare to go into combat without. The thrall needs none of that. As an almost troll-like appearance, without protection and armed only with a club – the most simple of all weapons next to the stone (Schulz, 2004, pp. 289–291) – he shows the self-absorbed upper class what strength and courage alone can do.

Even the saga's last combat scene is far from a heroic last stand. Instead, it lends some characteristics of a school yard brawl to the serious business of combat. The fight starts when Glúmr is pushed down some dunes, *og féll Glúmur og veltist með skjöld sinn á eyrina ofan og varð ekki sár en þrjú spjót hafði fest í skildi hans.* (p. 1947 / ch. 27) The three spears stuck in Glúmr's shield are the only proper weapons in the scene. Otherwise, stones are thrown: *Síðan eggjuðu hvorir aðra atgöngu og skutust á og börðust grjóti og varð hörð hrið og urðu margir sárir.* (p. 1947 / ch. 27) Even if these words are supposed to include the use of spears, swords, or axes, the saga tells nothing of them. On the contrary:

¹³⁰ A topic the saga plays with right at the start, when it introduces Glúmr's xenophobic grandfather Ingjaldr, and the 'racist' Norwegian Ívar: *'Illu heilli hefir þú til Íslands farið ef af þeim sökum skulum vér þjóna íslenskum mönnum eða láta ella frændur vora eða vini. Og eg veit eigi hví þér sýnist að fara til hinnar verstu þjóðar og frelst hefir þú þig um tíðindasögu við mig.* (p. 1908 / ch. 3)

Þorvaldr Tasaldi enters the fight with a paddle, the first weapon he got his hands on. In the end, two of Glúmr's men have died. But like in combat scene in chapters 22 and 23, neither are we witnesses to the actions that bring their death, nor are we told how exactly they die – as if the author felt compelled to mention the fallen, but wanted to keep the lighter tone of a huge brawl. A similar tone he puts to the tussle at the Hegranesþing. *Þeir gerðu svo og runnu að í einu skeiði í dómhringinn og var lengi nætur áður þeim varð bægt frá í brott.* (p. 1942 / ch. 24) Glúmr and his men carry spears when they push through the crowd of their opponents, but – in contrast to the battle at the *alþingi* in *Njáls saga* – no one is hurt. The conflict is a pushing and pulling, *og gerðist þar svo mikil þröng og föst og varð það um síðir að dómurinn var settur í annað sinn.* (p. 1942 / ch. 24)

Irony

Taken the various comical features of its combat scenes into account, *Víga-Glúms saga* can be read as an ironic remark on the constant fighting in the genre of *Íslendingasögur*. This is more or less explicitly stated by the text itself, in the horse fight scene. Horse fights are a stock motif of saga literature.¹³¹ They will usually end with the (human) participants attacking each other with the sticks they use to drive the horses, some fisticuffs, and more serious consequences afterwards, as in *Njáls saga* (CS 15: Horse fight escalates), *Grettis saga* (pp. 999-1000 / ch. 29), and of course *Þorsteins þáttur stangahöggs*. The author of *Víga-Glúms saga* uses the motif as well. Yet at the same time, he is unable to take it entirely seriously: *Og að skilnaði laust Kálfur Ingólf með stafnum. Standa menn nú á milli. Glúmur mælti: 'Gefum engan gaum að slíku. Svo lýkur hér hverju hestapingi.'* (p. 1924 / ch. 13) The *hér* that Glúmr speaks of is just as much the literary place – the genre of *Íslendingasögur* –, as it is his home region.

This is not the first ironic intertextual reference the saga makes. As discussed above, Glúmr's father Eyjólfur presents himself as a 'proper' warrior when he fights a 'standard' *hólmganga*, parallel to the *holmganga*-scenes of several other sagas. But not even the picture of Eyjólfur as a 'true hero' is left intact: Some time before the *hólmganga*, he tracks down a bear in the woods, and cuts off his snout. A remarkable deed, one might think, and reminding of heroes like Finnbogi and Grettir – in fact, the scene is a direct allusion to *Grettis saga*. In both texts, the hero's cape ends up in the cave of the bear, and both Eyjólfur and Grettir attack the bear, mutilate him, and come back to their companions with

131 For a technical discussion of the horsefight, see Schoenfeld (1900, pp. 46–52).

their cape, and a body part of the bear. The significant difference is, that Grettir's bear is a true monster: *Það bar til á öndverðum vetri að híðbjörn einn grimmur hljóp úr híði sínu og varð svo grimmur að hann eirði hvorki mönnum né fé.* (p. 987 / ch. 21) The beast is extremely aggressive and attacks as soon as it spots an intruder. (p. 988 / ch. 21) The bear that Eyjólfur fights, however, is quite the opposite – only a cub, and hardly any danger: *En viðbjörn hafði komið og dregið kápuna, hafði varla aflið til haft upp að halda er björninn var ungur og nýkominn úr híðinu og eigi mannsbani orðinn.* (p. 1909 / ch. 3) It is sitting on the ground when Eyjólfur finds it, obviously not knowing what to do with a human being. Eyjólfur shows no mercy, and wastes no time: *Brá hann sverði og hjó af trýnið við augun uppi af dýrinu og hafði það í hendi sér heim.* (p. 1909 / ch. 3) Upon his arrival, he impresses his companions with the bear's snout – of course without mentioning the rather unimpressive nature of the beast. Awe and respect are the reward: *'Hann hefir sýnt vaskleik í þessum hlut þar er eg veit eigi hvort nokkur vor mundi til verða.'* (p. 1910 / ch. 3)

Víga-Glúms saga: Conclusion

Featuring a hero who tricks other men to take the responsibility for his killings – after the slaying of Kálfr in ch. 14, and after the skirmish against Þórarinn in ch. 22/23 –, ironically twisting well-known literary motifs, and depicting combat mostly as unfair brutality, *Víga-Glúms saga* is not at all a praise of warrior ethic and martial mindset. On the contrary. The story ends with a last example of attempted violence, which is, again, an ironic twist, in this case on the 'last stand posturing' of other texts. It is malicious in planning, but so clumsily executed that it has to fail: Already an old man and bereft of his eyesight, Glúmr plans his last murder, inviting his rivals to make peace, but awaiting them with a drawn sword under his cloak. The victims *in spe* become suspicious of his plans, and turn their horses - *Og voru þau lok viðskipta þeirra Glúms og Eyfirðinga.* (p. 1949 / ch. 28) This sentence implies that conflicts are best brought to an end when the killing of people is avoided, not vice versa. And yet, no matter how difficult to justify Glúmr's use of violence had been, after his death people say that *Glúmur hafi verið best um sig allra vígra manna hér á landi.* (p. 1949 / ch. 28)

Contradictory to what its name could imply, *Víga-Glúms saga* is not a text about an outstanding warrior. We look in vain for, e. g., heroic battles or applications of the 'pirate pattern'. It is a saga about people who know that fighting is a mere necessity of the world they are living in. In most cases, they try to avoid it, and, if they can not, do it as

pragmatically – that is, as unfair – as possible. Therefore, only the first two characteristics of the ‘factual mode of combat’ are applied properly:

(I) *plausible tactics*: e. g., Klængr and his men luring Þorvaldr out of his house and slaying him (p. 1946 / ch. 27);

(II) *plausible fighting techniques*: e. g., Sigmundr's attempt to defend against Glúmr's spear (p. 1917 / ch. 8);

The other two characteristics, which are based on heroic exaggeration, are turned upside down. Heroism becomes a caricature:

(III) *unrealistic level of self control*: e. g., Glúmr running away from Skúta (p. 1927-1928 / ch. 16);

(IV) *exaggerated martial skills*: e. g., the thrall Eiríkr beating up the well-armed farmers with a club (p. 1939 / ch. 23).

Thus, the saga is, if anything, a swan song for an ideology which exalts combat as a value of its own and as a primary means to gain personal honour. Life, health, wealth, influence, all of these are more important to the saga's protagonists than honourable fighting or a noble death.

c) The ‘factual mode’: Conclusion

The lengthy discussion of *Njáls saga*, and the comparison with *Grettis saga* and *Víga-Glúms saga* leads to several conclusions:

First of all, a close reading of the combat scenes in the three sagas allowed for the development and verification of the ‘factual mode of combat’. To a certain degree, the ‘factual mode of combat’ is based on the repetition of literary patterns, and on narrative exaggeration: “What these descriptions show is the author's imaginative strength and dexterity with words as well as his knowledge of the literary conventions governing descriptions of fights.” (Ólason, 2007, p. 41 fn. 30) But this is only a part of the truth. The ‘fabulous mode of combat’ is just as much rooted in an actual understanding of how people move in combat, and aims at realistic descriptions of such movement, especially on a micro level. This is the major difference to the three ‘fantastic modes of combat’ analysed in the earlier chapters, which intentionally avoided realism in their combat descriptions. Only a superficial look at, e. g., *Njáls saga* can support the notion that its combat scenes are on the whole “incredible, unrealistic”. (Ólason, 2007, p. 41)

On the other hand, the degree of realism in the combat scenes does not mean that entertaining the audience by the adequate display of martial technique was their sole interest. Like any scene in any saga, they are part of a larger context, and, in a reciprocal process, help to constitute and are constituted by the overall mood of the text they are a part of. Combat is one of the most intense experiences of human existence, and tales of combat will easily fascinate an audience, in a positive or negative way.¹³² The literary processing of combat is thus ideally suited to carry meaning, to highlight a text's topics in the most dramatic way. And the less a combat scene is bound to formalized literary patterns (like the 'knightly' or the 'heroic mode of combat' are), the wider the range of possible messages that can be inscribed into it. We have seen that, even though many of the combat scenes of *Njáls saga* and *Grettis saga* are very similar on a structural level, they transport different information on the protagonists, and convey different moods. E. g., the comical aspects of *Grettis saga*'s combat scenes are hardly discernible in *Njáls saga*. *Víga-Glúms saga* goes even a step further, by twisting the 'factual mode of combat' to ridicule those attitudes towards combat that the other two sagas (and most *Íslendingasögur*) demonstrate. It plays on the same instrument, and a familiar tune, but in a different key, so to say.

The example of *Víga-Glúms saga* indicates an openness of the 'factual mode of combat' that allows for variation. In a further step, sub-patterns can be developed or integrated, as, for example, the 'pirate pattern'. It may well be that the stock motifs of the 'pirate pattern' are reflections of older, most likely oral storytelling traditions. However, the question of its roots is not up for discussion here. Of interest is that the pattern can be integrated into a text whose combat scenes are defined by the 'factual mode'. Subordinated to the latter's four guiding principles, the 'pirate pattern' receives its own space within the sagas. The respective scenes remain separate entities, often somewhat detached from the rest of the story (as their frequent localization at sea or outside of Iceland shows), and refer to one another intra- and intertextually.

As the discussion of *Njáls saga* and *Grettis saga* has shown, not all combat scenes of an *Íslendingasaga* are necessarily governed by the 'factual mode of combat' to the same extent. Sagas can and do digress into other modes where it fits the narrative, like the application of the 'heroic mode of combat' at the *Battle of Clontarf*, or of the 'adventurous mode' in Grettir's fight against the giant. Such digressions transgress the genre borders of

¹³² This seems to be a reflex on our basic behavioural setting as human beings: No matter if bystanders are amused or shocked, for most people it is almost impossible *not* to look when a fight breaks out.

saga literature. And they prove, as pointed out before, that the ‘realism’, formulaic character, or narrative function of a saga's combat scenes – let alone of the combat scenes of the *Íslendingasögur* as a genre – can not be deduced from a small number of samples alone. A broad approach is necessary, which first analyses the combat scenes of a given text individually, then reviews their connections within the text, and finally puts them into an intertextual network. Only such an exploration of all three levels (*scene* – *saga* – ‘*genre*’) can provide a correct understanding of combat in Old Norse literature.

Unfortunately, the mistake of a selective perspective has often been made, both when judging the scenes of the *Íslendingasögur* as a genre, and when comparing them with those of other genres, notably of the *samtíðarsögur*. As Hallberg wrote regarding the execution of Sturla Sighvatsson in *Sturlunga saga*:

One seeks in vain in the Sagas of Icelanders for anything remotely approaching these revolting details. Here in *Sturlunga* the fighting is more petty, but at the same time more cruel. No powerful death-dealing blows are exchanged, no heads are split down to the shoulder at a single stroke. The assailant picks and pokes cautiously with his weapons, and his courage rises in proportion to his adversary's defenselessness and seems to reach its climax when he is dead. [...] When one reads this authentic contemporary report by an eyewitness, one has a strong impression that the battle descriptions in the classical sagas must have represented something belonging to the far distant past for the Icelanders of the Sturlung Age. And at any rate one at least has the right to raise the question whether the sagas' heroic ideals and warrior-ethics were not in essence the fond dream and idealized fiction of a later epoch rather than the depiction of a once-existing reality. (Hallberg, 1962, pp. 32–33)

Hallberg may be correct, as long as he picks a scene like the mentioned execution, and compares it, e. g., with Gísli Súrsson's last stand. But by now we have seen plenty examples of combat scenes in ‘classical’ *Íslendingasögur* – from Skarpheðinn's brutal slayings in *Njáls saga* to the unheroic fighting of *Víga-Glúms saga* – which do not fit the wide-spread cliché of the “quite incredible” (Ólason, 2007, p. 41 fn. 30) combat action. *Vice versa*, *Sturlunga saga* includes descriptions of fights which we would not be surprised to find in an *Íslendingasaga*. To give just one example, here a scene from *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*: *Og eitt sinn er við hittumst á förnum vegi þá veitti eg honum tilræði en hann rann undir höggið og varð eg undir. Síðan brá hann knífi og stakk í auga mér og missti eg sýnar að auganu.* (Jóhannesson et al., 1946, p. 47) Ducking under a blow, closing the distance, throwing the opponent, pinning him on the ground and immediately getting one's own weapon ready is by no means a “petty” feat that could be executed “cautiously”, as Hallberg put it, but a combat action that demands just as much courage and skill as, e. g., Grettir's empty handed disarmings of his weapon wielding opponents. The combat scenes

of the *Íslendingasögur* are not a uniform group, but a heterogeneous collection, and the same is true for those of the *samtiðarsögur*. Their majority adheres to the first two characteristics of the 'factual mode of combat', (I) *plausible tactics* and (II) *plausible fighting technique*, while they differ in the extent they make use of the characteristics (III) *unrealistic level of self control* and (IV) *exaggerated martial skills*, from 'very much' to 'not at all'.

Consequently, the combat scenes of the *Íslendingasögur* are not one, but can be several things: the bragging about a hero's extraordinary physical and mental capability for fighting; exciting literary re-workings of actual combat experience or martial arts training; or witnesses to the horror of medieval bloodshed. The modern reader does well to admit their importance for the Old Norse texts, and their own artistic value.

After discussing the combat scenes of *Njáls saga* in full detail, and reviewing those of *Grettirs saga* and *Víga-Glúms saga* in comparison, the next chapter will take a different angle. Instead of analysing the intratextual connections of the combat scenes within a single text, the example of *glíma* wrestling shall demonstrate how pieces gathered from several sagas can be assembled into a coherent picture of a distinct form of (sportive) combat.

8. Hip-throw and heelhook: wrestling in the sagas

Competitive wrestling is an omnipresent phenomenon of human culture, a game or sport found all over the world, and at all times. While children wrestle ‘instinctively’, without formally defined rules, adults subordinate competitive wrestling to sets of rules, thus separating it from unarmed close quarter combat in battle or self defence, reducing the chance of injuries, and avoiding escalation.¹³³ German wrestling manuals from the Early Modern period coined the term *geselliges Ringen* (‘convivial wrestling’) for such sportive or playful forms. Various styles of competitive/convivial wrestling developed, each with their individual characteristics, like the Japanese national sport *sumo*, Turkish oil wrestling *yağlı güreş*, Sudanese crowd pleaser *lutte*, and innumerable other (mostly regional or national) styles.¹³⁴ Wrestling techniques can be traced back to ancient Egypt¹³⁵, and at least since the year 704 B.C., wrestling has been an Olympic discipline.

Contrary to the most widespread wrestling styles of today (Graeco-Roman, freestyle, *judo*, *luta livre*, and Brazilian *jiu jitsu*), competitive wrestling styles in Central and Northern Europe focused (at least since the Middle Ages) on stand-up grappling, not on ground fighting. A round was or is ended when one of the opponents is thrown to the ground. Examples for this mode are the *geselliges Ringen* Fabian von Auerswald described 1539 (Auerswald, 1539), or the recently practised *Schwingen* in Switzerland, and *gouren* in Brittany. Icelandic *glíma*¹³⁶ – both the form described in the sagas, and its modern descendant practised by the *Glímusamband Íslands* – belongs to this strand of European stand-up wrestling. Proofs for *glíma* practice come from different centuries, like, e. g., the early modern *galdrastafir*, magical signs, that were written on paper and put into a wrestler's shoe to secure his victory.¹³⁷ If such witnesses to the long-time existence of

133 As is for example demonstrated by Fabian von Auerswald, whose wrestling manual *Ringer kunst* from 1539 depicts several painful, dangerous techniques, but calls them “nicht Geselliglich” (‘not convivial’), that is, not suitable for playful competition. See Welle (1993, p. 166).

134 To get an impression of this vast and fascinating variety, see www.wrestlingiseverywhere.com (accessed 30. APR 2016)

135 On the wall paintings of Beni Hassan, around 2000 B.C.

136 The etymology of the word *glíma*, which is used only in Icelandic and Faroese to denote wrestling, is not entirely clear. Brøndum-Nielsen (1924, pp. 460, 462) derived it from a Germanic root **gli*, supposed to mean ‘to shine, to glimmer’, maybe denoting the quick wrestling movements that happen ‘like a flash’. Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon basically agreed with this derivation, but assumed an intermediate level of meaning, shifting the semantics from ‘to shine’ to ‘to delight, to amuse’, in Einarsson (2006, p. 98). Libermann (1996, p. 89), however, assumes a root meaning ‘to pull or push aside, to cast a sideways look’.

137 “The use of two magical signs named *gapaldur* and *ginfaxi* can be used in *glímagaldur* (wrestling magic). The *gapaldur* is placed under the heel of the right foot and the *ginfaxi* is placed under the toe of the left. Then a verse is to be spoken, for which four variants are given. They all begin *Gapaldur* under my heel *ginfaxi* under my toe, and

glíma should be interpreted as signs of an intact and purely Icelandic wrestling tradition remains debatable, as influences from other European forms of folk wrestling could well be imagined. No matter if or if not outside influences existed, a development of some form happened over the centuries. Many distinct characteristics of modern *glíma*, most notably the leather belt and thigh straps, are nowhere mentioned in the sagas. (Stetkevych, 2015, p. 9)

For a first impression of medieval *glíma* practice, here a scene from *Finnboga saga*:

One summer, Finnbogi's son Gunnbjörn takes part in sportive competitions,¹³⁸ in which wrestling matches play an important role: *var talað mart um glímur* (p. 662 / ch. 37). Although initially hesitant, Gunnbjörn is set for a match against Jökull, an old rival of his family.

Eftir þetta taka menn til leiks. Var Gunnbirni skipað í mót Jökli. Gengust þeir að fast og gerðu langa lotu og féll Jökull á kné. Þá var um rætt að þeir mundu hætta og kalla jafni. Jökull vill það eigi og gerðu þeir lotu aðra og féll þá Gunnbjörn á kné. Þá gengu menn að og báðu þá hætta. Jökull kvað ekki reynt vera. Eftir það taka þeir til hið þriðja sinn. Gunnbjörn leysir þá til og hleypur undir Jökul og þrífur hann upp á bringu sér og setur niður innar við pallinn mikið fall. Þeir Jökull og Bersi hljópu til vopna og voru haldnir. Eftir það skilja þeir leikinn. (p. 662 / ch. 37)

This descriptions hints at several characteristics of convivial *glíma* in medieval Iceland. Firstly, there is the *social context*. Wrestling is a social event, a sportive competition with active (wrestlers) and passive (audience) participants. When violence disturbs the convivial mode of conduct, the games are ended. Secondly, the *organisation* of the matches is hinted at. Opponents are set against each other, the matches last for several rounds. Thirdly, some *technicalities* of wrestling are mentioned. The wrestlers drag each other down to the knees, later on one wrestler ducks under his opponent's arms and slams him down.

Such details are not restricted to *Finnboga saga*. A comparison of the many wrestling scenes of saga literature produces a quite detailed picture of convivial *glíma* in medieval Iceland. We know that these scenes are not merely reflexes to older practices obsolete at the time of saga redaction, as a 14th century regulation in *Jónsbók* shows: *Nu geíngur maðr til leiks, fángs* (Schulmann, 2010, p. 56). The approximation of *leikr* and *fang* again indicate the convivial, 'playful' mode of conduct. The three dimensions *social context*,

conclude: stand by me, fiend now lying upon me! (i. e., possessing me] or stand by me, my ogre! (Ice. *skratti*) or strengthen me now, Adversary! (Ice. *andskoti*) or Devil, support me!" (Flowers (1989, p. 100)) For an image, see: http://www.vestfiridir.is/galdrasyning/german/G-magical_staves2.php#Ginfaxi (accessed 4. APR 2016)

138 For an overview on games and sports in the Old North, see Teichert (2014).

organisation, and techniques of *glíma* shall be further discussed, according to Rainer Welle's observation:

Die Bausteine des Ringens – die einzelnen technischen Fertigkeiten [...] an sich – sind in allen Kulturen, die den Ringkampf kennen, die gleichen [...] Die Epochenspezifität des Ringkampfes besteht daher eher in der Art und Weise, wie die technische Fertigkeit u.a. in einen ganzen Handlungskomplex integriert wird. [...] Damit begibt man sich auf die Suche nach der (gesellschaftlichen) Motivierung, die der technischen Fertigkeit zugrunde liegt. (Welle, 1993, p. 22)

a) The social context

Wrestling can be a spontaneous leisure activity, e. g. in *Finnboga saga*, where it is a – rather rough – game among boys: *Og það var einn dag að Bárður spurði hvort Gunnbjörn vildi glíma við annan pilt.* (p. 659 / ch. 35). And there can even be a frivolous undertone, when twelve year old *Finnbogi* wrestles with the maidservants. (p. 628 / ch. 6) However, more frequent in literature are matches that take place as parts of social events, as competition and spectacle for the bystanders, as for example at the famous wedding at *Reykhólar*: *Þar var nú glaumur ok gleði mikil, skemmtan góð og margs konar leikar, bæði dansleikar, glímur og sagnaskemmtan.* (Jóhannesson et al., 1946, p. 27) Or at the spring *þing* at *Hegranes* in *Grettis saga*: *Þá töluðu til sumir menn ungir að veður væri gott og fagurt og sé gott ungum mönnum að hafa glímur og skemmtan. Þeir kváðu það allráðlegt.* (p. 1064 / ch. 72)

Similar to modern sport events, wrestlers could play a role as proxy for competing groups; or – the other way round – groups competed because they identified with wrestlers from their ranks. Typically, such groups were organized by regional origin. Fighting not only for themselves, but also for their local community, wrestlers earned prestige among their peers. Thus, the physical action of wrestling became a means to integrate oneself into the complex network of mutual relations and dependencies that was so typical for medieval Iceland – compare a scene from *Víga-Glúms saga*:

Það gerist eitt sumar á alþingi að í Fangabrekku gengust menn að sveitum, Norðlendingar og Vestfirðingar. Gekk Norðlendingum þyngra. Var fyrir sveit þeirra Már sonur Glúms. Kemur þar að maður einn er Ingólfur hét sonur Þorvalds. [...] Már mælti: 'Þú ert þreklegur maður. Muntu vera sterkur. Veit mér að ganga til fangs.' Hann svarar: 'Það mun eg gera fyrir þínar sakir.' Sá féll er í móti var, gengur til annar og hinn þriðji og fór svo. Nú hugnaði Norðlendingum. Þá mælti Már: 'Ef þú þarft míns formælis skal eg þér að liði verða.' (p. 1923 / ch. 13)

Henning Eichberg wrote that “der gesellschaftliche Charakter des Sports nicht nur in seiner Organisation, Führung und Ideologie lag und liegt, sondern sich im Sportverhalten selbst aufsuchen läßt.” (Eichberg, 1978, pp. 14–15) In this respect, *glíma*'s characteristic feature is its synchronicity of ‘convivial’ and ‘antagonistic’ qualities. The matches described in the sagas are a way to demonstrate martial prowess without bloodshed. As *Grettis saga* expresses it: *Ekki vissu menn gjörla afl Grettis því að hann var óglíminn.* (p. 971 / ch. 14) – note the word *óglíminn*. Furthermore, wrestling reflects the ambiguous attitude Icelandic culture held towards violence. Aggression, willingness to fight, and combat skills were held in high esteem, but only as long as they were channelled into socially accepted action. Displays of *glíma* skills that were at the same time unwavering and determined, yet remained within the firm boundaries of the rules, signified the ‘ideal man’: successfully enforcing his will against political and economical rivals, but never threatening social order as an *ójafnaðarmaðr*.¹³⁹ *Glíma* was therefore just as much a game, and a performance, as it was a fight. *Jónsbók*'s choice of words, as quoted above, underlined this: *Nu geíngur maðr til leiks, fángs.* The words can even be integrated into a single compound, when men are said to go *til leikfangs*.¹⁴⁰

When a wrestler's attitude in the sagas shifts from control to affect, and his actions from playful technique to raw aggression, convivial *glíma* turns into true unarmed combat, and the opponent into an enemy, as we read in *Svarfdæla saga*:

Þeir takast fangbrögðum og glíma lengi þar til ambátt ein kom í stofudyrnar og kallar þetta ambáttafang er hvorgi féll og það þá kyssast og hætta síðan. Klaufi reiddist við þetta og tekur Þórð upp á bringu sér og keyrir niður fall mikið svo allir ætluðu hann meiddan. Eftir það gyrðir Klaufi hann svo fast að hélt við meiðsl. (p. 1797 / ch. 13)

The servant's effeminating words provoke Klaufi to an extent that he is no longer willing to channel his anger into a rule-bound game. He explodes in a fit of rage, changing from

139 The various social functions of combat sports competitions can be seen all over the world, and at different times. One might argue that they are fundamental traits of warrior cultures; compare, e. g., the social implications of modern day Zulu stick fighting matches, which are strikingly similar to those of the *glíma* matches described by the sagas: “Today, stick fighting is still an opportunity for men to build courage and skill, earmark themselves for leadership positions, and earn respect in the community [...] Zulu people call it ‘playing sticks’ [...] After they have passed puberty, boys begin to fight at public ceremonies such as weddings, the lung-festival [...], first-fruit festivals [...], and interdistrict fighting competitions [...] Stick fighting can take place as single or group combat, depending on the nature of the occasion on which it takes place.” (Coetzee (2010, p. 19)) Compare also Martin (2003, pp. 25–26) on sports competitions in the *Íslendingasögur*: “[T]he resemblance between the social dynamics depicted in the sagas and similar dynamics observed in real world cultures is too strong to be coincidental [...] in their depictions of social interactions surrounding competitive activity, at least, the saga compilers were writing as close to life as they could.”

140 Similarly, the execution of a single technique can be called ‘playing it’, even where the fight is no longer a game, but serious combat; e. g., *lék ek henni þá hælkrók*, ‘I played her a heelhook’. (Jónsson (1954, p. 352 / ch. 13))

technique to pure violence, with fatal consequences – after beating up Þórðr, Klaufi takes an axe and kills him.

b) Organisation

When *glíma* was played as a competition, wrestlers challenged each other, e. g., Gunnlaugr Ormstunga versus Þórðr (*Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu*, p. 1183 / ch. 10), or they were paired up by the bystanders. One the one hand, this guaranteed balanced, and thus exciting, matches: *Nú glímdu fyrst þeir sem ósterkastir voru [...] En er flestir höfðu glímt nema þeir sem sterkastir voru [...]* (*Grettis saga*, p. 1064 / ch. 72) On the other hand, the combination of the pairs could translate interpersonal tensions into physical action, for example in the quoted scene from *Finnboga saga*, when Bersi makes sure Gunnbjörn fights against rival Jökull.

Glíma takes place outdoors and indoors. There is no evidence of a separated, or even ritually prepared fighting ground, nor are there protective spells or sacrifices that would mark the time in which wrestling takes place. Both are notable differences to *hólmganga* (Wetzler, 2014b, pp. 358–360), and indicate *glíma*'s seemingly harmless character. Some of the matches in literature escalate, as they might have done in reality. But on the whole, wrestling remains a game, and its inherent aggression is not perceived as a threat to social order.

Matches are organized in rounds: *Síðan glíma þeir þrjár lotur og þótti Bárði mjög jafni og bað þá hætta.* (*Finnboga saga ramma*, p. 659 / ch. 35) As said before, ground fighting plays no role in convivial *glíma*. A round finds a clear end when one of the opponents is thrown to the ground. The consequences of touching the ground with only one knee are more difficult to judge, but it seems that this would end a round without a clear decision. Both Gunnbjörn and Jökull in *Finnboga saga* go down to one knee before their fight escalates. This could either mean that both have won one of two points necessary to win, or that the match remains undecided until the third round. Similarly, the match Grettir fights against two brothers does not end, although *ýmsir fóru á kné.* (*Grettis saga*, p. 1067 / ch. 72) Finally, the probably most famous wrestling match of Old Norse literature – Þórr against Elli, the personified old age – may be interpreted in the same line: Elli dominates,

but can not definitely decide the match for herself. When the god goes down on one knee, their host bids them to stop the fight.¹⁴¹

Þá mælir Þórr: 'Svá lítinn sem þér kallið mik, þá gangi nú til einhverr ok fáisk við mik! Nu em ek reiðr!' Þá svarar Útgarðaloki ok litask um á bekkina ok maelti: 'Eigi sé ek þann mann hér inni er eigi mun lítilræði í þykkja at fásk við þik.' Ok enn mælir hann: 'Sjám fyrst. Kalli mér hingat kerlinguna fóstru mína Elli, ok fáisk Þórr við hana ef hann vill. Felt hefír hon þá menn er mér hafa litizk eigi ósterkligrí en Þórr er.' Því næst gekk í höllina kerling ein gømul. Þá mælir Útgarðaloki at hon skal taka fang við Ásaþór. Ekki er langt um at gera. Svá fór fang þat at því harðara er Þórr knúðisk at fanginu, því fastara stóð hon. Þá tók kerling at leita til bragða, ok varð Þórr þá lauss á fótum, ok váru þær sviptingar allharðar, ok eigi lengi áðr en Þórr fell á kné oðrum fæti. Þá gekk til Útgarðaloki, bað þau hætta fanginu, ok sagði svá at Þórr mundi eigi þurfa at bjóða fleirum mǫnnum fang í hans höll. (Faulkes, 2nd ed. 2005 (1982), p. 42)

Þórsteinn Einarsson concluded from the sources that “fall á kné sé ekki talinn sigur, en menn geta kallast jafnir [...] Fullur sigur mun ekki hafa talist, nema andstæðingur félli á bakið, því að þá var hann kominn í óhagræðisaðstöðu.” (Einarsson, 2006, p. 77) Putting down one knee, and falling flat on the ground, are different level of helplessness. Symbolic meaning was attached to them. According to Grágás, pushing a man to the ground is a serious insult. It is noteworthy in our context that the law mentions the ‘half fall’ to the knee separately: *En það er fall, ef hinn styður niður kné eða hendi, allra helst, ef hann fellur meir.* (Karlsson, Sveinsson, & Árnason, 1992, p. 210)

Like any combat sport, *glíma* was not free of injuries. A famous example happens in *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*:

Og 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 féll Gunnlaugur þá með Þórði. [...] Þá var vafiður fóturinn og í liðinn færður og þrúnaði allmjög. (p. 1183 / ch. 10)

However, such injuries were seen as ‘part of the game’, and a man had no right to prosecute his opponent for a *glíma* accident.¹⁴² As *Jónsbók* states: *Nu geíngur maðr til leiks, fángs eða skinndráttar at vilia sínum. Þa abýrgiz hann sik síálfr at öllu. Þo at hann sái meín eða skaða af. En sa er lek við hann sýní vilia síns með settar eiði.* [transcr. S. W.] (Schulmann, 2010, p. 56)

141 Compare the rules of modern *glíma*: „Man rechnet nicht mit einem Fall bei der Glíma, wenn der Glímakämpfer den Boden oder die Erde nur mit den Armen oder Beinen unterhalb des Ellenbogens oder Knies berührt, wenn er z. Bsp. auf das Knie oder den Ellenbogen fällt, um dem eigentlichen Fall vorzubeugen.“ (“Íslenzk Glíma,” 1929, p. 7)

142 In *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, the injury has a narrative function, of course: *Þá maelti Þórður: ‘Vera má’, segir hann, ‘að þér vegni eigi annað betur.’ ‘Hvað þá?’ segir Gunnlaugur. ‘Málin við Hrafn’ [...] Gunnlaugur svarar öngu.* (p. 1183 / ch. 10) Þórður is right, the ill outcome for Gunnlaugr is a foreboding of the things to come. In their last duel, Gunnlaugr and Hrafn deal one another fatal wounds; like in the *glíma* match, both opponents fall. Again, a foot injury happens – this time not to Gunnlaugr, though –, a second connection between both scenes.

According to *Grettis saga*, men wrestled with bare chest. Grettir *kastaði [...] kuflinum og því næst öllum bolklæðum* (p. 1066 / ch. 72), and he urges his opponents to hurry with the undressing, *því að ekki sit eg lengi klæðlaus*. (p. 1066 / ch. 72) This made sense, considering what stress the activity provides for any clothing, but it also provided an opportunity to show off a powerful physique. As an alternative to bare-chested wrestling, at least the idea of a special, sturdy wrestling gown existed, called *fangastakkr*. However, it is unclear if this reflects Icelandic realities, or is a mere literary motif. The texts which speak of the *fangastakkr* (*Kjalnesinga saga*, *Vilmundar saga víðutan*, *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*) are rather located on the fantastic end of the spectrum.¹⁴³

c) Techniques

Like every martial art, a wrestling system's individual *gestalt* is dependant from its cultural context. Certain sets of rules, aesthetic principles, social norms and similar 'outside' influences define its technical repertoire. However, the unchanging 'experimental setup' – two human beings try to throw each other to the ground – leads to a remarkable similarity, often even congruency between (historical and recent) wrestling methods from around the world. Parallels between the ancient Egyptian drawings of Beni Hassan and modern Iranian *koshti*, between early modern wrestling manuals from Germany and Olympic *judo* are numerous, and can be found without effort. It is rewarding to keep this technical homogeneity in mind while reading literary descriptions of *glíma*. Modern *glíma* uses numerous technical terms which already can be found in the sagas, with the context frequently proving a continuity of meaning over the centuries. Details of technical application may have changed, but there is hardly a reason to doubt that this terminological congruency also equals a practical one – a practical congruency which grants us an access to Iceland's medieval culture which is of outstanding immediacy. While, for example, the exact mode of saga recitation at the wedding of Reykhólar will forever remain unclear, the wrestling matches held at the same event are easy to visualize before our inner eyes – a hip throw remains a hip throw, even after 900 years.

Wrestling starts with the opponents holding each other, or, in freer forms, trying to establish a grip on the other person. The initial method of holding defines the course of the fight, and the appropriate techniques; in some wrestling systems, fighters are allowed to

¹⁴³ It must be noted, though, that the fighters in continental wrestling manuals do wear clothes which, again, may reflect both the reality of the time, or aesthetic norms.

change grips once a round has begun, on others they have to keep the same position throughout the round. Modern *glíma* standardized starting position and sanctioned the techniques to be used from there, while the medieval sources are unclear on these matters. It may well be that various rule sets were in use, as, e. g., some texts refer it as a foul to let go of the grip, while it seems allowed in others. (Einarsson, 2006, p. 77)

The importance of the gripping method is reflected by the use of expressions from the word field 'to hold, to grip' as terms for wrestling in several European languages. In Icelandic, the root verb for such expressions is – quite simply – *at fá*, 'to take'. *Fang* in Old Icelandic is not only a grip, or, more precisely, "that which one clasps or embraces, [...] an armful" (Jónsson, 1954, p. 141), but also wrestling itself – compare Engl. 'to catch', 'catch-as-catch-can' or 'catchwrestling' as expressions for wrestling. The association of 'to wrestle' and 'to embrace' is known elsewhere in medieval Europe, as the oldest Italian fencing manual, the *Fior de Battaglia* from the first decade of the 15th century, calls unarmed fighting *abrazare*, Ital. for 'to embrace'. (Mondschein, 2011, p. 22) It is furthermore common for individual forms of wrestling to be called according to the way opponents hold each other, e. g. *Hoselupf*, 'collar and elbow', or 'backhold'. The latter is a wrestling version famous in Scotland, in which both fighters clasp their own hands behind their opponent's back, thus encompassing him completely; Icelandic provides its own word for this version, *hryggspenna*.

When Útgarða-Loki tells his old wet nurse Elli *at taka fang við Ásaþór* (Faulkes, 2nd ed. 2005 (1982), p. 42), Snorri grants his protagonist at least an *succès d'estime*. In the end, no one – not even a god – can stand against old age, the episode implies. However, Þórr proves worthy even against the fierce opponent. He fights back with all his might, and Elli resorts to a *bragð*, a wrestling technique or 'trick'. Other men have been felled by her before (*fellt hefir*), 'felled' meaning a complete fall, where the upper body touches the ground. Not so Þórr; he has to set down his knee, but he does not fall. Elli is denied a clear victory, and the match ends. Þórr may be the strongest of all the *æsir*, but he lacks the skill, the right *bragð*, to subdue Elli. Wrestling is always a matter of strength, but yet, strength alone is not enough when facing a serious opponent. One has also to know the right technique, as *Gylfaginning* demonstrates.

Snorra Edda does not tell us which technique exactly Elli uses to bring Þórr to his knee. Other texts provide much more detail, or use a wrestling terminology which hints at a precise understanding of the related techniques among authors and audience alike. For

example in Grettir's famous wrestling match against two brothers: *Grettir seildist aftur yfir bak Þórði og tók svo í brækurnar og kippti upp fótunum og kastaði honum aftur yfir höfuð sér svo að hann kom að herðum niður og varð það allmikið fall.* (p. 1967 / ch. 72) Grettir proves worthy of his nickname “the strong”.¹⁴⁴ The throw he uses, a *kastbragð* according to Einarsson (Einarsson, 2006, p. 74), is one of the most spectacular in the repertoire of wrestling, but not impossible. The saga describes the movement accurately: It is no exaggerated invention by the author (as one might easily think), but a literary rendering of actual wrestling technique.

Here another detailed description of a throw from *Jökuls þáttr Búasonar: og sló til sniðglímu við Gnípu, en er hana varði minnst, brá hann henni lausamjöðm* (p. 1461 / ch. 1). Both *sniðglíma* (a throw over the leg) and *lausamjöðm* (a hip throw) are words taken from *glíma* terminology, and the quick switch from one technique to the second, as referred to in the *þáttr*, is not a random combination. The moves are related, as has been pointed out in a modern *glíma* manual. (Íþróttasamband Íslands, 1916, p. 92) Many similar examples of wrestling technique can be found in saga literature, and have been discussed by Qays Stetkevych from a modern grappler's perspective in his insightful work on the topic. He rightfully pointed out that “the maneuvers and techniques utilized in the sagas were, for the most part, both practical and realistic.” (Stetkevych, 2015, p. 7)

A widespread medieval understanding of *glíma* technique, and the related terminology, is evident when different redactions of one saga use different expressions to refer to the same technique. The redactors knew which movement they had to denote, yet preferred different terms. An example are the variations used to name a hip throw in the manuscripts of *Gríms saga loðinkinna*. In the saga's first chapter, the hero wrestles with a troll woman, and finally throws her down; the variants are: AM 343 a 4^o: *á loptmjöðm*; AM 471 4^o: *till mjaðmar*; AM 173 fol^x: *mjaðmar bragð*.

Einarsson compiled twelve throwing techniques of medieval *glíma* from the sources (Einarsson, 2006, p. 76):¹⁴⁵

- *leggjarbragð*: sweeping the leg with the outside foot
- *kastbragð*: throw over the shoulder

144 The champion's belt of the modern *Glímusambands Íslands* is called *Grettis belti*, in memory of the hero's legendary strength.

145 Einarsson used the terminology of modern *glíma*. For pictures and detailed explanations of the techniques, see Íþróttasamband Íslands (1916), online for download via <http://openlibrary.org/books/OL24411028M/Gl%C3%ADmub%C3%B3k> (accessed 04. APR 2016)

- *sveifla*: ‘swinging’, that is, lifting and throwing sideways
- *magabragð eða klofbragð*: frontal lifting / frontal lifting, assisted by the thigh
- *háls- eða bolabragð*: gripping the neck and pulling down
- *draugabragð – bragð framan á baeða fótleggji*: sweeping both legs from the front
- *hnésbótarkrökur*: lifting at the knee
- *sniðglíma*: turning and throwing over the leg
- *tábragð, stigið á rist*: throwing by trapping the foot
- *lausamjöðm* : hip throw
- *fótarbragð, ekki getið um tegund*: footsweeps without further explanation [maybe including the *krækjur* (otherwise not mentioned in the list), hooks with the instep]
- *hælkur*: heelhook from behind

The *social context*, the *organisation*, and the *techniques* of *glíma*, as they are all presented in saga literature, and a comparison to other historical and recent wrestling forms indicate that the *glíma* of medieval Iceland was a well-defined, complex, and learnable set of embodied martial arts knowledge. The terminology used in the sagas indicates that single techniques were understood, applied, and most likely practised as such. Wrestling skill is developed in free play, but just as much by instruction and formal training. This will not have been different in the Norse Middle Ages than in ancient Greece, or in a 21st century *judo* school. The *glíma* scenes of saga literature are one of the foremost proofs for the existence of martial arts in medieval Iceland.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶ *Glíma* scenes are of course also perfectly suited to fulfil the ‘adventurous mode of combat’. For a more detailed discussion of the different types of *glíma* scenes, see Wetzler (2014a).

9. Summary & Conclusion

The original idea behind the study at hand rooted in an interest in the history of (European) martial arts. While in central Europe fencing techniques are well documented from the early 14th century onwards, no Icelandic fight books exist. However, the Icelandic sagas speak so vividly of close quarter combat that it seemed appropriate to explore if and how it is possible to deduce the historical shape of medieval Icelandic martial arts from these texts – and if one can rightfully speak of ‘martial arts’ when it comes to this time and place. However, the emphasis of the thesis soon shifted drastically. What was intended as a mainly historical work at a very early stage, turned more and more into a study in literature, with a focus on the literary function of the combat scenes. This was inevitable. No thorough historical analysis can be undertaken before the consequences of the scenes' literacy are understood,¹⁴⁷ and the thesis may fill the research gap described in the introduction chapter. If nothing else, I hope it is able to prove that the combat scenes can carry meaning for their texts which goes far beyond mere entertainment, and that it is worth to look at them closely.

The study began with a short discussion of the problem of genre. Even if the notion of clearly distinguishable saga genres has been disputed, smaller text units – like combat scenes – can, according to Lönnroth, be analyzed for recurring patterns and homogeneous characteristics. In our case, the emerging recurring patterns of combat descriptions were called ‘modes of combat’. In the course of the work, four of these ‘modes of combat’ have been established:

- the ‘knightly mode of combat’;
- the ‘adventurous mode of combat’;
- the ‘heroic mode of combat’;
- the ‘factual mode of combat’.

Of course, the ‘modes of combat’ will not always be encountered in their pure forms, as they were distilled here. Any given combat scene may combine the features of two or even

147 This approach sets my work apart from the text of other authors, who, without a thorough background in Old Norse literature and the academic study of it, tried to read the sagas as more or less direct textbooks for ‘Viking’ martial arts. The aforementioned William R. Short has undertaken such an attempt in his “Viking Weapons and Combat Techniques”, which displays a general understanding of texts and cultural context. (Short (2009)) Antony Cummins' “The Illustrated Guide to Viking Martial Arts”, on the other hand, betrays a complete ignorance of all three: Old Norse literature, development of weaponry, and historical European martial arts. (Cummins (2013))

more of them. However, the discussion has hopefully shown that the modes stand for standard narrative patterns which occur with great regularity.

Bearing in mind Mitchell's concept of an axis 'fabulous - factual', the first three modes can be called 'fabulous' – that means less realistic, less plausible, and with a greater impact of the supernatural –, while the fourth one is located on the opposite end of the scale. If one does not dismiss the concept of genre altogether, it is tempting to attribute the four modes to the genres they seemingly belong to: the 'knightly mode' to the *riddarasögur*, the 'adventurous mode' to the adventure tales, etc. By and large, the texts will often conform to this idea. Indeed, among the reasons why readers and researchers alike may identify a saga as belonging to the one or other genre, the mode of the combat scenes may not be the least important. Only in few other instances the alleged characteristics of the genres shine as clearly as in the combat scenes. However, the discussion has shown that such an attribution is far too simple. Certain 'modes of combat' may appear where one would not expect them, and a single saga can even include combat scenes that are guided by different modes. The inclusion of both the 'adventurous mode' (in the *berserkr*/pirate pattern) and the 'heroic mode' (at the Battle of Clontarf) in *Njáls saga*, which otherwise prefers the 'factual mode', demonstrated this clearly.

On a sub-level beneath these modes, and sometimes as hybrid forms, more specific patterns may occur. An example is the *berserkr*/pirate pattern just mentioned, which can be classified as a hybrid of 'adventurous mode' and 'heroic mode', and is defined by a recurring, very limited set of protagonists and motifs.

For the description of the 'knightly mode of combat', it was important to take the wider context of European chivalric martial culture and literature into perspective. A comparison of Chrétien de Troyes' *Yvain* with Old Norse, Middle High German and Middle Kymric redactions of the story indicated how consciously Norse literature adopted continental patterns of combat description. These patterns led to the 'knightly mode of combat', whose most obvious characteristic is a formulaic repetitiveness, the concentration on the standard set of chivalric arms and martial techniques, and an unquestioned superiority of the hero. It also features certain aesthetics of maximum force, and a tendency for exaggeration, especially in the numbers of slain enemies.

The exaggeration of numbers and deeds of arms is a feature that can be witnessed in all of the listed 'modes of combat', to varying degrees. Exaggeration of size and quality of the encountered enemies is typical for the 'adventurous mode', and this may be the reason that both 'knightly' and 'adventurous mode' have been subsumed as one type of

'unrealistic' combat description in the past. However, there are enough specific features to make a definition of a distinct 'adventurous mode' seem justified. Next to the exaggeration, these features are the graphic depiction of violence, the vulnerability of the hero, and a fascination for the supernatural. The 'adventurous mode' is not repetitive and formulaic. On the contrary, it tries to amaze its audience with ever new constellations of physical destruction. How a medieval audience reacted to combat scenes of this kind is hard to tell. The modern reader often cannot help but take them for black humour.

Rather the opposite mood is typical for the 'heroic mode of combat'. It seems to translate the narrative techniques of combat description found in Eddic poetry into prose, including a sense of grim brutality, and of foreboding doom. Seldom does this mode speak about individual combat actions, as the mental qualities of a warrior are of greater interest to it than his physical skill. Heroes may kill vast numbers of enemies, but yet, they remain vulnerable. This vulnerability is a core element of the mode, as it allows for the protagonists' tragic end. Here, the hero is not only defined by his martial prowess, but just as much by his ability to suffer physical cruelty.

Although the main focus of the thesis is on the combat scenes of the *Íslendingasögur*, a discussion of three (in Mitchell's terms) fabulous modes was important. It set the background before which the 'factual mode' can be discussed. The combat scenes of the *Íslendingasögur* have been described by others as exaggerated, stereotypical, and wholly implausible. Often, such judgements were developed on a few well-picked examples. While it is true that there are unrealistic exaggerations and stereotypes in these scenes, the close look on the 'knightly', 'adventurous', and 'heroic mode of combat' has shown that the Icelandic authors were well capable of designing combat scenes that were truly beyond any credibility, and repetitive to an almost ridiculous degree. Compared with them, the combat scenes of the *Íslendingasögur*, which follow the 'factual mode of combat', shine in a very different light. At their core lies an interest for the realities of the human body and mind in combat. Sources like the Norwegian *konungs skuggsjá* or the *Sturlunga saga* prove without a doubt the knowledge and understanding of martial arts techniques, namely the art of swordplay, which were trained and taught in Central Europe at the same time. Given the Icelandic social and legal situation, and a world view that held martial prowess in highest esteem, a fascination for armed and unarmed martial arts comes as no surprise. Fascination for and knowledge of the art of fencing (in the wide sense of the word) are – this was my assumption – woven into the 'factual mode of combat'.

To test this assumption, the combat scenes of a single saga have been discussed in detail. *Njáls saga* had been chosen as example, both for the number, the richness and the variety of its fight descriptions. The saga abounds with combat scenes, and the complete list provided here may raise the reader's awareness of this obsession with combat. A 'statistical' approach can then help to gain an overview over the raw numbers of the fights referred in *Njáls saga*: of the men killed, the weapons used, and the type of wounds inflicted. While the 'bodycount' of some protagonists may be surprising, the tables do otherwise confirm what we know of medieval close-quarter combat from other sources.

However, nothing can be said about the 'realistic' or historical core of the combat scenes, before their literary functions within their text are understood. To demonstrate the various, complex layers of meaning combat can acquire in a saga, the relevant scenes of *Njáls saga* were discussed in depth. It was shown how different protagonists move and behave differently in combat, and how this behaviour directly reflects their character (Gunnarr, Skarpheðinn, and Kári). Similar fighting styles and the use of the same weapon are devices to connect protagonists with each other (Skarpheðinn with Þorgeirr skorargeirr). A combat scene can be a dramatic reflection of a wider social and political situation (fight at the *alþingi*), or include supernatural features to show that forces greater than man are at work (Þangbrandr). But the scenes do not only connect elements within the text. They can also point intertextually at stock motifs of saga storytelling (the *berserkr*/pirate pattern), or change their 'mode of combat' to resemble the imagined heroic warfare of the *fornöld* (Battle of Clontarf).

Once their literary functions are understood, the combat scenes can be filtered for hints to actual combat techniques. My analysis was based on 25 years of practical experience in armed and unarmed martial arts, a first-hand familiarity with surviving medieval weapons gained as curator at *Deutsches Klingensmuseum Solingen*, and a study of the European fight book tradition. I have tried to demonstrate how easily some of the combat scenes can be translated into actual martial arts techniques. This is not supposed to mean that we would always know which specific movement the author had in mind. But there can hardly be a doubt that the precise descriptions were written by authors familiar with martial arts techniques, either by practical experience, or by observation, and that they were intended for a likewise informed audience. One might argue that the author of *Njáls saga* simply verbalized actual violent encounters he had witnessed. However, when the human psyche is engaged in or witnessing lethal combat, it tends to enter a state of reduced capacity for information processing. While it is very difficult to correctly remember a fighting technique

one has seen a single time in actual (lethal) application, it is rather easy to remember and describe the repetitions of martial arts training. I would therefore argue that the details of the combat scenes are indeed a reflection of actual fencing practice. This becomes nowhere as obvious as in the depictions of convivial *glíma* wrestling in the sagas, which were discussed in the last chapter. The social context of wrestling, the technical details in the texts and the use of a fixed terminology are foremost proof for a deeply rooted martial arts practice.

However, while the fighting tactics and combat movements of the 'factual mode' (as derived from *Njáls saga*) are, to a large degree, quite plausible, the sheer numbers of enemies slain by the main protagonists are not. This is one of the two reasons the saga's combat scenes have been called unrealistic. The other one is the super-human level of self-control the combatants often demonstrate. Only in very few instances, martial skills are displayed which are truly beyond any man's capability.

To test these characteristics of the 'factual mode of combat', the combat scenes of two other famous sagas have been analysed, those of *Grettis saga* and of *Víga-Glúms saga*. It was shown that the combat scenes of *Grettis saga* structurally fit perfectly to the pattern developed from *Njáls saga*. However, they often display a mood that is rather unknown to the latter, bearing a comical undertone. *Víga-Glúms saga*, on the other hand, goes one step further. Being aware of the typical exaggerations featured by the 'factual mode', the saga twists and ridicules these exaggerations. However, one can only ridicule what he knows and understands. The discussion of the three sagas demonstrated that the concept of the 'factual mode of combat' provides a functioning approach towards combat in the *Íslendingasögur*.

Based on the results of this thesis, several loose ends could be followed. Obviously, the proposed 'modes of combat' and sub-patterns should be checked back against the combat scenes of further sagas. A superficial reading of the 'standard' corpus of sagas seems to indicate that they are indeed applicable, but this would have to be proven individually. Also, it would be of interest how the combat scenes of other genres of Old Norse literature confirm to them. *Antikensagas*, *konungasögur*, and *biskopasögur*, historical writings, legal documents and, very importantly, Eddic and Skaldic poetry, they all have been neglected in this study, yet would make valuable objects for research. On the other hand, a complete picture of combat in medieval Iceland cannot be drawn without the consideration of non-literary sources. Weapon finds and osteo-archaeological evidence should be looked at, as well as depictions of arms, armour and combat in contemporary artwork.

In a wider, comparative approach, it will be interesting to see how the ‘Old Icelandic piece’ fits into the puzzle of literary accounts of combat – not only of medieval Europe, but also of other times and cultures. The time for big questions and global approaches seems long over, and for good reasons: all too often, attempts to identify common denominators in cross-cultural perspectives have produced either implausible or vague results. However, storytelling, martial arts, and physical violence all are anthropological constants. This allows – and even asks – to set the various literary renderings of combat into a shared context, with all the necessary methodological caution. In this perspective, Jón Ólafsson's turned-to-question witticism “*hvernig flugust bændur á?*” – “how did farmers come to blows?” – connects Old Norse studies with the recently emerging field of Martial Arts studies. (Bowman, 2015)

The lack of interest towards the combat scenes of saga literature, displayed by generations of scholars, may be interpreted as an intellectual disregard for the body in general, and for the bodily aspects of a warrior culture specifically. It seems as if academics were mostly interested in that part of medieval culture that corresponded with the priorities of their own lives – namely, the dealings of the mind. However, such an attitude can never be able to draw a truly adequate picture of the Icelandic Middle Ages. It overlooks a part of human life that once was of utmost importance for (at least male) self-image and self-fashioning. I hope that my work can be a step towards a better understanding of how the people of medieval Iceland not only wrote and thought, but also how they moved and fought.

*Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood
will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire.*

Isaiah 9:5

10. Appendix

Quotes from the various versions of Yvain in their original language.

a) Chrestien de Troyes: Yvain ou le Chavlier au Lion
(quoted after: Foerster, 1912)

Yvain against the Keeper of the Fountain

815

Et maintenant qu'il s'antrevirent

S'antrevindret et sanblant firent

Qu'il s'entrehaïssent de mort.

Chascuns ot lance roide et fort,

Si s'antredonent si granz cos,

820

Qu'andeus les escuz de lor cos

Percent, et li hauberc deslicent,

Les lances fandent et esclicient,

Et li tronçon volent en haut.

Li uns l'autre a l'espee assaut,

825

Si ont au chaple des espees

Les guiges des escuz coupees

Et les escuz dehachiez toz

Et par dessus et par dessoz

Si que les pieces en dependent,

830

N'il ne s'an ceuvrent ne deffandent;

Car si les ont harigotez
Qu'a delivre sor les costez
Et sor les braz et sor les hanches
Se fierent des espees blanches.

835

Felennesmant s'antrespreuvent
N'onques d'un estal ne se meuvent
Ne plus que feïssent dui gres.

[...]

840

N'ont cure de lor cos gaster ;
Qu'au miauz qu'il pueent les anploient.
Li hiaumë anbuingnent et ploient,
Et des haubers les mailles volent
Si que del sanc assez se tolent;

[...]

855

Et de ce firent mout que preu,
Qu'onques lor chevaus an nul leu
Ne navrerent ne anpirierent;
Qu'il ne vostrent ne deignierent;
Mes toz jorz a cheval se tindrent,

860

Que nule foiz a pié ne vindrent;
S'an fu la bataille plus bele.
An la fin son hiaume escartele
Au chevalier mes sire Yvains.
Del cop fu estordiz et vains

865

Li chevaliers; si s'esmaia;

Qu'ains si felon cop n'essaia;
Qu'il li ot desoz le chapel
Le chief fandu jusqu'au cervel,
Si que del cervel et del sanc

870

Taint la maille del hauberc blanc,
Don si tres grant dolor santi,
Qu'a po li cuers ne li manti.
S'adonc foi, n'ot mie tort;
Qu'il se santi navrez a mort;

875

Car riens ne li valut deffanse.

The battle against Count Aliers

3152

Et mes sire Yvain fiert el tas

[...]

3155

Si feri de si grant vertu

Un chevalier parmi l'escu,

Qu'il mist an un mont, ce me sanble,

Cheval et chevalier ansanble,

N'onques puis cil ne releva;

3160

Qu'el vandre li cuers li creva,

Et fu parmi l'eschine frez.

[...]

3212

Veez or, comant cil se prueve,

Veez, come il se tient an ranc,

Veez, come il portaint de sanc

3215

Et sa lance et s'espee nue,

Veez, comant il les remue,

Veez, comant il les antasse,

Come il lor vient, come il lor passe,

Come il ganchist, come il trestorne;

3220

Mes au ganchir petit sejourne

Et po demore an son retor.

Veez, quant il vient an l'estor,

Come il a po son escu chier,

Que tot le leisse detranchier;

3225

N'an a pitié ne tant ne quant.

Mes tout les veomes an grant

Des cos vangier, que l'an li done.

Qui de trestot le bois d'Argone

Li avroit fet lances, ce cuit,

3230

N'an avroit il nule anquenuit;

[...]

3233

Et veez, comant il le fet

De l'espee, quant il la tret!

[...]

3264

La chace mout longuemant dure,

3265

Tant que cil, qui fuient, estanchent,
Et cil, qui chacent, les detranchent
Et lor chevaux lor esboelent;
Li vif dessor les morz roelent,
Qui s'antrafolent et ocient.

3270

Leidemant s'antrecontralient:

Yvain versus his friend Gawain

6106

Antresloignié se sont andui,
Por ce qu'il ne s'antreconoissent.
A l'assanbler lor lances froissent,
Qui grosses ierent et de fresne.

6110

Li uns l'autre de rien n'aresne;
Car s'il antraresnié se fussent,
Autre assanble faite eüssent.

[...]

6117

Qu'il s'antrafolent et mehaingnent.
Les espees rien n'i gaaingnent
Ne li hiaume ne li escu,

6120

Qui anbuignié sont et fandu,
Et des espees li tranchant
Esgrunent et vont rebochant;
Car il se donent mout granz flaz
Des tranchanz, non mie des plaz,

6125

Et des pons redonent tes cos
Sor les nasés et sor les cos
Et sor les fronz et sor les joes,
Que totes sont perses et bloes
La, ou li sans quace dessoz.

6130

Et les haubers ont si deroz
Et les escuz si depeciez,
N'i a celui, ne soit bleciez.
Et tant se painnent et travaillent,
A po qu'alainnes ne lor faillant;

6135

Si se combatent une chaude,
Que jagonce ne esmeraude
N'ot sor les hiaumes atachiee,
Ne soit molue et esquachiee;
Car des pons si granz cos se donent.

6140

Sor les hiaumes, que tuit s'estonent
Et par po qu'il ne s'escervellent.
Li oel des chiés lor estancelent;
Qu'il ont les poinz quarrez et gros
Et forz les ners et durs les os

6145

Si se donent males groigniees
A ce qu'il tiennent anpoigniees
Les espees, qui grant aïe
Lor font, quant il fierent a hie.
QUANT grant piece se sont lassé,

6150

Tant que li hiaume sont quassé

Et li hauberc tot desmaillié,

(Tant ont des espees maillié,)

Et li escu fandu et fret,

Un po se sont arriere tret;

6155

Si leissent reposer lor vaines

Et si repranent lor alaines.

Mes n'i font mie grant demore,

Ainz cort li uns a l'autre sore

Plus fieremant qu'ains mes ne firent.

[...]

6196

Que la bataille est si paroille,

Que l'an ne set par nul avis,

Qui a le miauz ne qui le pis.

Et nes li dui, qui se combatent,

6200

Qui par martire enor achatent,

S'esmervoillent et esbaïssent;

Qui si par igal s'anvaïssent,

Qu'a grant mervoille chascun vient,

Qui est cil, qui se contretient

6205

Ancontre lui si fieremant.

Tant se combatent longuemant,

Que li jorz vers la nuit se tret,

Et si n'i a celui, qui n'et

Les braz las et le cors doillant,

6210

Et li sanc tot chaut et boillant

Par mainz leus fors des cors lor bolent

Et par dessoz les haubers colent,

Ne n'est mervoille, s'il se vuelent

Reposer; car formant se duelent.

[...]

6246

Bien savez voz cos asseoir

Et bien les savez anploier.

b) Ívens saga

(quoted after: Kölbing, 1898)

Yvain against the Keeper of the Fountain

15. En þegar er hvárr sá annan, þá ættuz þeir með svá ógurligum ok opinberum fjándskap, sem hvárr ætti qðrum dauðasok at gefa. 16. Hvártveggi hafði et harðasta ok et digrasta spjót, ok brynjur biluðu, en spjótin brotnuðu, ok flugu krufarnir í lopt upp. 17. Þeir skunduðu þá báðir at neyta sverðanna, ok hjogguz þeir þá meðsverðunum, en hlífðuz með skjöldunum, ok þorðuz þá svá í ákafa ok miklu kappi, at skildirnir flugu í sundr í smá hluti ok fellu niðr, ok var þá ekki lengr með þeim at hlífaz; svá hofðu þeir hoggvit þá í smá hluti, at sverðin niðr kæmi á herðar þeirra ok handleggi, á lær eða lendar fljúgandi. 18. Svá kappsamliga, ágjarnliga ok vaskliga þorðuz þeir, at hvárrgi ók fyrir qðrum; svá sátu þeir fast, sem stokkr eða steinn væri. 19. [...] svá at hjálmar þeira kloffnuðu fyrir hoggum, hringarnir af flugu brynjunum [...] 21. En í því gerðu þeir sem enir kurteisustu riddarar, at hvárrgi vildi skeina annars hest. 22. Jafnan helduz þeir á hestunum, svá at hvárrgi sté niðr. En um síðir hjó herra Íven í hjálm riddarans svá mikit hogg, at riddarinn var sem hofuðærr; óttaðiz hann af því, at hann kendi aldri slíkt hogg fyrr, þvíat hjálmrinn bilaði, en brynjuhattrinn slitnaði, ok klauf sverðit hausinn. 23. Ok er Íven kipði sverðinu at sér, þá blóðgaði hann allan brynjuhattinn af blóðinu ok heilanum. 24. Ok þóat hann flýi nú, þá er honum eigi ámælanda, þvíat hann kendi sik sáran til ólífis. Honum téði þá ekki at verjaz [...]

(III, 15-24)

The battle against Count Aliers

4. Ok þegar sem þeir möettuz, þá skaut Íven spjóti í gegnum einn riddari ok kastaði honum dauðum á jörð. [...] 7. 'Sé [...] hversu þessi riddari röskliga reyniz einn fyrir alla, eða hversu hans herklæði eru öll lituð í blóði þeirra, er hann hefir drepit, eða ríðr í gegnum lið þeirra!' 8. Ok svá hjuggu þeir vandliga skjöldinn af honum, at ekki var eptir. 9. En á þeim, er nokkut hogg hjó hann, þá hefndi hann sín svá skjótt ok vaskliga, at eigi fýsti þann optar, til hans at hoggva, þvíat hann svæfði hann svá þungum svefni, at engi hans kumpánn gat vakt hann. 10. Sem skjöldrinn ónýttiz fyrir, honum, þá braut hann svá mǫrg spjót á óvinum sínum, at vel váru (.X.) hundrað, fyrr en kveld kom; ok var þat mest mannsPELL á óvinum hans, er hann gerði á þeim með spjótum. En á milli þess, er hann braut spjót ok fekk annat, þá neytti hann sverðsins. [...] 14. Jarlinn helt þá undan ok allir þeir, er eptir lifðu. En herr Íven ok hans riddarar ráku flóttann svá ǫruggir fyrir hans vǫrn, sem steinveggr stœði um þá, ok drápu þá óvini sína. 15. Jarl flýði undan, en herra Íven eptir honum [...] 16. Ok tók herra Íven hann ok reiddi at honum sverðit, at drepa hann. En hann bað sér griða ok gaf sik upp í vald herra Ívens, þvíat hann mátti hvárki undan flýja né verjaz. 17. Eptir þat leiddi herra Íven hann eptir sér [...]

(X, 4-17)

Yvain versus his friend Gawain

1. Nú riðr hvárr ǫðrum at, ok sem þeir saman kómu, þá brutu þeir báðir þau en digru spjót, er þeir hǫfðu. Hvárrgi mælti orð við annan. En þegar í stað brugðu þeir sverðum, ok hjó hvárr til annars með svá ákafri sókn, at engi maðr sá þvílíkt einvígi II manna. 2. Svá urðu miklir brestir af hoggum þeira, at heyra mátti IV mílur, er stálin möettuz. Þá váru hoggnir mjök skildir þeira, hjálmar brotna, en brynjur slitna, en báðir váru sárir ok móðir, ok þeir urðu af at fara hestunum. [...] 4. [...] riddarar ok hlupu upp ok bǫrðuz hálfu snarpligar en fyrr. Öllum þótti undarligt, er svá jafnt var í millum þeira. Bǫrðuz þeir nú svá lengi, at daginn tók at kvelda ok ljósit minka. 5. Þá váru þeir svá móðir, at armleggir þeira gátu eigi upp lypt sverðunum, ok var þeim svá heitt, at blóðit vall í sárunum, ok líkaði hvárigum at berjaz lengr, þvíat myrk nátt gekk yfir þá. Öttaðiz þá hvárr annan mjök, þvíat hjálmar þeira váru vandliga farnir, ok nam þá hvártveggi staðar. 6. [...] 'aldri hugðumz ek mega finna þann riddari, er mér kynni svá mǫrg ok stór hogg at veita.'

(XV, 1-6)

c) Hartmann von Aue: Îwein

(quoted after: Benecke, Lachmann, & Wolff, 1968)

Yvain against the Keeper of the Fountain

1004

ouch verstuont sich her îwein wol
daz er sich weren solde,
ob er niht dulden wolde
beide laster unde leit.
ir ietweder was gereit
ûf des anderen schaden:

1010

sî hete beide überladen
grôz ernst unde zorn.
sî nâmen diu ors mitten sporn:
sus was in zuo ein ander ger.
ir ietweder sîn sper

1015

durch des andern schilt stach
ûf den lîp daz ez zebrach
wol ze hundert stücken.
dô muosen si beide zücken
diu swert von den sîten.

1020

hie huop sich ein strîten
daz got mit êren möhte sehen,
und solt ein kampf vor im geschehen.
über die schilte gienc diu nôt,
den ir ietweder vür bôt,

1025

di wîle daz die werten:
sî wurden ab mit den swerten
zehouwen schiere alsô gar
daz si ir bêde wurden bar.

Ich machte des strîtes harte vil

1030

mit worten, wan daz ich enwil,
als ich iu bescheide.
sî wâren dô beide,

unde ouch nieman bî in mê
der mir der rede gestê.

1035

spræche ich, sît ez nieman sach,
wie dirre sluoc, wie jener stach:
ir einer wart dâ erslagen:
dern mohte niht dâ von gesagen:
der aber den sige dâ gewan,

1040

der was ein sô hovesch man,
er hete ungerne geseit
sô vil von sîner manheit
dâ von ich wol gemâzen mege
die mâze ir stiche und ir slege.

1045

wan ein dinc ich iu wol sage,
daz ir deweder was ein zage,
wan da ergienc wehselele gnuoc,
unz daz der gast dem wirte sluoc
durch den helm einen slac

1050

zetal unz dâ daz leben lac.
und alser der tôtwunden
rehte het empfunden,
dô twanc in des tôdes leit
mêre dan sîn zageheit

1055

daz er kêrte und gap die vluht.

The battle against Count Aliers

3716

nû wart der muot von in genomen,
dô sî den gast sâhen
zuo den vienden gahen
und sô manlichen gebâren.

[...]

3730

wand sîn eines manheit

diu tetes unstätelichen
an einen vurt entwîchen.
dâ bekoberten sî sich.
hie slac, dâ stich!

3735

nû wer möhte diu sper
älliu bereiten her
diu mîn her îwein dâ brach?
er sluoc unde stach,
und die sîne alle,

3740

daz jene mit maneges valle
muosen unstätelichen
von dem vurte entwîchen
und in den sige lâzen.
die der vluht vergâzen,

3745

die wurde âne zagen
alle meisteil erslagen
und die andern gefangen.
hie was der strît ergangen
nâch hern îweines êren.

[...]

3759

Sus wart dem grâven Âliere

3760

genendeclîchen schiere
gefangen unde erslagen sîn her.
dannoch entwelter ze wer
mit einer lützelen kraft,
und tete selhe rîterschaft

3765

die niemen gevelschen mohte.
dô daz niht langer tohte,
dô muoser ouch entwîchen,
und vlôch dô werlichen
gegen einer sîner veste

[...]

3776

dâ vienc er in vor

und nam des sîne sicherheit
daz er gefangen wider reit
in der vrouwen gewalt

Yvain versus his friend Gawain

7075

Ir ors diu liefen drâte.
ze vruo noch ze spâte
sô neigten sî diu sper
und sluogen suûf die brust her,
daz sî niene wancten.

7080

sine bürten noch ensancten
deweder ze nider noch ze hô,
niuwan ze rehter mâze alsô
als ez wesen solde
und ir ietweder wolde

7085

sînen kampfgesellen
ûf den sâmen vellen,
daz ietweders stich geriet
dâ schilt unde helm schiet:
wan dâ râmet er des man

7090

der den man vellen kan.
daz wart dâ wol erzeiget:
wandez was geneiget
ir ietweder alsô sêre
daz er dâ vor nie mêre

7095

sô nâhen kam dem valle,
ern viele ouch mit alle.
daz ir ietweder gesaz,
daz enmeinde niht wan daz
daz diu sper niht ganz beliben:

7100

wand sî kâmen dar getriben
mit alsô manlîcher kraft

daz ir ietweders schaft
wol ze hundert stücken brach,

[...]

7113

dâ wart vil gestochen
und gar diu sper zerbrochen

7115

diu sî dâ haben mohten.
heten si dô gevohten
ze orse mitten swerten,
des sî nieme gerten,
daz wære der armen orse tôt:

7120

von diu was in beiden nôt
daz sî die dörperheit vermiten
und daz sî ze vuoze striten.
in heten diu ors niht getân:
sî liezenz an den lîp gân.

[...]

7128

sî sparten daz îsen
dâ mit ir lîp was bewart:

7130

diu swert enwurden niht gespart.
sî wâren der schilte
ein ander harte milte:
den schilten wâren sî gehaz.
ir ietweder bedâhte daz

7135

‘waz touc mir mîn arbeit?
unz er den schilt vor im treit,
sô ist er ein sicher man.’
die schilte hiuwen sî dan.
sîne geruochten des nie

7140

daz sî niderhalp der knie
deheiner slege tæten war,
dâ si der schilte wâren bar.
si entlihen kreftiger slege

mê dan ich gesagen mege,
7145
âne bürgen und âne pfant,
und wart vergolten dâ zehant.

[...]

7219
die schilte wurden dar gegeben
7220

ze nôtpfande für daz leben:
die hiuwens drâhte von der hant.
done heten sî dehein ander pfant
niuwan daz îsen alsô bar:
daz verpfanten sî dar.

7225

ouch enwart der lîp des niht erlân
ern müese dâ ze pfande stân:
den verzinseten sî sâ.

die helme wurden eteswâ
vil sêre verschrôten,

7230

daz die meilen rôten
von bluote begunden,
wande sî vil wunden
in kurzer stunt enpfiengen
die niht ze verhe engiengen.

[...]

7242

in hete die müede benomen
sô gar den lîp und die kraft
daz sî des dûhte ir rîterschaft

7245

diu wære gar ân êre,
und envâhten dô niht mêre.

[...]

7251

diu ruowe wart vil unlanc
unz ietweder ûf spranc
und liefen aber ein ander an.

[...]

7256

ezn wac ir erriu rîterschaft
engegen dirre niht ein strô,
der sî begunden aber dô.
ir slege wâren kreftec ê,
7260

nû kreftiger, und wart ir mê.
ouch sach diesen kampf an
manec kampfwise man:
ir deheines ouge was vûr wâr
weder sô wîse noch sô clâr,
7265

heter genomen ûf sinen eit
ze sagenne die wârheit
weder irz des tages ie
gewunnen hete bezzer hie
alsô groz als umb ein hâr,
7270

desne möhter vûr wâr
ir dewederm nie gejehen:
ezn wart nie glîcher kampf gesehen.

[...]

7242

dise guoten knehte
die hâten dem langen tage
mit manegem rîterlîchen slage
7345

nâch êren ende gegeben,
und stuont noch ûf der wâge ir leben,
unz daz diu naht ane gienc
und ez diu vinster undervienc.

Sus schiet sî beide diu naht,

7350

und daz ir ietweders maht
wol dem andern was kunt,
daz sî beide dô zestunt
an ein ander genuoete.

[...]

7406

und wærer langer drifer slege,
die heten iu den sige gegeben
unde mir benomen daz leben:

[...]

d) Chwedyl Iarlles y Ffynnawn (Owein)

(quoted after: Thomson, 1968)

Yvain against the Keeper of the Fountain

A'e erbynnyeit a oruc Owein, ac ymwan ac ef yn drut, a thorri y deu baladyr a orugant, a dispeilaw deu gledyf a wnaethant ac ymgfyogi. Ac ar hynny Owein a drewis dyrnawt ar y marchawc trwy y helym a'r pennffestin a'r penngwch pwrqwin, a thrwy y kroen a'r kig a'r asgwrn yny glwyfawd ar yr emennyd. Ac yna adnabot a oruc y marchawc duawc ry gaffel dyrnawt agheuawl ohonaw.

(270-276)

The battle against Count Aliers

A'e dynnu a oruc Owein efo o'y gyfrwy yny vyd y rydaw a choryf, ac ymhoelut pen y varch parth a'r castell a oruc. A ffa ovit bynhac a gafas ef a doeth a'r iarll ganthaw hyny doeth y borth y castell lle yd odynt y macwyeit yn y aros.

(648-51)

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