INTRODUCTION

This book provides a comprehensive and accessible one-volume collection of primary documents that will be of use to instructors and students as well as to the general reader interested in the Viking Age. In assembling, translating, and arranging the materials presented here we have been guided by the principle of providing as much breadth as possible, both in the types of sources presented and in the geographic and chronological coverage of the work. Of course, the vast amount of material available, particularly the corpus of Icelandic saga texts, means that it is impossible to include everything, and we are conscious of omissions. Nevertheless, we hope that the documents presented here will encourage readers to delve further into primary texts dealing with the Vikings and the Viking Age.

The second edition of *The Viking Age: A Reader* largely preserves the structure and content of the first edition, while adding both depth and breadth to its coverage. This is accomplished through the revision of some texts that were included in the first edition, as well as the addition of new materials that enhance existing themes and topics or else add new ones. In some instances these new materials introduce types of evidence that were under-represented in the first edition, particularly the lives of saints, translations of relics and runestones.

**Who, When, and Where Were the Vikings?**

In the popular imagination, the Vikings are shaggy, unkempt, ax-wielding thugs in horned helmets who raped, pillaged, and plundered their way across Europe in the Early Middle Ages, nearly destroying Western civilization in the process. They have been blamed for everything from a decline in learning (thanks to the burning of monasteries, places of learning) to the break-up of the Carolingian empire that dominated Europe in the ninth century. So is the Viking stereotype of the burly, destructive barbarian even remotely accurate? As usual, the myth is far removed from reality. The shaggy Vikings were not the unkempt louts of popular fiction, but a proud people who were careful about their appearance. The horned helmets associated with the Vikings in popular culture are a romantic invention of the nineteenth century, and no helmets with horns are known from the Viking Age anywhere in Europe. And, while a very small minority of early medieval Viking Age Scandinavians might well have resembled the warriors and bandits of the stereotype, their fellow Norsemen were also renowned merchants, seamen, explorers, mercenaries, and poets, who contributed much to early medieval European civilization.
Understanding the Vikings begins with understanding the word “Viking” itself. In Old Norse (ON), the noun víkingr means a sea-borne pirate or raider; viking means a sea-borne raid. The word Viking is, then, in the technical sense, a job description, and it was a part-time job at that, since Viking expeditions were undertaken seasonally by farmers, fishermen, merchants, and the like, as a means of supplementing their income. Few Scandinavians of the Viking Age would have thought of themselves, or would have been described by others, as Vikings. In fact, out of all those who suffered at the hands of marauding Scandinavians, only the Anglo-Saxons actually named them wicingas. Common designations in contemporary British and Irish, and European, records include the terms “Northmen,” “foreigners,” and “heathens,” the latter a reference to the fact that at the dawn of the Viking Age the Scandinavians had yet to be converted to Christianity. It was not until the nineteenth century, following the “rediscovery” of the Icelandic sagas and eddas and their translation into English, that the term Viking passed into common English use. Today the usefulness of the term is a subject of debate among academics. In this collection, however, we adopt the term in its widely accepted sense as a descriptor for the peoples of Scandinavia in the period from the late eighth to the eleventh centuries, not just for those who undertook sea-borne raiding; we use the terms “Norse” and “Norsemen” in the same sense.

Vikings, then, were raiders, traders, farmers, and, later, settlers; the activities were closely intertwined. In the course of the Viking diaspora, Norsemen (and women) traveled westward across the North Atlantic to North America and eastward down the Russian river systems to Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul) and into the Islamic world. Scandinavian trade flowed through Hedeby in Denmark, Visby and Birka in Sweden, Kaupang in Norway, Novgorod in Russia, Kiev in the Ukraine, York in England, and Dublin in Ireland. Scandinavians were thus important traders from the Caspian Sea to Greenland. Accordingly, this text aims to capture the astonishing geographic scope of the Viking world by including materials relating to all of these regions.

The Viking Age is generally considered to have begun in the late eighth century with the dramatic explosion of Scandinavian raiding parties onto the European stage. The destruction of Lindisfarne Abbey in Northumbria in the summer of 793 horrified Europe and, along with other raids like it, shaped the European perception of the Vikings for many centuries. For several decades Viking raiding parties terrorized most of northern Europe, using hit-and-run tactics to target monasteries where they could lay hands on easily portable wealth, along with captives who could be enslaved or ransomed. But, within about 50 years of the earliest recorded raids, raiding gave way to permanent settlement in Britain, Ireland, and the Continent, as well as the North Atlantic islands of the Faeroes, Iceland, and Greenland, which were given the names

xvi
by which they are still known. Around the year 1000, Norsemen were the first Europeans to reach North America, exploring the region they called Vinland the Good, probably the shores of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Indeed, Norse maritime activity of all kinds was at its height during the so-called medieval warm period of ca 800-ca 1300, and exploration of the North Atlantic was at least partly facilitated by the comparative lack of pack ice in those years.

The end of the period is harder to place. The unification and centralization of the Scandinavian states in the tenth and eleventh centuries have been simultaneously blamed for increases in Viking activity and credited with its cessation. However, a case could be made for regarding some point during the eleventh century as bringing the Viking Age to a close. The Battle of Clontarf (1014) emphasized the waning power of Norsemen to do as they pleased in Ireland. The North Sea empire of Knut (Cnut/Canute) the Great disintegrated with his death in 1035, and his conquests might be seen as the last great expedition of the age of the Vikings. Another possibility is 1066, when King Harald Hardradi of Norway failed disastrously in an attempt to invade England. Harald was killed, and his army destroyed, at the Battle of Stamford Bridge in the north of England. Raiding in England was never more than half-hearted after the death of Harald and the arrival of William the Conqueror.

All of these events may be regarded as stages in a slow process of change. However, Norse activity in the British Isles continued until the death of Hakon IV the Old (d. 1263). His doubtfully successful punitive raid on Scotland was the last serious Scandinavian intervention in the British Isles.

**How Do We Know?**

One major challenge is the dearth of literary materials from the Vikings themselves in the early part of the Viking Age. It is not quite fair to say, as is sometimes done, that the Vikings were illiterate at the time the Scandinavian expansion began, since they did possess a runic alphabet, the futhark, which was used in carving inscriptions on stone, wood, bone or metal. Runic inscriptions are, by their very nature, not suited to long narrative, however, and their study requires a highly specialized background. Until recently, therefore, our knowledge of the Vikings and their culture was shaped by the accounts of their European enemies, who gave them a very bad press. English and French chronicles are a major source of contemporary narratives of Viking incursions.

However, from the nineteenth century onwards, translation into English of medieval Icelandic sagas added another dimension to the study of the Viking Age, allowing the Vikings to be appreciated from the perspective of their own culture—or at least the culture of their Christianized descendants in thirteenth-century Iceland. The narratives of history and saga-literature
frequently overlap, and this has tempted many to find in the sagas a greater degree of historical factuality than is justified. Nonetheless, the sagas are among the major ways in which thirteenth-century Icelanders constructed their own and the wider Scandinavian pasts. They were closer to the events than we are, and we must concede to their writing, if not factuality, a high degree of plausibility.

Two texts appear often in this reader: *Egil’s Saga* and Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla, a History of the Kings of Norway*. In order to provide cohesiveness across the volume, many topics in the reader are examined in part using *Egil’s Saga*, the biography of Egil Skallagrímsson, a notable tenth-century Icelandic Viking and poet. Snorri Sturluson (d. 1241) was a thirteenth-century Icelander of outstanding ability, at once lawyer, diplomat, scholar, and poet. Snorri’s *Heimskringla* covers much of Viking Age history, and does so with both clarity and drama. In addition, Snorri interlaces his prose with extensive quotations from court poets contemporary with the events he narrates. While *Heimskringla* is no longer regarded as an absolutely reliable historical source, it is important as a highly skillful blend of history and popular legend. His *Edda*, too, is an indispensable source for the study of Norse mythology and skaldic poetry. It has also been suggested that he wrote *Egil’s Saga*.

European and Scandinavian material is complemented by documents from the neighboring civilizations of Byzantium and Islam; in fact, Islamic texts provide some of the most important descriptions of Scandinavians and their customs in the tenth century. Understanding the Vikings, then, necessarily involves the study of many texts and documents from many different regions and periods, and written in many different languages. An important aim of this collection is to highlight this geographic, historical, and linguistic diversity of primary-source materials relating to the Viking diaspora.

**Some Notes on the Translations**

Unless otherwise noted, all Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon texts are newly translated for this reader. As is usual, the names of persons are anglicized: for example, Egill appears as Egil, and Guðrún as Gudrun.

In Old Norse texts, an individual is often identified as the son or daughter of his or her father: for example, Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, anglicized here as Gudrun Osvifrsdaughter, or Egill Skalla-Grímsson, anglicized as Egil Skallagrimsson. A few names, such as Hákon or Sigurðr, have a different form and are anglicized as Hakonarson and Sigurdarson when used to express the patronymic, as in Hakon Hakonarson and Sigurda Sigurdarson.
In the headings of chapters and sections of chapters, the titles of Norse texts are given in their original form in parentheses after the customary English translation: for example, *Egil’s Saga* (*Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*).

Where placenames have well-known English forms, these are generally used: for example, York replaces Jórvík, and Reykjavik replaces Reykjavík.

Only two symbols from Old Norse are likely to cause confusion on the rare occasions when they are used here: Đ, đ: pronounced *th* as in *that*; þ, þ: pronounced *th* as in *thin*.
CHAPTER THREE
EARLY RELIGION AND BELIEF

Figure 3.1: A pendant representing Thor’s hammer, Mjolnir, made of silver in ninth-century Öland, Sweden.


Our knowledge of Norse mythology depends heavily on the work of Snorri Sturluson (see Introduction). His Edda is an extraordinary compilation of myth and poetry. Without it, we would know significantly less about the subject. A second source for Norse myth and religion is the late-thirteenth-century Icelandic manuscript known as the Codex Regius, which anthologizes heroic and mythological Norse poems known collectively as the Poetic Edda. Without these and accounts in various sagas and histories, the world of pre-Christian Norse beliefs would be largely closed to us.
Snorri Sturluson’s Gylfaginning is a powerful retelling of many Norse myths. Snorri gives his work the form of a dialogue between Gylfi, a legendary king of Sweden, and Odin, who is presented here as a trinity: Hárr (High One), Jafnhárr (Just as High), and Thridi (Third). Their responses to Gylfi’s questions contain much of what we know about Norse mythology. To conceal his identity, Gylfi adopts the pseudonym Gangleri.

3. This is how Gangleri began his questioning: “Who is the oldest and most exalted of all the gods?”
   The High One said, “He is called All-Father in our language, but in old Asgard, he had twelve names. . . .”
   “Where does this god live?” asked Gangleri. “What power does he have, and what great deeds has he done?”
   “He endures throughout all ages,” replied the High One. “He rules over all his kingdom and he has power over all things, both great and small.”
   Then Just as High said, “He made heaven and earth, the sky, and everything in them.”
   “But his greatest achievement,” said Third, “was to create man and give him a soul that will live and never perish, even though his body molders to dust or is burned to ashes. And all men who are virtuous will live, and they will dwell with him in Gimli or Vingof, but evil men will go to Hel and from there to Niflheim, which is down in the ninth world.”
   “What did he do before the creation of heaven and earth?” asked Gangleri.
   “At that time, he dwelt with the Frost Giants,” replied the High One.
4. “How did everything begin? What started it all? What was there before?” asked Gangleri. The High One replied, “As Völuspá says, In earliest times
nothing existed;
there was no sand,
no sea, no chilly wave;
earth did not exist,
nor heaven overhead;
a great void yawned
and no grass grew.”
Then Just as High spoke, “Many ages before the earth was created, Niflheim was formed. In the middle of Niflheim, there is a spring called Hvergelmir out of which flow the rivers Svol, Gunnthra, Fjorm, Fimbubthul, Slid and Hlid, Sylg and Ylg, Vid, Leipt, and Gjoll, which is next to the gates of Hel.”

“But first,” said Third, “there was the world in the south, called Muspell—a bright, hot place, blazing with fire and inaccessible to outsiders who are not born there. A being named Surt is stationed at the border to defend the land. He has a fiery sword, and, at the end of the world, he will go forth and wage war, defeating all the gods and destroying the whole world with fire. Thus says Völuspá,

Surt travels from the south
with the scorcher of trees;
from his sword flashes
the sun of the slaughter-gods;
rocks crash
and witches rove;
men tread Hel’s road
and heaven is split asunder.”

Gangleri asked, “What were things like before the various races came into being, and mankind increased and multiplied?”

“There were rivers called the Elivagar [the Ice-waves] and when these rivers had flowed some distance from their source, their poisonous streams began to harden like slag from a forge and turned into ice,” said the High One. “And when the ice ceased flowing and came to a stop, the moisture arising from the poison froze and hardened into rime, and the rime built up layer by layer, in Ginnungagap [the Yawning Void].”

“The north-facing part of Ginnungagap filled up with thick, heavy ice and rime, and from that direction there came drizzling rain and gusting wind,” said Just as High. “But the southern part of Ginnungagap was brightened by the sparks and glowing embers flying out of Muspellsheim.”

Then Third said, “Just as everything that emerged from Niflheim was cold and grim, so everything that faced toward nearby Muspellsheim was hot and bright, and Ginnungagap was mild as a windless sky. And when the warm breeze met the rime, it began to thaw and drip and, through the power of heat, these flowing drops were quickened into life and assumed the shape of a man. That man was named Ymir, but he is called Aurgelmir by the Frost-giants, and they are all descended from him, as the Short Völuspá tells us,
All seeresses
stem from Vidolf,
all wizards
from Vilmid,
all sorcerers from
Svarthofdi,
and all giants
from Ymir.

And this is what Vafthruthnir the giant tells us:

When poisonous drops
sprayed up from Elivagar,
they grew until a giant emerged;
our kin are all
descended from him;
and so they are always fierce.”

“How did the various races evolve from him?” asked Gangleri, “How did more men come into being? Or do you believe that Ymir is a god?”

The High One replied, “We do not regard him as a god at all. He was evil like all his kin, whom we call Frost-giants. The story goes that he fell asleep and began to sweat, and a man and a woman grew under his left arm, and one of his legs begot a son with the other. Their offspring are the Frost-giants; but the original Frost-giant is called Ymir.”


“The next thing to emerge from the dripping rime was a cow called Authumla. Four streams of milk flowed from her udder, and she fed Ymir.”

“What did the cow live on?” asked Gangleri.

“She licked the rime-covered stones, which were salty,” replied the High One. “On the first day that she licked the stones, a man’s hair emerged toward evening. On the second day, his head appeared, and on the third day, the whole man was visible. His name was Buri and he was a big, strong, handsome man. He fathered a son named Borr, who married Bestla, the daughter of the giant, Bolthorn. They had three sons: the first was called Odin, the second Vili, and the third Ve. And it is my belief that this Odin (and his brothers) must be the ruler of heaven and earth; we think that he should be given the name ruler, for that is what we call the greatest and worthiest man we know, and you would be well-advised to call him that too.”

7. “How did they get on with one another? Which side was more powerful?” asked Gangleri. “Borr’s sons killed Ymir the giant,” replied the High
One, “and when Ymir died, such a torrent of blood gushed from his wounds that they drowned the whole race of Frost-giants in it, all except for one, called Bergelmir, who escaped with his household. He and his wife boarded their ark and were saved, and it is from them that the Frost-giant families are descended, as it says here in *Vafþrúðnismál*,

Numberless winters
before the world was created,
Bergelmir was born;
what I recall first is
how that clever giant
took refuge on his ark.”

8. “What did Borr’s sons do then to make you regard them as gods?” asked Gangleri.

“There’s a lot to be said about that,” replied the High One. “They picked Ymir up and carried him to the middle of Ginnungagap where they created the earth from his body. They made the sea and the lakes from his blood, the land from his flesh, and the mountains from his bones; rocks and boulderfields were made out of his teeth, his molars, and any broken bones.”

“They made the sea from the blood that flowed and gushed freely from his wounds” added Just as High. “Then, when they had formed the earth and firmed it into shape, they encircled it with the sea, which most men will regard as impossible to cross.”

Then Third said, “They also took Ymir’s skull and made the sky out of it, raising it up over the earth at four corners, and setting a dwarf under each of them. These dwarfs are called: East, West, North, and South. Next, they collected the sparks and glowing embers that had been hurled out of Muspellsheim and were flying about freely. They placed these throughout the vast heavens to light up the sky above and the earth below. They allotted positions to all these burning masses. Some were fixed in the firmament, while others moved about, but it was Borr’s sons who assigned their positions and directed their courses. And thus, according to ancient lore, it became possible to distinguish one day from the next and reckon up the years; *Völuspá* tells us that this is what things were like above the earth before that time,

The sun did not know
where her dwelling was,
the moon did not know
his own might and
the stars did not know
where they should stand."

“These are important events I’m hearing about,” said Gangleri. “The heav-
ens are an astonishingly large creation, and skillfully made. How was the earth
constructed?”

The High One replied, “The earth is circular. Around it lies the deep sea,
and along the shore of this sea, Borr’s sons gave the giants lands to live on. But
further inland, they built a fortification around their world as a defense against
attack by the giants. They made this fortification out of Ymir’s eyebrows and
called it Midgard. They also tossed Ymir’s brains into the sky and made clouds
from them, as is said in Grímnismál,

From Ymir’s flesh
the earth was formed,
from his blood the sea,
from his bones the mountains,
from his hair trees,
and from his skull the heavens.
And from his brows
the blessed gods
made middle-earth
for the sons of men;
and from his brains
all the sullen clouds
were created.”

9. “It seems to me that Borr’s sons achieved a great deal when heaven and
earth were created, and the sun and the stars put in place, and day divided
from night. Now where did the people who live in the world come from?”
asked Gangleri.

The High One answered, “When Borr’s sons were walking along the
shore, they found two trees and created people from them. The first son
gave them breath and life, the second gave them intelligence and feeling,
and the third gave them form, speech, hearing, and sight. They also gave
gave them clothes and names. The man was called Ash, and the woman Elm,
and they begot the human race, which was given a home in Midgard. Next
Borr’s sons built themselves a city in the centre of the world and named
it Asgard, though we call it Troy. The gods and their descendants settled
there and from then on many incidents and events took place both on earth
and in heaven.
“In Asgard, there is a place called Hlidskjalf and when Odin sat there in his high-seat, he looked out over the whole world and saw what everyone was doing, and understood everything that he saw. His wife was called Frigg Fjorvins-daughter, and from their family line come the Aesir, a race of divine descent that lived in old Asgard and the kingdoms belonging to it. Thus Odin may truly be called All-Father for he is the father of all the gods and of men, and of everything else that was brought into being by him and his might. Earth was both his daughter and the wife by whom he sired his first son, Thor of the Aesir. Through his power and strength he is master of all living things.

10. “Norfi or Narfi was a giant who lived in Jotunheim [Giant-Land]. He had a daughter called Night who was swarthy and dark like all her family. She was given in marriage to a man called Naglfari and they had a son called Aud. Next she was married to someone named Annar [Second] and their daughter was called Earth. Her last marriage was to Delling, who was one of the Aesir. Their son was Day and, like his father, he was bright and beautiful. Then All-Father took Night and her son Day and gave them two horses and two chariots and set them in the heavens to ride around the Earth every day. Night rides ahead with the horse called Hrimfaxi [Frost-Mane] and every morning he bedews the Earth with the foam from his bit. Day’s horse is called Skinfaxi [Shining-Mane] and he lights up all the Earth and the sky with his mane.”

11. Then Gangleri asked, “How does All-Father regulate the course of the sun and the moon?” The High One replied, “There was a man named Mundilfoeri who had two children. They were so beautiful and fair that he called his son Mani [Moon] and his daughter Sol [Sun]. The gods, infuriated by his arrogance, seized the brother and sister and placed them in the heavens. They made Sol drive the horses that pulled the chariot of the Sun. The gods had fashioned this chariot from the glowing embers that flew out of Muspellsheim, in order to illuminate the worlds. The horses are called Arvak [Early-Waker] and Alsvid [All-Burning]. To keep them cool, the gods placed two bellows under their shoulder-blades; in some sources these are called ‘iron-coolers.’ Mani directs the course of the Moon and controls its waxing and waning. From earth, he carried off two children named Bil and Hjuki as they were leaving a well called Byrgir, carrying between them on their shoulders a bucket called Soeg, on a pole called Simul. These children, the offspring of Vidfin, can be seen from earth as they follow Mani.”

12. Then Gangleri said, “Sol travels fast, almost as if she were afraid; indeed, she could not hurry along her course any faster even if she were in fear of death.”

“It’s hardly surprising that she moves so quickly,” replied the High One, “for she has a pursuer hard on her heels and flight is her only means of escape.”

“Who is causing her this anxiety?” asked Gangleri.
“It is two wolves,” replied the High One, “The one pursuing her is called Skoll. She is terrified of him, and he will catch her. The one running ahead of her is called Hati Hrodvitnisson. He is eager to seize hold of the Moon; and that too will happen.”

“What family do the wolves belong to?” asked Gangleri.

The High One replied, “A giantess lives to the east of Midgard in a forest called Ironwood; in that forest live trollwomen, called the Ironvidjur. The old giantess bears many giant sons, all of whom are shaped like wolves, and it is from this line that these wolves are descended. It is said that this family will produce a mighty wolf called Managarm [Hound of the Moon], who will fill himself up with the blood of everyone who dies. Then he will gulp down the Moon and shower all the heavens and the sky with blood, causing the Sun to lose its brightness, and blustery winds to blow hither and thither. As Völuspá says,

The old woman lives eastward in Ironwood
and there gives birth to Fenrir’s brood;
one will emerge,
one from among them all,
who, in troll’s skin,
will snatch the Moon.
He devours the flesh of doomed men;
he reddens the gods’ home with crimson gore;
the Sun’s rays will grow black in the summers that follow,
the weather will always be wretched.
Do you wish to know more? And what?”

13. Then Gangleri asked, “What is the route from earth to heaven?”

“That question isn’t too clever,” answered the High One, with a laugh. “Hasn’t anyone told you that the gods built a bridge called Bifrost between earth and heaven? You must have seen it; maybe it’s what you call a rainbow. It is tri-colored and very strong, for it was fashioned with more skill and knowledge than other constructions. But strong as it is, the bridge will collapse when Muspell’s men come riding across it...”

15. Then Gangleri said, “Where is the chief holy place of the gods?”

“It’s at the ash tree called Yggdrasil,” answered the High One. “That’s where the gods must sit in judgment every day.”
“What is known about this place?” asked Gangleri.

Just as High answered him, “The ash is the greatest and best of all trees. Its limbs spread out over the whole world and stretch across the heavens. The tree is supported by three of its roots and these extend for a very long way: one reaches to the Aesir, a second to the Frost-giants, in what was once Ginnungagap [the Yawning Void], and the third extends over Niflheim [Land of Fog]. The serpent Nidhogg gnaws at the base of that root and under it is a spring called Hvergelmir. But under the root which stretches toward the Frost-giants lies Mimir’s Well, in which wisdom and understanding are kept. The well-keeper is called Mimir; he is full of wisdom because he drinks well-water from the Gjallarhorn [Bellowing Horn]. All-father went there and asked for a single drink from the well, but he did not get it until he had laid down his eye as a pledge. Thus says Völuspá,


Odin, I know all about
where you hid your eye
in Mimir’s famous well;
every morning, Mimir drinks
mead from Odin’s forfeit.
Do you wish to know more? And what?

The third root of the ash reaches to heaven and beneath it is a very holy well called Urd’s [Fate’s] well, where the gods have their court. Every day the Aesir ride there over Bifrost, which is also known as the Aesir’s bridge. . . .”

Then the High One said, “Under the ash, beside the well, there stands a beautiful hall, and out of this hall come three maidens, whose names are Urd [What Has Been], Verdandi [What Is], and Skuld [What Will Be]. These maidens, who shape the course of men’s lives, are called norns. There are also other norns, who come to each man at birth to shape his life. These norns are descended from the gods, but others are of elf origin, and a third group is descended from dwarfs, as it says in Fafnismál,


The norns, I know,
have numerous origins,
are not of the same family;
some are descended from gods
and some are from the elf-tribe,
some are daughters of dwarfs.”

Then Gangleri said, “If the norns control the fates of men, then they allot these fates very unfairly, for some people have a successful and prosperous life, while others get little honor or affluence. Some men have a long life, while others have a short one.”
“Good, well-born norns shape good lives,” said the High One, “but the people who suffer misfortune are controlled by evil norns.”

16. “Is there anything else of note to be said about the ash?” asked Gangleri.

“There is still a great deal to be said,” replied the High One. “In the branches of the ash sits an eagle, which is knowledgeable about many things, and between its eyes sits a hawk, called Vedrfolnir. A squirrel named Ratatosk runs up and down the ash, carrying insults between the eagle and Nidhogg. Four harts called Dain, Dvalin, Duneyr, and Durathror run among the branches, eating the leaves. And, in Hvergelmir, there are so many serpents in addition to Nidhogg that no tongue can count them. As *Grimnismál* puts it,

The ash, Yggdrasil,  
endures more anguish  
than humankind knows;  
above, a hart bites,  
at the side, it rots; Nidhogg  
gnaws from below.

*Grimnismál* also says,

More serpents  
squirm under Yggdrasil  
than old fools imagine;  
Goin and Moin  
—they are the sons of Grafvitnir—  
Grabbak and Grafvollud,  
Ofnir and Svafnir  
will forever, I think, tear  
at the tree’s twigs.

“It is said also that the norns who live beside Urd’s well take water from it every day, along with some of the surrounding clay, and pour it over the ash tree so that its limbs will not wither or decay. The water is so holy that whatever comes into contact with it becomes as white as the skin that lines the inside of an eggshell. As *Völuspá* puts it here,

There stands an Ash,  
Yggdrasil by name,  
a tall tree, sprinkled  
with moist, white soil;
from it come the dews
that fall in the dales;
evergreen, the Ash stands
above the well of Urd.

The dew which falls from the tree to the earth is known among men as honey-
dew and bees feed on it. Two birds feed in Urd’s well. They are called swans, and
all the birds of that species are descended from them.”

8. RAGNAROK: THE DOOM OF THE GODS

The Poetic Edda (sometimes called the Elder Edda) is a collection of mythological and
heroic poems put together in thirteenth-century Iceland. The manuscript, the Codex
Regius, is considerably later than the arrival of Christianity in Iceland, though much of
the material is certainly older than the Codex itself. The following passage comes from
Völuspá [The Seeress’s Prophecy]. The poem is the seeress’s reply to Odin’s implicit
questions about the future. Snorri used a version of this poem as a source for his Edda.

Source: trans. A.A. Somerville, from Die Lieder des Codex Regius, ed. Gustav Neckel; 5th rev. edition,

43. The golden-combed cock
crowed above the Æsir,
waking the warriors
at the Warfather’s home;
and another crows
under the earth,
in the halls of Hel,
a cock dark red in hue.

44. Loud barks Garm
before Gnipahel [Gnipa Cave],
fetters will break
and the wolf run free;
she knows much old lore,
but I see further into the future
to the doom of the gods,
the bitter doom of the victorious gods.

45. Brothers will fight
brothers to the death,
20. UNN THE DEEP-MINDED TAKES CONTROL OF HER LIFE

The Saga of the People of Laxdale contains some of the most vivid female characters in all of Icelandic literature. The saga begins with the adventures of Unn the Deep-Minded, the daughter of Ketil Flatnose, a nobleman who fled to Scotland rather than submit to Harald Finehair. After the deaths of her male relatives in Scotland and Ireland, Unn courageously gathers together her household and followers for a migration to Iceland. Unn the Deep-Minded presents an alternative to the largely masculine tales of Iceland’s foundation.


4. Ketil Flatnose sailed to Scotland where he was well received by men of good family because he was famous and nobly born. They invited him to stay there on whatever terms he pleased, so Ketil settled with the rest of his family except for Thorstein the Red, the son of his daughter Unn, who immediately went raiding. He made forays all over Scotland and was always victorious. At length, he made a treaty with the Scots. By this he gained half of Scotland and became king there. He married Thurid Eyvindsdaughter, the sister of Helgi the Lean. The Scots did not keep their agreement for long, but betrayed Thorstein during the truce [ca 880–890]. Ari Thorgilsson the Wise [author of The Book of the Icelanders] records that he was killed in Caithness.

Unn the Deep-Minded was in Caithness when her son Thorstein was killed. When she heard that he was dead, and since her father had also died, she recognized that she wouldn’t have much of a future there. So, she had a cargo ship built secretly in the forest and, when it was ready, she loaded the ship with great riches and prepared it for sailing. She took with her all the members of her family who were still alive. Everyone agrees that it is hard to find another case of a woman escaping with so much property and so many followers in the midst of such hostilities. She was obviously an amazing woman. Unn was also accompanied by many noteworthy and well-born men. A man named Koll was one of the most outstanding in Unn’s band, mainly because of his birth; he had the title of hersir [local chieftain, lord]. On the journey, too, was a well-born and distinguished man by the name of Hord.

When her preparations were completed, Unn steered for the Orkneys where she stayed for a short time and married off Gro, the daughter of her son, Thorstein the Red. . . . The son of that marriage was Hlodver, the father of Earl Sigurd whose son was Earl Thorfi nn, and from this line are descended all the earls of Orkney. Then Unn made for the Faeroes and stayed there for a while. In the Faeroes, she arranged a marriage for another of Thorstein’s daughters,
Olof; from her marriage are descended the Gotuskeggjar, the best known family in the Faeroes.

5. Unn prepared to leave the Faeroes and announced to her crew that she intended to head for Iceland. Along with her went Olaf Feilan, the son of Thorstein the Red, as well as Olaf’s unmarried sisters. She put to sea and, after a good voyage, arrived at Vikarskeid in the south of Iceland, where they suffered shipwreck, but all hands survived and no property was lost.

With twenty of her men she went to visit her brother Helgi. When she arrived, he came out to meet her and invited her to stay along with nine of her men. Angrily, she answered that she hadn’t known he was so mean-spirited. She left, intending to visit her brother Bjorn at his home in Breidafjord. When Bjorn heard about her approach, he went to greet her with a large band of men. He welcomed her warmly and invited her to stay with him and to bring her entire company, for he understood his sister’s expansive nature. This pleased her and she thanked him for his generosity. She remained there all winter and was treated splendidly as provisions were abundant and no expense was spared.

In spring, she crossed Breidafjord and arrived at a headland where she and her companions had their morning meal, dogurthr. Thereafter, the place was called Dogurness; it juts out from Medalfellsstrand. Then she sailed in along Hvammsfjord and came to another headland where she rested for a while and lost her comb. Since then the headland has been called Kambsness. Next, she traveled all over the Breidafjord Valleys and took as much land as she pleased. She sailed to the head of Breidafjord. Her high-seat pillars had been washed ashore there, so she thought this was clearly where she should make her home. Then she built the farm that was afterwards known as Hvamm and settled there. In the same spring as Unn established herself at Hvamm, Koll married Thorgerd, the daughter of Thorstein the Red. Unn met the costs of the wedding and gave Thorgerd the whole of Laxdale for her dowry. Koll built a farm to the south of the Lax River and was a very important man. Their son was Hoskuld.

6. Then Unn gave some of the land she had taken to other people. To Hord she gave all of Hordadale as far as the Skramuhlaup River. He lived at Hordabolstad and was a man of considerable note as well as being fortunate in his offspring. His son was Asbjorn the Wealthy who settled at Asbjornstad in Ornolfsdale. He married Thorbjorg, the daughter of Skeggi from Midfjord. Their daughter was Ingibjorg who married Illugi the Black and their sons were Hermund and Gunnlaug Serpent’s Tongue. This family is known as the Gilsbekki clan.

Unn addressed her men: “You must have a reward for your work now that we have the means to repay your efforts and good will. You know that I have
given freedom to Erp, the son of Earl Meldun, for the last thing I want is that a man of such a noble family should bear the name of slave.”

Then Unn gave him land at Saudafell between the Tungu River and the Mid River. His children were Orm and Asgeir, Gunnbjorn and Halldis whom Alf of the Dales married. To Sokkolf she gave Sokkolsdale, and he lived there till old age. One of Unn’s freedmen was a Scot called Hundi. She gave him Hundadale. Vifil was Unn’s fourth slave, and he received Vifilsdale.

The fourth daughter of Thorstein the Red was Osk. She was the mother of Thorstein the Black, known as the Wise. It was he who inserted an extra week to correct the calendar [since the solar year and the calendar had got out of step]. Thorstein the Red’s fifth daughter was Thorhild. She was mother of Alf of the Dales from whom many men trace their ancestry. His daughter was Thorgerd, the wife of Ari Masson, son of Atli, son of Ulf the Squint and Bjorg Eyvindsdaughter, sister of Helgi the Lean. From this line come the people of Reykjaness. The sixth daughter of Thorstein the Red was Vigdis from whom are descended the people of Hofdi in Eyjafjord.

7. Olaf Feilan was the youngest of Thorstein the Red’s children. He was a big, strong man, good-looking, and very accomplished. Unn thought more highly of him than of any other man and declared publicly that she intended Olaf to inherit all her property at Hvamm after her death. When Unn was becoming very weary with age, she called Olaf Feilan to her and said to him, “It strikes me, kinsman, that you should settle down and get married.”

Olaf was amenable and said that he would trust her judgment in the matter. Unn replied, “I really think that your wedding should take place late this summer, because it’s easiest to get hold of all the necessary provisions at that time of year and I’m sure that a great crowd of our friends will be there as this is the last feast I intend to give.”

“That is generously said,” answered Olaf. “However, I won’t marry any woman who will rob you of either your property or your authority.”

The same autumn, Olaf Feilan married Alfdis and their wedding took place at Hvamm. Unn spent a great deal on the feast as she had sent invitations to well-born men of other districts far and wide. She invited her brothers Bjorn and Helgi and they came with many followers. Her grandson-in-law, Koll of the Dales, came as did Hord of Hordadale and many other prominent men. There were a great many wedding guests, though nowhere near as many showed up as Unn had invited because it was a long journey for the people of Eyjafjord.

Old age had taken its toll on Unn so that she didn’t get up before the middle of the day and went to bed early. She allowed no one to consult her from the time she went to bed till the time when she was up and dressed and she answered irritably if anyone asked how she was. On the day of the wedding,
Unn slept longer than usual, but she was up and about when the wedding guests arrived. She went out to meet them and welcomed her relatives and friends honorably. She said that those who had come a long way had shown her particular affection.

“I single out Bjorn and Helgi for this, but I thank all of you who have come.”

Then Unn went into the hall with a large company. When the hall was full, everyone was amazed at the splendor of the feast. Then Unn said, “I call on you my brothers, Bjorn and Helgi, and my other relatives and friends, to witness that I am handing over to my kinsman, Olaf, the possession and management of this dwelling and of all the household goods that you can see.”

After that, Unn stood up and said that she was going to her sleeping chamber. She bade them enjoy themselves in whatever way they pleased, and said that there should be enough ale to give everyone a good time. People say that Unn was both tall and stout. She walked quickly along the hall and people said that she was still a splendid woman.

They drank throughout the evening until they thought it was bedtime. Next day, Olaf went to his grandmother Unn’s sleeping chamber. When he entered the room, she was sitting upright against the pillows, and she was dead. Olaf returned to the hall and announced what had happened. Everyone thought it was wonderful how Unn had retained her dignity until her dying day. Now they celebrated both the wedding of Olaf and the funeral feast of Unn. On the last day of the feast, Unn was moved to the burial mound that had been prepared for her. In the mound, she was placed in a ship and much valuable property was laid beside her. Then the burial mound was closed up.

Olaf Feilan took over the possession and management of Hvamm with the consent of all the relatives who had come to visit. When the feast came to an end, he presented expensive gifts to the most important guests before they went away. Olaf became a great man and a powerful chieftain. He lived at Hvamm till his old age.

21. QUEEN GUNNHILD HAS HER WAY WITH HRUT

Njal’s Saga is marked by the presence of strong women such as Queen Gunnhild, the widow of Eirik Bloodax, king of Norway. Her sons are frequently referred to as the Gunnhildarsons rather than as the Eirikssons. In this selection, she dominates her son, King Harald Greycloak, and uses her power to the advantage of Hrut, an Icelander with whom she has an affair.

GUDRUN OSVIFRSDAUGHTER’S INCITEMENT OF HER SONS

A tenth-century Gudrun follows her namesake’s example in The Saga of the People of Laxdale.


60. A few days after her return, Gudrun called her sons to the vegetable garden for a talk. When they got there they saw linen clothes spread on the ground; there was a shirt and a pair of trousers and they were covered with blood.

Gudrun said, “The clothes you see here challenge you to avenge your father. I’m not going to say much; it’s not to be expected that speechifying will move you in the right direction if you aren’t moved by tokens and reminders like these.”

The brothers were shocked by what Gudrun said and answered that they had been too young to take revenge and had no one to lead them. They said that they had no idea how to make plans, either for themselves or for others. “But we certainly haven’t forgotten what we have lost.”

Gudrun said that in her opinion they were much more interested in horse-fights and sports. After that the brothers went away, but that night they could not sleep. Thorgils noticed this and asked them what was wrong. They related to him the whole exchange between themselves and their mother; they said, too, that they could not bear their own sorrow or their mother’s taunting any longer. “We want to try for revenge,” said Bolli. “We brothers are old enough now for people to reproach us if we don’t lift a finger.”

The following day Thorgils and Gudrun had a talk and Gudrun began like this:

“I think, Thorgils, that my sons have had enough of doing nothing and making no attempt to avenge their father. Till now, the main reason for delay has been my feeling that Thorleik and Bolli were too young to be plotting against men’s lives. However, there has been good reason to talk about this long before now.”

“It’s no use discussing this business with me,” Thorgils replied, “when you have flatly refused to marry me. My thoughts on the matter are the same as they were when we discussed it before. If I can persuade you to marry me, then it won’t bother me a bit to kill one or both of the men most involved in the slaying of Bolli.”

Gudrun said, “I know that Thorleik thinks no one is better suited than you to take the lead when there is work to be done that requires boldness. I won’t conceal from you the fact that the boys intend to take aim at Helgi
Hardbeinsson, the berserk [see doc. 30], who lives on his farm at Skorradal and is not afraid of anything.”

Thorgils answered, “It makes no odds to me whether he goes by the name of Helgi or has some other name, because I don’t think it’s beyond my powers to deal with Helgi or anyone else. This will be my last word on the subject, so long as you promise before witnesses that you will marry me if I help your sons get their revenge.”

Gudrun said that she would honor any agreement she made, even if there were few people to witness it. She said, too, that Thorgils’s terms would be acceptable. Gudrun asked to have Thorgils’s foster-brother Halldor and her sons called as witnesses. Thorgils asked for Ornolf to be called too, but Gudrun said there was no need for this. “I have more suspicions about Ornolf’s loyalty to you than you seem to have yourself,” she said.

Thorgils left the decision to her. The brothers then arrived to join Gudrun and Thorgils; Halldor was there talking to them. Gudrun now explained to them how things stood: “Thorgils has promised to lead my sons in a foray against Helgi Hardbeinsson as vengeance for Bolli. He has stipulated that, in return, I will marry him. Now I call upon you to witness my promise to Thorgils that I will marry no man in this land except him, and I don’t plan to marry in another country.”

This seemed quite satisfactory to Thorgils and he didn’t see through it. The parley broke up with full agreement that Thorgils was to take on the exploit. He prepared to leave Helgafell with Gudrun’s sons. First they went to Thorgils’s home at Tung and afterwards they rode into the Dalir district.

26. THE GOADING OF HILDIGUNN

Hildigunn had not long been married to Hoskuld, Njal’s foster son, when he was murdered by Njal’s own sons in the seemingly endless chain of revenge that overshadows Njal’s Saga. In this passage, Hildigunn attempts to shame Flosi Thordarson, her kinsman, into taking revenge on Hoskuld’s murderers.


116. Hildigunn was outside in the yard. “I’d like all my menfolk to be waiting out here when Flosi arrives,” she said. “The women are to clean the house, hang up the tapestries, and get the high seat ready for Flosi.” Later on, when Flosi rode into the homestead, Hildigunn went to meet him and said, “Welcome, kinsman, it does my heart good to see you.”

“We’ll have a meal here with you, before riding on,” replied Flosi. Then their horses were tied up. Flosi went into the main room and, as he sat down,
Next day, as people were making their way to the law court, the brothers saw some well-dressed women outside the booths of the men from the Rang river valley. Hoskuld said to Hrut, “There’s Unn now, the one I was talking to you about. How does she look to you?”

“She looks fine,” said Hrut, “but I don’t know if we’ll get on well together.”

So they went on to the law court where Mord Fiddle was discussing legal business as usual and when he finished, he returned to his booth. Hoskuld and Hrut got up, went over to Mord’s booth, and entered. Mord was sitting on the innermost seat of the booth, and when Hoskuld and Hrut addressed him, he stood up to meet them. He took Hoskuld’s hand and placed him in the seat next to his own, while Hrut sat next to Hoskuld. They discussed various matters before they got down to Hoskuld’s business.

“I want to talk business with you,” said Hoskuld. “Hrut wants to be your son-in-law, and pay the price for your daughter. I’ll do all I can to make sure the deal happens.”

“I know you’re an important chieftain,” answered Mord, “but I don’t know a thing about your brother.”

“Hrut’s got more going for him than I have,” replied Hoskuld.

“You’ll have to pay out a lot for him because she’ll inherit everything I have,” said Mord.

“You won’t have to wait long to hear what I’ll promise with him,” answered Hoskuld. “He’ll have Kambsness and Hrutstead, and the land as far up as Thrandargils. He also has a trading ship at sea.”

“Mord,” said Hrut, “my brother has given me far too much credit out of his affection for me. Bearing that in mind, if you want to make an agreement, I want you to decide the terms of the deal.”

Mord replied, “I’ve considered the terms. She will have six hundreds [of homespun cloth, used as a means of exchange] outright, and a third of that in your house. If the pair of you have heirs, you and she will have equal shares in the property.”

Hrut answered, “I accept these terms, and now we have to witness the deal.”

Afterwards, they stood up and shook hands and Mord betrothed his daughter Unn to Hrut. The wedding feast was to be held at Mord’s house two weeks after midsummer. Then both parties rode away from the Thing.

28. DIVORCES FROM THE SAGAS

(a) How Gudrun Divorced Thorvald

While surviving (Christian) law codes are ambivalent about divorce, the sagas suggest a situation in which divorce appears to have been easily available to either
partner in a marriage, as is the case in this passage from The Saga of the People of Laxdale.


34. There was a man called Thorvald, the son of Halldor the Godi [chieftain] of Garpsdal. He lived in Garpsdal at Gilsfjord and was a prosperous man, but not very brave. He asked to marry Gudrun Osvifrsdaughter at the Althing when she was fifteen years old. The offer was not badly received but Osvifr remarked that as far as marriage went, he and Gudrun were not evenly matched. Thorvald responded mildly and said that he was asking for a wife, not money. So Gudrun was betrothed to Thorvald and, on his own, Osvifr drew up a contract by which it was agreed that Gudrun would have sole control of their property as soon as they occupied one bed, and that she would own half their property no matter how long or short a time they lived together. Thorvald was also obliged to buy costly possessions for her so that no woman of equal wealth would have better and he was to keep up the stock on his farm despite these expenses. Then everyone rode home from the Thing.

Gudrun wasn’t asked about this arrangement and she was miserable about it, but didn’t make a fuss. The wedding feast took place at Garpsdal in the fifth month of summer [late August, early September]. Gudrun cared little for Thorvald and was extravagant in making expensive purchases. There were no costly items in the West Fjords that Gudrun didn’t think she ought to have and she scolded Thorvald if he didn’t buy them, however expensive they were.

Thord Ingunnarson became very friendly with Thorvald and Gudrun and stayed with them for long periods. There was a lot of talk about the intimacy between Gudrun and Thord. On one occasion, when Gudrun asked Thorvald to buy her something expensive, he said that her demands were insatiable and slapped her on the face. Then Gudrun said, “You have given me a feature we women think it is very important to have in good measure, and that is a high color. And you have persuaded me not to pester you with excessive demands.”

When Thord arrived that evening on a visit, Gudrun told him about the insult and asked how she should repay it. With a smile, Thord said, “I know a good way of doing it. Make him a shirt with an opening shamefully wide for a man and declare yourself separated from him because of that effeminacy.” Gudrun said nothing against the idea and they ended their conversation.

The same spring, Gudrun declared herself separated from Thorvald and went back to Laugar. Later, their property was divided, and Gudrun got half, though the property was now worth more than before. They had lived together for two years.
(b) Vigdis Divorces Thord Goddi

When a relative, Thorolf, seeks Vigdis’s protection from the consequences of a murder, her husband, Thord, fails to act as she thinks a man ought to, and she declares herself divorced from him, in this selection from The Saga of the People of Laxdale.


14. . . . The news of Hall’s murder spread throughout the islands and was taken very seriously because, although he was not a lucky man, Hall belonged to a noble family. Now Thorolf fled from the islands, for he knew no one there who would shelter him after such a terrible deed. He had no relatives from whom he could hope for protection, whereas there were powerful men in the neighborhood who could certainly be expected to plot against his life, men like Ingjald the Godi [chieftain] of the South Islands, the brother of Hall.

Thorolf got a passage to the mainland. He traveled wearing a large hood on his head and there is no account of his journey until he arrived at Goddastead one evening. Vigdis, the wife of Thord, was some sort of relation of Thorolf’s and that is why he turned up at that house. Thorolf had already heard about how things stood there, in particular that Vigdis was more tough-minded than her husband Thord. On the evening of his arrival, Thorolf went straight to tell Vigdis his troubles and ask for her help.

Vigdis gave him this answer: “I won’t deny our kinship, and what you have done does not seem to me to have made a worse man of you. I think that anyone who protects you will risk both his life and property considering the stature of the men who will be in pursuit of you. But,” she said, “my husband Thord isn’t much of a fighting man, and the advice of us women is always wanting in judgment, if anything is needed. But I can’t bring myself to turn you away out of hand, since you have decided to come here for help.”

After that, Vigdis led him to a farm building and told him to stay there. She locked the door when she left. Later, she approached Thord. “A man has come here looking for a place to stay for the night,” she said. “His name is Thorolf, and he has some sort of kinship with me. I think that he will need to stay for longer, if you’re willing.”

Thord answered that he didn’t like having people to visit, but said that he could stay for the next day, so long as he wasn’t in trouble. Otherwise he should be on his way as soon as possible.

Vigdis answered, “I have already offered to let him stay and I won’t go back on my word even though he may not be equally friendly with everyone.”

Then she told him about the murder of Hall and that his murderer, Thorolf, was the man who had arrived at their house. Thord was angry about this, and
said that he knew for certain that Ingjaldr would make him pay heavily for
the protection already given to Thorolf, now that the door had been locked
behind him.

“Ingjaldr won’t take your money for giving Thorolf one night’s shelter,” said
Vigdis, “because he’s staying here for the whole winter.”

“You can trump me completely, but I’m really annoyed that such an unlucky
man is here,” complained Thord. Nonetheless, Thorolf stayed there over the
winter.

This reached the ears of Ingjaldr, who was prosecuting his brother’s mur-
der. Ingjaldr got ready for his journey to the Dales district in late winter and
launched a ferry that he owned. He and eleven others sailed from the west
before a sharp north-westerly wind and landed at the mouth of the Lax river
in the evening. They beached the ferry and traveled to Goddastead during
the evening. Their arrival was expected and they received a warm welcome.

Ingjaldr drew Thord aside for a talk and told him his business, saying that he
had heard that his brother’s killer, Thorolf, was there, but Thord denied that
this was so. Ingjaldr told him not to deny it.

“Let’s make a deal,” he said, “You give up the man to me and save me
trouble and I’ve got three marks of silver here for you in return. And I won’t
prosecute the charges you have brought on yourself by sheltering Thorolf.”

Thord thought the money looked good and there was also the promise of
the abandonment of the charges, which he had greatly feared would lead to
a serious loss of property. “I know that I’ll be criticized by people because of
our dealings, but our bargain will stand,” said Thord. They slept for much of
the night until an hour before day.

15. Then Ingjaldr and his men got up and dressed. Vigdis asked Thord what
he and Ingjaldr had been talking about during the evening. He replied that
they had discussed a lot, and had agreed that the place should be ransacked,
so they would be out of trouble if Thorolf wasn’t found. “So I had my slave
Asgaut take him away,” said Thord.

Vigdis said that she had no time for lying and declared that she didn’t fancy
having Ingjaldr poking about in her house, but told him to get on with it. Ing-
jaldr ransacked the place, but didn’t find Thorolf there. At that moment Asgaut
came up and Vigdis asked him where he had parted from Thorolf. “I took him
to the sheep-house as Thord told me to,” replied Asgaut.

“Could anything be closer to Ingjaldr’s path when he returns to his ship?”
said Vigdis. “I’m not going to take the risk that this is what they cooked up
yesterday evening. I want you to go right now and take him to Saudafel to
meet Thorolf Raudnef [a different Thorolf]. If you do as I ask you, there will
be something in it for you. I’ll give you your freedom and some money so
that you will be able to go wherever you want.” Asgaut was all for this and
went to the sheep-house where he found Thorolf and told him to get away as quickly as possible.

At that moment Ingjald was riding away from Goddastead intent on getting his money’s worth and when he had come down from the farm, he and his men saw two men walking toward them: they were Asgaut and Thorolf. It was early in the morning, so there wasn’t much daylight. Asgaut and Thorolf had got themselves into a very tight spot, with Ingjald on one side, and the Lax river on the other. The river was in flood and there were huge masses of ice on both sides, but the middle of the river was flowing and it looked dangerous to cross.

“We seem to have two choices facing us,” said Thorolf to Asgaut. “First, we could wait for them here beside the river and defend ourselves as long as our resolve and courage hold out, but it’s more than likely that Ingjald and his men will kill us straight off. The other choice is to try the river, and that seems to have its own risks.” Asgaut told Thorolf to decide, and declared that he wouldn’t part from him now, whatever he decided to do. “Let’s head for the river,” said Thorolf.

They did this and lightened their equipment as much as possible. After that, they climbed down to the masses of ice and threw themselves into the water. Because these men were brave, and longer life was in their destiny, they managed to cross the river and climbed up onto the heaped ice on the other side. They were no sooner across than Ingjald and his followers reached the side of the river. Ingjald addressed his men: “What are we going to do? Will we try the river or not?” They told him to decide and said that they would trust his judgment, though the river seemed impassable to them. “We’ll turn back and leave the river alone,” said Ingjald.

When Thorolf and Asgaut saw that Ingjald and his men were not going to attempt the crossing, they wrung out their clothes first of all and got ready for their journey. They walked all day and in the evening reached Saudafell where they had a warm welcome because anyone was allowed to stay there overnight. In the course of the evening, Asgaut went to see Thorolf Raudnef and outlined to him all the circumstances of their errand. He explained to Thorolf Raudnef that the man who had arrived with him had been sent there by his kinswoman Vigdis for support and protection. He gave an account of all that had gone on between Thord Goddi and his wife and presented the identification sent by Vigdis to Thorolf Raudnef.

“I’m not going to question this identification,” said Thorolf Raudnef. “Of course I’ll take in this man at Vigdis’s request. I think she has behaved courageously in this business, and it’s a great pity that a woman like her has made such a wretched marriage. Asgaut, you can stay here as long as you like.”

Asgaut replied that he wouldn’t stay there any longer. Then Thorolf Raudnef received his namesake and made him one of his followers. Thorolf and Asgaut parted as good friends and Asgaut made his way home.
As for Ingjald, he turned back to Goddastead when he and Thorolf had parted company. By that time, no fewer than forty-two men from neighboring farms had shown up at the request of Vigdis. When Ingjald and his men got back to the farm, Ingjald called Thord over to him.

“You haven’t behaved like a gentleman about our agreement,” said Ingjald. “We know for sure that you got the man away.” Thord replied that he truly had no part in the affair, but the whole story of the agreement between Ingjald and Thord came out. Now Ingjald wanted to get back the money he had given to Thord. Vigdis was standing nearby during their conversation and remarked that they had got what they deserved. She told Thord it was unmanly to keep the money. “Because, Thord, you got hold of the money dishonorably,” she said. Thord said that she should do whatever she wanted with it.

With that, she went indoors to Thord’s chest and found a fat money-bag at the bottom of it. She picked up the bag and took it out to Ingjald and told him to take the money. Ingjald brightened up with that and stretched out his hand toward the money-bag. Vigdis heaved up the bag and struck him on the nose with it, and immediately his blood gushed to the ground. Along with the bag, she hurled a few choice epithets at him, said that he would never get his money back again, and told him to be on his way. Ingjald saw that the best idea was to be off as soon as he could and that’s what he did, without stopping till he got home. He wasn’t happy about his trip.

16. As soon as Asgaut got back home, Vigdis gave him a warm welcome and asked him how good the hospitality had been at Saudafell. He reported that it had been excellent and repeated Thorolf Raudnef’s parting words to her. She was very pleased about that and said to Asgaut,

“You have shown real guts and loyalty, and I’ll tell you right now what your reward is going to be: I am giving you your freedom, and from today you will be called a free man; you will have the money Thord accepted in return for the life of my kinsman; the money has found a better home.” [The grateful Asgaut moves to Denmark where he becomes a successful farmer.] . . .

Vigdis felt such hostility because of the plot between Ingjald and Thord Goddi that she declared herself divorced from Thord. She went back to her relatives and told them what had happened. Thord Gellir, their chief, was not happy about the divorce, but there was no fuss. Vigdis took no more from Goddistead than her own valuables. The people of Hvamm announced that they intended to take half the property owned by Thord Goddi. . . .

(c) How Aud Dealt with Her Humiliating Divorce

Gudrun Osvifrsdaughter becomes involved with Thord Ingunnarson, who, unfortunately, is already married to Aud. The resourceful Gudrun suggests a pretext by which Thord
can get a divorce from her. Aud does not simply fade away but exacts an ironic revenge on Thord for her humiliation. From The Saga of the People of Laxdale.


35. . . . Gudrun Osvifrsdaughter rode to the Althing and Thord Ingunnarson went with her. One day, as they were riding across Blaskogarheath in fine weather, Gudrun asked,

“Is it true, Thord, that your wife, Aud, always wears men’s breeches and leg-bands that reach almost to her shoes?” He replied that he hadn’t noticed.

“There can’t be much truth to the rumor if you haven’t noticed it,” said Gudrun. “But why else is she called Aud-in-Breeches?”

“I don’t think she can have been called that for long,” said Thord.

“What’s really important is how long the name sticks,” replied Gudrun.

After that, people arrived at the Althing: nothing of much importance happened there. Thord spent a lot of time in Gest’s booth and was forever talking with Gudrun. One day, he asked her what would be the consequences for a woman who always wore trousers like a man. Gudrun answered, “A woman who does this should face the same penalty as a man who has so large an opening in his shirt that his nipples are exposed. Both are grounds for divorce.”

Thord said, “Do you think I should announce my divorce from Aud here at the Althing, or at home in my own district where I’ll have the backing of more supporters? For the men who are likely to take offence at this are proud and touchy.”

After a moment, Gudrun answered, “The timid postpone their lawsuits till evening.” Then Thord sprang up and went to the Law Rock. He named witnesses and declared that he was divorcing Aud, on the grounds that she wore gored breeches as though she were a man.

Aud’s brothers were not at all happy about this, but they took no action. Thord rode from the Thing with the Osvifrssons. When Aud heard the news, she said:

It’s as well to know
I’m deserted so.

Later, Thord and eleven others rode west to Saurby for the division of the estate. This went without a hitch as Thord made no difficulties about how the property was split up. Then he went back to Laugar with a great number of livestock and asked for Gudrun’s hand in marriage. His request was granted willingly by Osvifr, and Gudrun didn’t object. The wedding was to take place at Laugar ten weeks before the end of summer. The feast was splendid
and Thord and Gudrun were happy in their marriage. The only reason that Thorkel Whelp and Knut [Aud’s brothers] did not bring a lawsuit against Thord Ingunnarson was that they had no support for it.

The following summer Aud and the men of Hol were at their shieling [a summer pasture, usually with a cottage] in Hvammsdal. The men of Laugar had their shieling in Lambadal, which runs west into the mountains from Saelingsdal. Aud asked the fellow who looked after their sheep how often he ran into the shepherd from Laugar. He said that was always happening, not surprisingly, as only a single ridge separated the shielings. Aud said,

“Go and meet the shepherd from Laugar today and find out for me who is at the shieling and who has stayed behind at the main farm. Talk about Thord in a very friendly fashion, just as you ought to.”

The boy promised to do as she asked and when he came home in the evening, Aud asked for his news. The shepherd replied, “I’ve heard news you’re going to like. There’s quite a distance just now between the beds of Thord and Gudrun, for she’s at the shieling and he’s working himself to death building a house. He and Osvifr are the only two at the home farm.”

“What a great job of spying you’ve done!” said Aud. “When everyone goes to bed, have two horses saddled.”

The shepherd did as she asked and shortly before sunset Aud mounted her horse. On this occasion she was definitely wearing breeches. She pressed on so hard that the shepherd on the other horse could barely keep up with her. She rode south across Saelingsdal Heath and didn’t come to a halt until she got to the fence around Laugar farm. There she dismounted and told the shepherd to watch the horses while she made her way to the house. Aud went up to the entry and found the door open. She entered the main room and walked toward the bed closet where Thord lay asleep. The door was shut but not bolted. She entered the bed-closet and found Thord sleeping on his back. Then Aud woke Thord and he turned toward the door when he realized that a man had come in. She drew a short sword and thrust at Thord, wounding him seriously in the right arm and cutting across both nipples. She thrust so hard that the sword lodged itself in the wooden bed. After that, Aud went back to her horse, leapt into the saddle, and rode home.

Thord tried to spring to his feet when he was wounded, but he couldn’t as the loss of blood had weakened him. Awakened by the noise, Osvifr asked what had happened and Thord told him that he had been wounded. Osvifr got up and saw to Thord’s wounds. He asked him if he knew who had done this to him. Thord said he thought that Aud had done it. Osvifr offered to ride in pursuit of her. He said she was likely to have come without many companions and so her punishment would be assured. Thord declared he was far from wishing any such thing and that Aud had just done what she had to do.
When Aud arrived home at dawn, her brothers asked where she had been. She answered that she had been to Laugar and told them what she had done there. They were delighted but said that she had not gone far enough. Thord’s wounds kept him in bed for a long time. Though the injuries on his chest healed well, his arm was never the same again. . . .
38. ON THE CAUSES OF THE VIKING EXPANSION

Dudo, dean of St. Quentin (d. before 1027), wrote his De moribus et actis primorum Normanniae ducum (On the Customs and Deeds of the First Dukes of Normandy) at the behest of Count Richard I (d. 996). The work was composed between about 996 and 1015 and covered events between the 850s and the death of Count Richard. The first book includes one of the few attempts by a medieval writer to explain the sudden advent of the Northmen as anything other than the wrath of God. Modern scholarship is quite skeptical about the historical value of the work, but it is important as an early formulation of the Norman origin myth.


1.1 Now the cosmographers who have surveyed the world’s whole mass, and have cunningly measured the perimeter and the surface of the land, have taken a bearing by the cardinal points of the four-cornered sky, and have divided the whole of the land, hedged round on all sides by the endless girdle of Ocean, into three parts; and these parts are reckoned to be Asia, Europe, and Africa. Of these, Europe is threaded by the courses of very many rivers, and marked out into various provinces, and divided up into countries within its “separating boundary.” And of these, the most spacious and the most affluent of all, owing to the many uncountable throngs of its people, is called Germany. Within which, the river Hister rises at the top of mount Abnoba, grows vastly bigger fed by sixty tributaries, and wanders boisterously from the south to the east (having separated Germany from Scythia) up to the point where it is received into the Scythian Sea; it is usually called the Danube.

Spread out within the huge space between the Danube and the edge of the Scythian Sea, there dwell savage and barbarous peoples, which are said to have sprung forth in various different ways from the island of Scanza [Scandinavia], hemmed in on both sides by the Ocean, like a swarm of bees from a hive, or like a sword from a scabbard; as barbarians will. For there lies the region of the great multitudes of Alania, the exceedingly fertile site of Dacia, and the far-extended reaches of Getia. Of which, Dacia stands in the middle, looking like a crown, or resembling a city fortified by enormous Alps. And wild peoples, warlike and “foreboding Mars” inhabit this extensive corner; that is, the Getae (also called Goths), the Sarmatians, and the Amacsobii, the Tragoditae, and the Alans, and many other peoples who dwell in and cultivate the Maeotid Marshes. Now these people burn with too much wanton lasciviousness, and with singular depravity debauch and mate with as many women
as they please; and so, by mingling together in illicit couplings, they generate innumerable children.

When these have grown up, they clamor fiercely against their fathers and their grandfathers, or more frequently against each other, for shares of property; and, as they are over-many, and the land they inhabit is not large enough for them to live in, there is a very old custom by which a multitude of youths is selected by lot and expelled into the realms of other nations, to win kingdoms for themselves by fighting, where they can live in uninterrupted peace. That is what the Getae did, who are also called Goths, after they had laid waste almost the whole of Europe as far as where they live now.

1.2 Besides, at one time they used to complete their expulsions and exits by making sacrifices in honor of their god Thor. And to him they would offer no single beasts, nor herds of cattle, nor “gifts of Father Liber, nor of Ceres,” but men’s blood, which they deemed to be the most precious of all holocausts; because him whom a soothsaying priest would determine beforehand, they struck with one fatal blow on his head, [as with] a pair of oxen. And then, when the head of the one chosen by lot had been struck a single blow by each man, he was laid out on the ground, and they would search for “the tube of the heart” on the left-hand side; that is, for the aorta. And it was their custom to smear their own and their followers’ heads with the blood that was drained out; and then they would quickly hoist the sails of their ships into the winds, thinking to placate those [winds] by such a procedure, and would briskly ply the oars of their ships.

But if, on the other hand, the lot they drew was for going out on horseback, they would raise the martial standards of battle, and so escape from their own confines and pursue the policy of “falling upon other nations with” deadly “force.” For they are exiled by fathers, boldly to batter kings. They are sent away without wealth from their own people, that they may enrich themselves out of the plenty of foreigners. They are deprived of their own lands, that they might be settled undisturbed on those of others. They are expelled as exiles, that they may be rewarded as warriors. They are thrust out by their own people, that they may share with aliens. They are separated from their own nation, that they may rejoice in possessing others. They are abandoned by their fathers, perhaps never again to be seen by their mothers. The ferocity of the young men is aroused, and the nations are destroyed. The native land is liberated, having been purged of its own numerous enemy. So they lay waste everything which stands in their way. Along the sea-shores they sail, to win for themselves the despoiling of lands. What they seize from one kingdom they remove to another. They make for “peace-protected” ports in order to make a profit from their loot.
39. VIKING RAIDS ON ENGLAND, 789–850

One of the most important sources for this period is the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, which records the annals of England from 60 BCE until 1154 CE. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is not the title of a single document, but refers collectively to a group of nine manuscripts, none of which is the original copy. The following translation relies mainly on the version known as the Peterborough Chronicle. This selection covers the period from the first appearance of Vikings off the south coast of England to the year 851, in which the “great army” of the Danes wintered in England instead of heading back home. Dates in the chronicle are often out by one or more years. Correct dates are supplied in brackets.


787 [789]. This year, King Beorhtric [of Wessex] married Eadburg, Offa’s daughter. And in his days there came for the first time three ships of Northmen, from Hordaland [in Norway]. Then the Reeve rode to meet them; he intended to have them go to the king’s town because he did not know what they were. They killed him. These were the first Danish ships to attack the land of the English people.

793. In this year, terrifying omens appeared over Northumbria, and the people were wretchedly afraid. There were huge flashes of lightning and fiery dragons were seen flying in the air. A great famine followed these signs, and shortly after that, on the sixth day before the Ides of January of the same year [8 January], the miserable raiding of the heathens destroyed God’s church on the Isle of Lindisfarne through plundering and murder. Also, Sicga [a Northumbrian nobleman] died on the seventh day before the Calends of March [23 February].

794 [796]. In this year, Pope Hadrian and King Offa [of Mercia] died. King Athelred of Northumbria was killed by his own people on the thirteenth day before the Calends of May [19 April]. Also, the bishops Ceolwulf and Eadbald left the country. Ecgferth succeeded to the kingdom of Mercia and died the same year. Eadbiht came to power in Kent; his other name was Præn. Athelheard the alderman died on the Calends of August [1 August]. The heathens raided in Northumbria and plundered Ecgferth’s monastery at Jarrow. And there one of their leaders was killed. Also, some of their ships were wrecked in a storm, and many of them drowned. Some of them got to the river bank alive; they were promptly killed at the mouth of the river.

832 [835]. In this year, heathen men ravaged Sheppey.

833 [836]. In this year, King Ecgbriht [of Wessex] fought against the men from twenty-five ships at Carhampton. After great slaughter the Danes were
left in possession of the battlefield. Hereferth and Wigferth, two bishops, died as did the aldermen Duda and Osmod.

835 [838]. This year, a great Danish fleet came to the West Welsh [Cornishmen]. The Welsh and the Danes joined forces and began fighting against Ecgberht, king of the West Saxons. He moved against them and fought them at Hingston. There he put to flight both the Welsh and the Danes.

837 [840]. This year, Alderman Wulfheard fought against the men from thirty-three ships at Southampton. He slaughtered a great number and won the victory, but he died the same year. Alderman Athelhelm fought the Danes at Portland in Dorset. The alderman was slain and the Danes won control of the battlefield.

839 [842]. In this year, there was much slaughter in London, Canterbury, and Rochester.

840 [843]. This year, King Athelwulf fought the men from thirty-five ships at Carhampton, and the Danes won possession of the battlefield.

845 [848]. In this year, Alderman Ceorl with the men of Somerset, Bishop Ealhstan, and Osric with the men of Dorset fought the Danes at the mouth of the Parret and won the battle there with great slaughter.

851 [850 or 851]. In this year, Alderman Ceorl and the men of Devonshire fought against heathens and, after huge slaughter, defeated them. The heathens stayed in Thanet over the winter. The same year, three hundred and fifty ships arrived at the mouth of the Thames. The heathens stormed Canterbury and routed Brihtwulf, king of the Mercians, and his army. Next, the heathens went south across the Thames where King Athelwulf [of Wessex] and Athelwulf his son with the West-Saxon host fought them at Oakley. This battle was the greatest massacre of a heathen army we have ever heard tell of. King Athelwulf and his forces were victorious there. That same year, King Athelstan and Alderman Ealhere fought in their ships and massacred a large heathen force at Sandwich. They captured nine ships and drove off the rest.

40. ALCUIN’S LETTER TO KING ATHELRED, 793

The sack of the monastery of Lindisfarne on the east coast of England on 8 June 793 (described in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, doc. 39 above) prompted the churchman and scholar Alcuin (d. 804) to write a series of letters in which he criticized the Northumbrian king, people, and churchmen for misconduct, which, he argued, had brought the wrath of God upon them.

To the most beloved lord King Ethelred and all his chief men, Alcuin the humble deacon, sends greeting.

Mindful of your most sweet love, O men my brothers and fathers, also esteemed in Christ the Lord; desiring the divine mercy to conserve for us in long-lasting prosperity our land, which it once with its grace conferred on us with free generosity; I do not cease to warn you very often, my dearest fellow-soldiers, either with words, when present, if God should grant it, or by letters when absent, by the inspiration of the divine spirit, and by frequent iteration to pour forth to your ears, as we are citizens of the same country, the things known to belong to the welfare of an earthly kingdom and to the beatitude of an eternal kingdom; that the things often heard may be implanted in your minds for your good. For what is love in a friend, if it is silent on matters profitable to the friend? To what does a man owe fidelity, if not to his fatherland? To whom does he owe prosperity, if not to its citizens? We are fellow-citizens by a two-fold relationship: sons of one city in Christ, that is, of Mother Church, and natives of one country. Thus let not your kindness shrink from accepting benignly what my devotion is eager to offer for the welfare of our country. Do not think that I impute faults to you; but understand that I wish to avert penalties.

Lo, it is nearly 350 years that we and our fathers have inhabited this most lovely land, and never before has such terror appeared in Britain as we have now suffered from a pagan race, nor was it thought that such an inroad from the sea could be made. Behold, the church of St. Cuthbert spattered with the blood of the priests of God, despoiled of its ornaments; a place more venerable than all in Britain is given as prey to pagan peoples. And where first, after the departure of Saint Paulinus from York, the Christian religion in our race took its rise, there misery and calamity have begun. Who does not fear this? Who does not lament this as if his country were captured? Foxes pillage the chosen vine, the heritage of the Lord has been given to the Gentiles; the holy festivity has been turned to mourning.

Consider carefully, brothers, and examine diligently, lest perchance this unaccustomed and unheard-of evil was merited by some unheard-of evil practice. I do not say that formerly there were no sins of fornication among the people. But from the days of King Ælfwold fornications, adulteries, and incest have poured over the land, so that these sins have been committed without any shame and even against the handmaids dedicated to God. What may I say about avarice, robbery, violent judgments?—when it is clearer than day how much these crimes have increased everywhere, and a despoiled people testifies to it. Whoever reads the Holy Scriptures and ponders ancient histories and considers the fortune of the world will find that for sins of this kind kings lost kingdoms and peoples their country; and while the strong unjustly seized the goods of others, they justly lost their own.
Truly signs of this misery preceded it, some through unaccustomed things, some through unwonted practices. What portends the bloody rain, which in the time of Lent in the church of St. Peter, prince of the apostles, in the city of York, which is the head of the whole kingdom, we saw fall menacingly on the north side from the summit of the roof, though the sky was serene? Can it not be expected that from the north there will come upon our nation retribution of blood, which can be seen to have started with this attack which has lately befallen the house of God?

Consider the dress, the way of wearing the hair, the luxurious habits of the princes and people. Look at your trimming of the beard and hair, in which you have wished to resemble the pagans. Are you not menaced by terror of them whose fashion you wished to follow? What also of the immoderate use of clothing beyond the needs of human nature, beyond the custom of our predecessors? The princes’ superfluity is poverty for the people. Such customs once injured the people of God, and made it a reproach to the pagan races, as the prophet says: “Woe to you, who have sold the poor for a pair of shoes,” that is, the souls of men for ornaments for the feet. Some labor under an enormity of clothes, others perish with cold; some are inundated with delicacies and feastings like Dives clothed in purple, and Lazarus dies of hunger at the gate. Where is brotherly love? Where the pity which we are admonished to have for the wretched? The satiety of the rich is the hunger of the poor. That saying of our Lord is also to be feared: “For judgment without mercy to him that hath not done mercy.” Also we read in the words of the blessed Peter: “The time is that judgment should begin at the house of God.”

Behold, judgment has begun, with great terror, at the house of God, in which rest such lights of the whole of Britain. What should be expected for other places, when the divine judgment has not spared this holy place? I do not think this sin is theirs alone who dwell in that place. Would that their correction would be the amendment of others, and that many would fear what a few have suffered, and each say in his heart, groaning and trembling, “If such great men and fathers so holy did not defend their habitation and the place of their repose, who will defend mine?” Defend your country by assiduous prayers to God, by acts of justice and mercy to men. Let your use of clothes and food be moderate. Nothing defends a country better than the equity and godliness of princes and the intercessions of the servants of God. Remember that Hezekiah, that just and pious king, procured from God by a single prayer that a hundred and eighty-five thousand of the enemy were destroyed by an angel in one night. Likewise with profuse tears he averted from him death when it threatened him, and deserved of God that fifteen years were added to his life by this prayer.

Have decent habits, pleasing to God and laudable to men. Be rulers of the people, not robbers; shepherds, not plunderers. You have received honors by
God’s gift; give heed to the keeping of his commands, that you may have him as a preserver whom you had as a benefactor. Obey the priests of God; for they have an account to make to God, how they admonish you; they as interceders for you, you as defenders of them. But, above all, have the love of God in your hearts, and show that love by keeping his commandments. Love him as a father, that he may defend you as sons. Whether you will or not, you will have him as a judge. Pay heed to good works, that he may be propitious to you. “For the fashion of this world passeth away”; and all things are fleeting which can be seen or possessed here. This alone from his labor can a man take with him, what he did in alms-giving and good works. We must all stand before the judgment-seat of Christ, and each must show what he did, whether good or evil. Beware of the torments of hell, while they can be avoided; and acquire for yourselves the kingdom of God and eternal beatitude with Christ and his saints in eternal ages.

May God both make you happy in this earthly kingdom and grant to you an eternal country with his saints, O lords, my dearest fathers, brothers and sons.

41. AN ENGLISH GOSPEL BOOK RANSOMED FROM THE VIKINGS

The Canterbury Codex Aureus (also known as the Stockholm Codex Aureus) is a splendidly decorated book of Gospels, produced in England (probably at Canterbury) in the eighth century. Stolen by Vikings in the ninth century, the codex was ransomed by Alderman Alfred and handed over to Christ Church, Canterbury. Alfred’s pious deed is remembered in an Anglo-Saxon inscription added to the first page of St. Matthew’s Gospel. The codex now resides in the Swedish Royal Library, Stockholm.


In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, I Alderman Alfred and Werburg my wife obtained these books from the heathen army with our money; the purchase was made with pure gold. We did this for the love of God and the good of our souls, and because we did not want these holy books to remain any longer in the possession of heathens. And now we wish to present these books to Christ Church for the praise, glory, and honor of God, and in thanks for his sufferings, and for the use of the religious brotherhood who offer praise to God in Christ Church every day—on condition that they are read every month, as long as God sees fit that baptism should be performed in this place, for the sake of Alfred, Werburg, and their daughter Alhthryth, for the eternal salvation of their souls. Also, I Earl Alfred and Werburg beg and beseech in the name
peoples from abroad. He imposed everlasting privileges and laws on the people, authorized and decreed by the will of the chief men, and he compelled them to dwell together in peace. He raised up churches that had been demolished to the ground, he rebuilt temples that had been ruined by the visitations of the heathens, and he made new and extended the walls and defenses of cities. He subdued the Britons who resisted him, and he amply victualed the whole of the realm that had been granted to him from the Breton food-renders. . . .
59. THE PIRAEUS LION

Figure 9.1: In 1687, the Piraeus Lion was looted from Greece and removed to its present location at the Arsenale in Venice. This first- or second-century statue is three meters high and is made of white marble. In the late eleventh century, the lion was visited by some Scandinavians (probably mercenary soldiers), who embellished it with Norse inscriptions in the runic alphabet, or futhark. The inscriptions are now badly worn and difficult to interpret.

Figure 9.2: This conjectural transcription is the work of Carl Christian Rafn, a nineteenth-century Danish scholar. Rafn’s argument that Harald the Tall is Harald Sigurdarson Hardradi is not persuasive, as the latter’s adventures in the East took place considerably earlier than the probable date of the inscription.

Right side of the lion:

ASMUDR : HJU : RUNAR : DISAR : PAIR : ISKIR : AUK : DURLIFR :
HUGSAU : AUK : BANAPU :

ASMUND CARVED THESE RUNES ALONG WITH ASGEIR AND THORLEIF, THORD AND IVAR AT THE REQUEST OF HARALD THE TALL, THOUGH THE GREEKS THOUGHT ABOUT IT AND FORBADE IT.
Left side of the lion:

EGIL : VAR : I : FARU : MID : RAGNARR : TIL : RUMANIU . . . . AUK :
ARMENIU :

HAKON, ALONG WITH ULF AND ASMUND AND ORN, WON THIS SEAPORT.
THESE MEN, WITH HARALD THE TALL, IMPOSED A FINE BECAUSE OF THE
UPRISING OF THE GREEKS. DALK REMAINS AGAINST HIS WILL [CAPTIVE]
IN DISTANT LANDS. EGIL WENT ON A JOURNEY WITH RAGNAR TO
ROMANIA . . . . AND ARMENIA.

60. THE RÙS

The Carolingian Annals of St-Bertin (see doc. 47), in its entry for the year 839,
contains the first reference in a European source to the people called the Rûs, and it
links them with Sweden. This excerpt relates how the Byzantine Emperor Theophilus
(829–842) sent envoys to the emperor Louis the Pious.

University Press, 1991), p. 44.

There also came envoys from the Greeks sent by the emperor Theophilus. They
were Theodosius, metropolitan bishop of Chalcedon, and Theophanus the
Spatharius, and they brought gifts worthy for an emperor, and a letter. The em-
peror received them with due ceremony on 18 May at Ingelheim. The purpose
of their mission was to confirm the treaty of peace and perpetual friendship
and love between the two emperors and their subjects . . . [Theophilus] also
sent with the envoys some men who said they—meaning their whole people
[gens]—were called Russians and had been sent to him by their king, whose
name was the Khagan, for the sake of friendship, so they claimed. Theophi-
lus requested in his letter that the emperor in his goodness might grant them
safe conduits to travel through his empire and any help or practical assistance
needed to return home, for the route by which they had reached Constan-
tinople had taken them through primitive tribes that were very fierce and savage
and Theophilus did not wish them to return that way in case some disaster
befell them. When the emperor investigated more closely the reason for their
coming here, he discovered that they belonged to the people of the Swedes.
He suspected that they had really been sent as spies to this kingdom of ours rather than as seekers of our friendship, so he decided to keep them with him until he could find out for certain whether or not they had come in good faith. He lost no time in sending a letter to Theophilus through the same envoys to tell him all this, and to add that he had received them willingly for the sake of his friendship with Theophilus and that if they were found to be genuine, he would supply them with means to return to their fatherland without any risk of danger and send them home with every assistance, but if not, he would send them with envoys of ours back to Theophilus for him to deal with as he might think fit.

61. THE RŪS ATTACK CONSTANTINOPLE

In June of 860, while the emperor Michael III and the army were on campaign against the Muslims, Constantinople was attacked by a Russian fleet numbering two hundred vessels, according to Greek and Slavonic sources. Photius (d. ca 895) was patriarch of Constantinople at the time of the attack and spoke of it in two sermons. The first, quoted here, was delivered in St. Sophia during the attack itself, in the second half of June, and the second probably in early July, following the withdrawal of the Rūs. Although Photius’s purpose was not to provide a chronicle or narrative of the attack, but rather to draw moral and religious lessons, his sermons, despite their rhetorical flourishes and moral invectives, represent our best Greek source on the event and constitute important historical evidence, coming as they do from a highly educated and articulate eyewitness.


1. What is this? What is this grievous and heavy blow and wrath? Why has this dreadful bolt fallen on us out of the farthest north? What clouds compacted of woes and condemnation have violently collided to force out this irresistible lightning upon us? Why has this thick, sudden hail-storm of barbarians burst forth, not one that hews down the stalks of wheat and beats down the ears of corn, or lashes the vine-twigs and dashes to pieces the unripe fruit, or strikes the stems of plants and tears the branches apart (which for many has often been the extent of its most grievous damage), but miserably grinding up men’s very bodies, and bitterly destroying the whole nation? Why or how have the lees (to call them no worse) of so many and great disasters been poured out on us? Is it not for our sins that all these things have come upon us? Are they not a condemnation and a public parading of our transgressions? Does not the terror of things present indicate the awful and inexorable judgment of the future? Is
Domestic with forty thousand men, Phocas the Patrician with the Macedonians, and Theodore the General with the Thracians, supported by other illustrious nobles, surrounded the Russes. After taking counsel, the latter threw themselves upon the Greeks, and as the conflict between them was desperate, the Greeks experienced difficulty in winning the upper hand. The Russes returned at evening to their companions, embarked at night upon their vessels, and fled away. Theophanes pursued them in boats with Greek fire, and dropped it through pipes upon the Russian ships, so that a strange miracle was offered to view.

Upon seeing the flames, the Russians cast themselves into the sea-water, being anxious to escape, but the survivors returned home. When they came once more to their native land, where each one reported to his kinsfolk the course of events and described the fire launched from the ships, they related that the Greeks had in their possession the lightning from heaven, and had set them on fire by pouring it forth, so that the Russes could not conquer them. Upon his return, Igor began to collect a great army, and sent many messengers after the Varangians beyond the sea, inviting them to attack the Greeks, for he desired to make war upon them.

63. A MUSLIM DIPLOMAT MEETS RŪS MERCHANTS ON THE VOLGA RIVER

The Vikings appear in many Islamic sources. Perhaps the most famous, and detailed, is that of Ibn Fadlān, a member of an embassy sent by the caliph of Baghdad to the king of the Bulgars on the Volga River in 921. His account, known as the Risāla [Writing], described the journey and the peoples with whom the embassy came into contact, including a group called the Rūs who were encountered on the upper reaches of the Volga in 922. The identity of these Rūs is the subject of debate: often regarded as Scandinavians, they were probably undergoing processes of cultural adaptation and assimilation by which they became Slavicized by the mid-eleventh century.


I saw the Rūsiyyah when they had arrived on their trading expedition and had disembarked at the River Ātil. I have never seen more perfect physiques than theirs—they are like palm trees, are fair and reddish, and do not wear the qurṭaqaq or the caftan. The man wears a cloak with which he covers one half of his body, leaving one of his arms uncovered. Every one of them carries an axe, a sword and a dagger and is never without all of that which we have mentioned. Their swords are of the Frankish variety, with broad, ridged blades. Each man, from the tip of his toes to his neck, is covered in dark-green lines, pictures and such like.
Each woman has, on her breast, a small disc, tied around her neck, made of either iron, silver, copper or gold, in relation to her husband’s financial and social worth. Each disc has a ring to which a dagger is attached, also lying on her breast. Around their necks they wear bands of gold and silver. Whenever a man’s wealth reaches ten thousand dirhams [an Islamic silver coin], he has a band made for his wife; if it reaches twenty thousand dirhams, he has two bands made for her—for every ten thousand more, he gives another band to his wife. Sometimes one woman may wear many bands around her neck. The jewellery which they prize the most is the dark-green ceramic beads which they have aboard their boats and which they value very highly: they purchase beads for a dirham a piece and string them together as necklaces for their wives.

They are the filthiest of all Allâh’s creatures: they do not clean themselves after excreting or urinating or wash themselves when in a state of ritual impurity (i.e., after coitus) and do not wash their hands after food. Indeed they are like asses that roam in the fields.

They arrive from their territory and moor their boats by the Ātil (a large river), building on its banks large wooden houses. They gather in the one house in their tens and twenties, sometimes more, sometimes less. Each of them has a couch on which he sits. They are accompanied by beautiful slave girls for trading. One man will have intercourse with his slave-girl while his companion looks on. Sometimes a group of them comes together to do this, each in front of the other. Sometimes indeed the merchant will come in to buy a slave-girl from one of them and he will chance upon him having intercourse with her, but the Rūs will not leave her alone until he has satisfied his urge. They cannot, of course, avoid washing their faces and their heads each day, which they do with the filthiest and most polluted water imaginable. I shall explain. Every day the slave-girl arrives in the morning with a large basin containing water, which she hands to her owner. He washes his hands and his face and his hair in the water, then he dips his comb in the water and brushes his hair, blows his nose and spits in the basin. There is no filthy impurity which he will not do in this water. When he no longer requires it, the slave-girl takes the basin to the man beside him and he goes through the same routine as his friend. She continues to carry it from one man to the next until she has gone round everyone in the house, with each of them blowing his nose and spitting, washing his face and hair in the basin.

The moment their boats reach this dock every one of them disembarks, carrying bread, meat, onions, milk and alcohol, and goes to a tall piece of wood set up in the ground. This piece of wood has a face like the face of a man and is surrounded by small figurines behind which are long pieces of wood set up in the ground. When he reaches the large figure, he prostrates himself before it and says, “Lord, I have come from a distant land, bringing
so many slave-girls <priced at> such and such per head and so many sables <priced at> such and such per pelt.” He continues until he has mentioned all of the merchandise he has brought with him, then says, “And I have brought this offering,” leaving what he has brought with him in front of the piece of wood, saying, “I wish you to provide me with a merchant who has many dīnārs and dirhams and who will buy from me whatever I want <to sell> without haggling over the price I fix.” Then he departs. If he has difficulty in selling <his goods> and he has to remain too many days, he returns with a second and third offering. If his wishes prove to be impossible he brings an offering to every single one of those figurines and seeks its intercession, saying, “These are the wives, daughters and sons of our Lord.” He goes up to each figurine in turn and questions it, begging its intercession and grovelling before it. Sometimes business is good and he makes a quick sell, at which point he will say, “My Lord has satisfied my request, so I am required to recompense him.” He procures a number of sheep or cows and slaughters them, donating a portion of the meat to charity and taking the rest and casting it before the large piece of wood and the small ones around it. He ties the heads of the cows or the sheep to that piece of wood set up in the ground. At night, the dogs come and eat it all, but the man who has done all this will say, “My Lord is pleased with me and has eaten my offering.”

When one of them falls ill, they erect a tent away from them and cast him into it, giving him some bread and water. They do not come near him or speak to him, indeed they have no contact with him for the duration of his illness, especially if he is socially inferior or is a slave. If he recovers and gets back to his feet, he rejoins them. If he dies, they bury him, though if he was a slave they leave him there as food for the dogs and the birds.

If they catch a thief or a bandit, they bring him to a large tree and tie a strong rope around his neck. They tie it to the tree and leave him hanging there until <the rope> breaks, <rotted away> by exposure to the rain and the wind.

I was told that when their chieftains die, the least they do is to cremate them. I was very keen to verify this, when I learned of the death of one of their great men. They placed him in his grave and erected a canopy over it for ten days, until they had finished making and sewing his <funeral garments>.

In the case of a poor man they build a small boat, place him inside and burn it. In the case of a rich man, they gather together his possessions and divide them into three, one third for his family, one third to use for <his funeral> garments, and one third with which they purchase alcohol which they drink on the day when his slave-girl kills herself and is cremated together with her master. (They are addicted to alcohol, which they drink night and day. Sometimes one of them dies with the cup still in his hand.)
When their chieftain dies, his family ask his slave-girls and slave-boys, “Who among you will die with him?” and some of them reply, “I shall.” Having said this, it becomes incumbent upon the person and it is impossible ever to turn back. Should that person try to, he is not permitted to do so. It is usually slave-girls who make this offer.

When that man whom I mentioned earlier died, they said to his slave-girls, “Who will die with him?” and one of them said, “I shall.” So they placed two slave-girls in charge of her to take care of her and accompany her wherever she went, even to the point of occasionally washing her feet with their own hands. They set about attending to the dead man, preparing his clothes for him and setting right all he needed. Every day the slave-girl would drink alcohol and would sing merrily and cheerfully.

On the day when he and the slave-girl were to be burned I arrived at the river where his ship was. To my surprise I discovered that it had been beached and that four planks of birch and other types of wood had been erected for it. Around them wood had been placed in such a way as to resemble scaffolding. Then the ship was hauled and placed on top of this wood. They advanced, going to and fro around the boat uttering words which I did not understand, while he was still in his grave and had not been exhumed.

Then they produced a couch and placed it on the ship, covering it with quilts Byzantine silk brocade and cushions Byzantine silk brocade. Then a crone arrived whom they called the “Angel of Death” and she spread on the couch the coverings we have mentioned. She is responsible for having his garments sewn up and putting him in order and it is she who kills the slave-girls. I myself saw her: a gloomy, corpulent woman, neither young nor old.

When they came to his grave, they removed the soil from the wood and then removed the wood, exhuming him still dressed in the izār [garment] in which he had died. I could see that he had turned black because of the coldness of the ground. They had also placed alcohol, fruit and a Pandora [a musical instrument similar to a lute] beside him in the grave, all of which they took out. Surprisingly, he had not begun to stink and only his colour had deteriorated. They clothed him in trousers, leggings, boots, a qurtq, and a silk caftan with golden buttons, and placed a silk qalansuwwah [cap] fringed with sable on his head. They carried him inside the pavilion on the ship and laid him to rest on the quilt, propping him with cushions. Then they brought alcohol, fruit and herbs and placed them beside him. Next they brought bread, meat and onions, which they cast in front of him, a dog, which they cut in two and which they threw onto the ship, and all of his weaponry, which they placed beside him. They then brought two mounts, made them gallop until they began to sweat, cut them up into pieces and threw the flesh onto the ship.
two cows, which they also cut up into pieces and threw on board, and a cock and a hen, which they slaughtered and cast onto it.

Meanwhile, the slave-girl who wished to be killed was coming and going, entering one pavilion after another. The owner of the pavilion would have intercourse with her and say to her, “Tell your master that I have done this purely out of love for you.”

At the time of the evening prayer on Friday they brought the slave-girl to a thing that they had constructed, like a door-frame. She placed her feet on the hands of the men and was raised above that door-frame. She said something and they brought her down. Then they lifted her up a second time and she did what she had done the first time. They brought her down and then lifted her up a third time and she did what she had done on the first two occasions. They next handed her a hen. She cut off its head and threw it away. They took the hen and threw it on board the ship.

I quizzed the interpreter about her actions and he said, “The first time they lifted her, she said, ‘Behold, I see my father and my mother.’ The second time she said, ‘Behold, I see all of my dead kindred, seated.’ The third time she said, ‘Behold, I see my master, seated in Paradise. Paradise is beautiful and verdant. He is accompanied by his men and his male-slaves. He summons me, so bring me to him.’” So they brought her to the ship and she removed two bracelets that she was wearing, handing them to the woman called the “Angel of Death,” the one who was to kill her. She also removed two anklets that she was wearing, handing them to the two slave-girls who had waited upon her: they were the daughters of the crone known as the “Angel of Death.” Then they lifted her onto the ship but did not bring her into the pavilion. The men came with their shields and sticks and handed her a cup of alcohol over which she chanted and then drank. The interpreter said to me, “Thereby she bids her female companions farewell.” She was handed another cup, which she took and chanted for a long time, while the crone urged her to drink it and to enter the pavilion in which her master lay. I saw that she was befuddled and wanted to enter the pavilion but she had put her head into the pavilion while her body remained outside it. The crone grabbed hold of her head and dragged her into the pavilion, entering it at the same time. The men began to bang their shields with the sticks so that her screams could not be heard and so terrify the other slave-girls, who would not, then, seek to die with their masters.

Six men entered the pavilion and all had intercourse with the slave-girl. They laid her down beside her master and two of them took hold of her feet, two her hands. The crone called the “Angel of Death” placed a rope around her neck in such a way that the ends crossed one another and handed it to two of the men to pull on it. She advanced with a broad-bladed dagger and began
to thrust it in and out between her ribs, now here, now there, while the two men throttled her with the rope until she died.

Then the deceased’s next of kin approached and took hold of a piece of wood and set fire to it. He walked backwards, with the back of his neck to the ship, his face to the people, with the lighted piece of wood in one hand and the other hand on his anus, being completely naked. He ignited the wood that had been set up under the ship after they had placed the slave-girl whom they had killed beside her master. Then the people came forward with sticks and firewood. Each one carried a stick the end of which he had set fire to and which he threw on top of the wood. The wood caught fire, and then the ship, the pavilion, the man, the slave-girl and all it contained. A dreadful wind arose and the flames leapt higher and blazed fiercely.

One of the Rûsiyyah stood beside me and I heard him speaking to my interpreter. I quizzed him about what he had said, and he replied, “He said, ‘You Arabs are a foolish lot!’ ” So I said, “Why is that?” and he replied, “Because you purposely take those who are dearest to you and whom you hold in highest esteem and throw them under the earth, where they are eaten by the earth, by vermin and by worms, whereas we burn them in the fire there and then, so that they enter Paradise immediately.” Then he laughed loud and long. I quizzed him about that <i.e., the entry into Paradise> and he said, “Because of the love which my Lord feels for him. He has sent the wind to take him away within an hour.” Actually, it took scarcely an hour for the ship, the firewood, the slave-girl and her master to be burnt to a fine ash.

They built something like a round hillock over the ship, which they had pulled out of the water, and placed in the middle of it a large piece of birch on which they wrote the name of the man and the name of the King of the Rûs. Then they left.

He (Ibn Faḍlān) said: One of the customs of the King of the Rûs is that in his palace he keeps company with four hundred of his bravest and most trusted companions; they die when he dies and they offer their lives to protect him. Each of them has a slave-girl who waits on him, washes his head and prepares his food and drink, and another with whom he has coitus. These four hundred <men> sit below his throne, which is huge and is studded with precious stones. On his throne there sit forty slave-girls who belong to his bed. Sometimes he has coitus with one of them in the presence of those companions whom we have mentioned. He does not come down from his throne. When he wants to satisfy an urge, he satisfies it in a salver. When he wants to ride, they bring his beast up to the throne, whence he mounts it, and when he wants to dismount, he brings his beast <up to the throne> so that he can dismount there. He has a vicegerent who leads the army, fights against the enemy and stands in for him among his subjects.