

What Did King Hákon góði Do before the Battle at Fitjar and after the Battle at Avaldsnes?

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ABSTRACT: *The starting point for this paper is the enigmatic stanza 6 of the Norwegian skald Guthormr sindri's mid-900s poem Hákonardrápa. This stanza depicts the Norwegian king Hákon góði clashing his spears together over the heads of the fallen warriors after the battle of Avaldsnes. But why did he do it? And what did Hákon do when he "played" (lék) in front of his army before the Battle of Fitjar, as portrayed in Eyvindr Finnsson's poem Hákonarmál? Roman sources, iconographic motifs from the migration period to the Viking age, as well as information in Old Norse literature, suggest that war dances, intimidating movements, as well as aggressive and incendiary gestures, cries and songs constituted an important aspect of warfare among Germanic and Scandinavian peoples. In this paper, it is suggested that Hákon's – to us – enigmatic performances in Hákonardrápa and Hákonarmál may be understandable within the framework of this martial context.*

RESUME: *Utgångspunkten för denna artikel är en gåtfull strof (6) i den norske skalden Guthormr sindri's dikt Hákonardrápa, från mitten av 900-talet. Strofen beskriver hur den norske kungen Hákon góði slog samman spjut över huvudena på de fallna krigare, som låg spridda över slagfältet efter slaget vid Avaldsnes. Varför gjorde han det? Och vad gjorde samme kung Hákon, när han enligt Eyvindr Finnsson's poem Hákonarmál "lekte" (lék) framför sina krigare på slagfältet före slaget vid Fitjar? Romerska källor, ikonografiska motiv från folkvandringstid till vikingatid, liksom uppgifter i den norröna litteraturen, visar att krigsdanser, hotfulla rörelser samt aggressiva och eggande gester, utrop och sånger var viktiga inslag i krigsföringen bland de germanska och skandinaviska folken. I denna artikel föreslås att Hákon's – för oss – gåtfulla handlingar i Hákonardrápa och Hákonarmál blir förståeliga inom ramen för denna militära kontext.*

KEYWORDS: *Skaldic Poetry; war dance; ritual; battlefield behaviour; Óðinn worship.*

Sometimes, one word can make a huge difference. Consider, for example, a poetic stanza depicting a Viking battle: "the king let spears clash together over the heads of

the warriors; there the king left his enemy". The meaning would probably seem rather clear to the poet's audience: the king (and his host) attacked an enemy army, was victorious, and left the dead antagonists on the battlefield. Now consider the same sentence again, but with the word *slain* before the word *warriors*: "the king let spears clash together over the heads of the slain warriors; there the king left his enemy". The scene becomes a different one. Now, warriors (from both armies?) lay dead on the battlefield and the victorious king clashes his spears together over the heads of the slain men. Then he leaves the enemy there. But why, one might wonder, would a victorious king clash spears together over the heads of slain warriors? This question is not hypothetical, because the Norwegian king Hákon góði did just this after the battle at Avaldsnes (*Øgvaldsnes*) against the sons of his late brother Eiríkr blóðøx, in 953 AD – at least if we are to believe the wording in the sixth stanza of Guthormr sindri's poem *Hákonardrápa*. This paper discusses what could possibly be the idea behind this – at least in our eyes – somewhat peculiar scene.

Hákonardrápa and its context in *Hákonar saga góða*

Little is known about the poet Guthormr sindri (mid-tenth century), although he was in the service of both Hákon's father Haraldr hárfagri and his uncle Hálfðan svarti, before joining Hákon's entourage. According to Snorri Sturluson (*Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, ch. 36, Sturluson, Snorri 1979, 141), Guthormr composed poems about all three kings, but only eight stanzas from *Hákonardrápa* (of which two are incomplete) have survived. *Hákonardrápa* was composed at some point between the battle at Rastarkálfr in 955 AD and Hákon's death after the battle at Fitjar in c. 961 (Poole 2012, 156).

The historical events inspiring Guthormr to compose *Hákonardrápa* are retold in Snorri Sturluson's *Hákonar saga góða*, and in *Fagrskinna*. References to chapters below follow Snorri's version in Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson's edition of *Heimskringla* in Íslendzk fornrit 26 (Sturluson, Snorri 1979, 157–197). After the defeat of his brother Eiríkr blóðøx, Hákon became king of Norway (mid-930s). When Viken (*Vík*, the area around the Oslofjord) was ravaged by Danes, Hákon assembled an army, pursued the plunderers, and defeated them in battle in Jutland (ch. 6, *Hákdir*. 1). The remaining Danish army fled to Zealand, where they were again defeated by Hákon (ch. 7, *Hákdir*. 2). Hákon then ravaged Zealand, Scania and eastern Gautland (Swedish Götaland) before returning to Norway (ch. 8–9, *Hákdir*. 3–5). The sons of Eiríkr blóðøx then attacked and ravaged Viken (ch. 10). Hákon re-assembled his army and clashed with his nephews' troops in a battle at Avaldsnes (*Øgvaldsnes*), on the island of Karmö in Rogaland (c. 954). After his victory – if we are to believe Guthormr sindri – Hákon clashed spears together over the heads of the slain warriors before leaving them on the battlefield. He then pursued the remaining part of the enemy host to Denmark (ch. 19, *Hákdir*. 6–7). More confrontations followed and Hákon was victorious (ch. 25, *Hákdir*. 8). However, in the battle at Fitjar (c. 961), Hákon sustained a fatal wound in his arm, which eventually led to his death (ch. 20–31). This battle and its aftermath were later portrayed in

comprehensive mythic glory by Eyvindr skáldaspillir Finnsson (c. 916–990) in the praise poem *Hákonarmál* (cf. Poole 2012, 170; Fulk 2012, 171). After Hákon’s death, Eiríkr’s son Haraldr gráfeldr took over the reign of Norway.

The scene with Hákon clashing spears together over the heads of the fallen warriors is portrayed in the sixth stanza of *Hákonardrápa*. In Russell Poole’s edition, interpretation and translation (Poole 2012, 164) this reads:

Valþagnar lét vegnum
vígnestr saman bresta
handar vafs of hǫfðum
hlymmildingum gildir.
Þar gekk Njörðr af Nirði
nadds hámana radar
valbrands víðra landa
vápnunduðum sunda.

[Poole’s prose order of words:] [Gildir {vafs handar}] lét {vígnestr} bresta saman of hǫfðum {vegnum {Valþagnar hlym}mildingum}. Þar gekk [Njörðr {raddar {hámana nadds}}] af {vápnunduðum Nirði {víðra landa {sunda {valbrands}}}}.

{The payer {of the coil of the arm}} [ARM-RING > GENEROUS MAN = Hákon] let {war-needles} [SPEARS] clash together over the heads {of the slain bestowers {of the tumult of Valþögn <valkyrie>}} [(lit. ‘tumult-bestowers of Valþögn’) BATTLE > WARRIORS]. There {the Njörðr <god> {of the voice {of the high moon of the spear}}] [SHIELD > BATTLE > WARRIOR = Hákon] went from {the weapon-wounded Njörðr <god> {of the wide lands {of the inlets {of the slaughter-fire}}}} [SWORD > BLOOD > SHIELDS > WARRIOR = Guthormr Eiríksson].

Approaching the content of *Hákonardrápa* stanza 6, we need not concern ourselves with Guthormr’s four kennings for ‘warrior’, which are convincingly interpreted by Poole.¹ Instead our emphasis is on what king Hákon did on the battlefield after the victory over his nephews’ army. According to Guthormr sindri, Hákon clashed *vígnestr* (pl.) together over the heads of the slain warriors. What the kenning *vígnestr* refers to is not totally clear. Scholars have suggested ‘battle needles’ = ‘spears’ or ‘swords’, as well as (although less common) ‘battle brooches’ = ‘shields’ (Meissner 1921, 156; Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1979, 174 footnote 1; Finlay and Faulkes 2011, 103 footnote 223; Poole 2012a, 165). In accordance with Poole and others, the most convincing interpretation in my view is ‘battle needles’ = ‘spears’, as it is very easy to imagine the metaphorical association between a needle pricking fabric, and a spear piercing the coat of arms of an enemy warrior. Hence I use the translation *vígnestr* ‘spears’ throughout this paper.

¹ Perhaps except for one detail in the kenning *vápnunduðum Nirði víðra landa sunda valbrands* ‘the weapon-wounded Njörðr of the wide lands of the inlets of the slaughter-fire’, which refers to Eiríkr blóðøx’s son Guthormr. Poole interprets *valbrandr* as ‘slaughter-fire = sword’, *valbrands sund* as ‘the inlets of the sword = blood’, *valbrands sunda víðra landa* as ‘the wide lands of the blood = shields’, and the complete kenning ‘the weapon-wounded Njörðr of the shields’ as Guthormr Eiríksson. However, in my view ‘the wide lands of the blood’ can equally refer to ‘battlefields’, which would correspond well with Guthormr Eiríksson lying dead, or dying from his wounds, on the battleground.

In his Swedish translation of *Heimskringla*, Karl G. Johansson (1991, 148) interprets the first part of *Hákonardrápa* 6 as “Härskaren lät sköldarna slå samman över huvudena på de stridande kämparna”. As stressed before, however, the adjective *vegnum* ‘slain’ (from the verb *vega* ‘cut, strike, slay’) clearly indicates that the warriors are already slaughtered, as has been suggested by Russell Poole (above), and others.² But why did Hákon crash spears together over the heads of the slain warriors? Judging by the poet Guthormr sindri’s very concise depiction of the king’s action, he apparently expected his listeners in the warrior strata of Viking-Age society to understand this scene without further explanation. This suggests that whatever Hákon was doing, neither Guthormr nor his audience found the act exceptional.³

For later scholars, however, the situation is the opposite, and this presents us with two options. We can either leave the scene unexplained, or we can try to interpret it. If we choose the latter, we must try to reconstruct a general framework from the few disparate clues that our sources can offer and draw a wider conclusion from it (compare Ginzburg 1979, 273–288). Of course, both the assumed contextual foundation and the interpretation will then be largely dependent on which clues we find subjectively relevant in the first place (compare Nordberg 2016, 11–12).

Accordingly, my own premises are these: pre-Christian warfare among the Germanic peoples often seem to have involved customs of explicit ritualistic nature, of which some even had religious aspects (cf. Halsall 1989, 155–177; Evans 1997, 35–36.; Ringtved 1999, 363–364; Nordberg 2003; Lincoln 2005, 9679–9683; Littleton 2005, 9683–9687; Andrén 2014, 98–104; Schjødt 2011, 269–295; Schjødt 2020, 559–587). This, broadly speaking, Germanic warrior culture persisted in Scandinavia during the Viking Age, even after the Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons and the continental Germanic peoples (Enright 1996). Hence, in my broad, general contextual framework I will refer to literary sources from the Roman Iron Age, iconographic imagery from the Germanic Migration period, and Old Norse texts from the Viking Age and the early Middle Ages. From this, I will suggest an interpretation of what Hákon góði did after the battle at Avaldsnes, as depicted in *Hákonardrápa*. Before this, however, it may be appropriate to make a brief comment about Hákon’s religious affiliation.

Hákon the Apostate

Many have pointed out that the information about Hákon góði’s religious affiliation is somewhat paradoxical. According to the medieval Old Norse sagas, Hákon converted to Christianity at a young age during his upbringing as fosterling to king Æthelstan in England. This tradition also acknowledges that Hákon made efforts to introduce Christianity in Norway after his return to Scandinavia. In contrast to this, however,

² See for example Emil Olson 1919, 183 “över fallna krigares huvud”; Finnur Jónsson, Skj. B1, 56 “over hovederne på de dræbte krigere”; Finlay and Faulkes 2011, 103 “over heads of slain heroes”.

³ In addition, Luke John Murphy has pointed out to me, that Skaldic diction rarely includes adjectives “just for the sake of adjectives”, which again indicates that the inclusion of *vegnum* must have been important to Guthormr.

contemporary poets portrayed Hákon not only as a pagan, but as a warrior king who was deeply rooted in the Óðinistic configuration of the pre-Christian religion (for religious configurations, see Nordberg 2019, 339–370). If the information on Hákon’s early conversion is correct, he therefore most likely returned to the religion of his ancestors after some time in Norway (Sawyer 1996, 138; Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1998, 57–78; Krag 2003, 190–191; SkP 2012, cxcii). This apostasy, moreover, may be understood in two partly different ways. As Historian of Religion Anders Hultgård (2011, 307–315) has pointed out, it is possible that Hákon genuinely abandoned his Christian faith after some years in Norway and returned to the religion of his kinfolks. However, it is also possible that he played this role of a pagan king partly for political reasons. Hákon’s adherence to the indigenous religion was an absolute requirement for his pagan subjects among the aristocracy, warrior class, and lay people to acknowledge Hákon as king with the right to rule the land. In both cases, moreover, it is in an indigenous Óðinistic context we must view Hákon’s demeanour and manners as a warrior king.

Germanic Martial Rituals in Roman Sources

Roman sources from the early centuries AD testify that ritualistic combative postures and movements, as well as war dances and chants, were common in military contexts among the Germanic tribes during the Roman Iron Age (see Much 1959, 46–54; Speidel 2004, 110–113). For example, in his *Histories* (Book II, ch. 22, 1925, 196–197), Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus (c. AD 55–120) relates that warriors from the Batavi approached their enemies *cantu truci et more patrio nudis corporibus super umeros scuta quatientium* “singing their wild songs and brandishing their shields above their shoulders, while their bodies, according to a native custom, were unprotected”. In *Germania* (ch. 3), he also informs that Germanic tribes sang songs about their gods and their ancient heroes in order to strengthen their own courage and to put fear into their enemies. To make these songs and cries sound grislier, the warriors chanted them while holding their shields close to their mouths (Tacitus 1914, 132–135, translation by Hut-ton):

Fuisse apud eos et Herculem memorant, primumque omnium virorum fortium ituri in proelia canunt. sunt illis haec quoque carmina, quorum relatu, quem baritum vocant, accendunt animos futuraeque pugnae fortunam ipso cantu augurantur; terrent enim trepidantve, prout sonuit acies, nec tam vocis ille quam virtutis concentus videtur. adfectatur praecipue asperitas soni et fractum murmur, obiectis ad os scutis, quo plenior et gravior vox repercussu intumescat.

They further record how Hercules appeared among the Germans, and on the eve of battle the natives hymn “Hercules, the first of brave men.” They have also those cries by the recital of which—“barritus” is the name they use—they inspire courage; and they divine the fortunes of the coming battle from the circumstances of the cry. Intimidation or timidity depends on the intonation of the warriors; it seems to them to mean not so much unison of voices as union of hearts; the object they specially seek is a certain volume of hoarseness, a crashing roar, their shields being brought up to their lips, that the voice may swell to a fuller and deeper note by means of the echo.

In Maurice Hutton's translation cited above, the phrase *et fractum murmur* is interpreted as 'a crashing roar'. Rudolf Much suggests 'stoßweises Dröhnen' (Much 1959, 54). Tacitus thus seems to be referring to a form of chant similar to the battle cry used among the Cornuti and the Bracchiati in the battle at Strassburg in 357 AD, according to the Roman soldier and historian Ammianus Marcellinus (c. AD 330–400). Ammianus (*History*, Book XVI, ch. 43, 1950, 286–289) relates that these Germanic warriors intimidated their enemies both through a mighty battle cry, which *ipso fervore certaminum, a tenui susurro exoriens, paulatimque adulescens ritu extollitur fluctuum, cautibus illisorum* "rises from a low murmur and gradually grows louder, like waves dashing against the cliffs", and by the way they moved (*eos iam gestu terrentes*). Latin *gestus* has multiple meanings, 'bearing, gesture, dance', and it is thus likely that the daunting movements of the Germanic warriors involved intimidating postures or war dances of some kind (Speidel 2004, 115).

Such warlike movements and dances are known from other Roman sources as well. For example, Tacitus (*History*, Book V, ch. 17, 1931, 204–205) relates that on the eve of battle against a Roman army, the commander Civilis assured his warriors from the Germani and the Batavi that the indigenous gods were on their side, and he goaded them to remember the heroic deeds of their past kinsmen. *Ubi sono armorum tripudiisque (ita illis mos) adprobata sunt dicta, saxis glandibusque et ceteris missilibus proelium incipitur* "When the Germans had applauded these words with clashing arms and wild dancing according to their custom, they opened battle". Tacitus (*Annals*, Book IV, ch. 47) also informs us that some bold Germanic warriors were even performing songs and war dances outside their ramparts, both to incite their own party and to taunt the enemy (Tacitus 1937, 85). Likewise, Plutarch (c. AD 46–120) reports of a group of Germanic warriors from the Ambroni, who were encountered by a Roman troop while resting, eating, and drinking (*Gaius Marius* xix, 1920, 512–515):

τὰ μὲν οὖν σώματα πλησμονῇ βεβαρημένοι, τοῖς δὲ φρονήμασι γαῦροι καὶ διακεχυμένοι πρὸς τὸν ἄκρατον, οὐκ ἀτάκτοις οὐδὲ μανιώδεσι φερόμενοι δρόμοις οὐδὲ ἀναρθρον ἀλαλαγμὸν ἰέντες, ἀλλὰ κρούοντες ῥυθμῶ τὰ ὄπλα καὶ συναλλόμενοι πάντες ἅμα τὴν αὐτῶν ἐφθέγγοντο πολλακίς προσηγορίαν Ἄμβρωνες, εἴτε ἀνακαλούμενοι σφᾶς αὐτούς, εἴτε τοὺς πολεμίους τῇ προδηλώσει προεκφροῦντες.

However, though their bodies were surfeited and weighed down with food and their spirits excited and disordered with strong wine, they did not rush on in a disorderly or frantic course, nor raise an inarticulate battle-cry, but rhythmically clashing their arms and leaping to the sound they would frequently shout out all together their tribal name Ambrones, either to encourage one another, or to terrify their enemies in advance by the declaration.

According to Tacitus (*Germania*, ch. 24, 1914, 166–167), young, naked men even performed weapon dances at public celebrations and festivals.

Iconographic evidence from the Germanic Migration Period

War cries, chants, dance-steps and intimidating gestures and movements are also testified in Scandinavian sources (Hauck 1954, 40–49; Holmqvist 1960, 101–127; Chadwick Hawkes 1965, 17–23; Beck 1968, 237–252; Ringquist 1969, 287–296; Gunnell 1995, 60–76; Nedoma 2004, 606; Speidel 2004, 118–120). The earliest evidence is iconographical. For example, dancing men who are holding swords in their hands are depicted on two gilded silver cups dated to the third century AD, found in Himlingøje in Denmark (Nationalmuseet, genstandsnummer MCMXXXVI). Men performing weapon dances are also portrayed in the sketch of the smaller of the two now lost gold horns from Gallehus, Denmark, from the fifth century. A gold bracteate, found in Rugbjerg in Denmark, portraying a male figure dancing with weapons (Nationalmuseet, genstandsnummer C 36639), stems from the same period.

Other depictions of dancing warriors are testified on artefacts from the seventh and eighth centuries. For example, one of the die-impressed panel decorations on the helmet from boat grave 7 in Valsgärde (Uppland, Sweden), portrays two men in kaftans and horned helmets. The men are holding a spear in one hand and a sword in the other. Based on the men's postures, it has been suggested that they are in fact dancing (Arwidsson 1977, fig. 138; fig. 1). A variation on this motif is portrayed on several panels of the helmet from Sutton Hoo in England. On this plate, however, two additional spears are placed in a cross behind the two men (Chadwick Hawkes 1965, 20, fig. 2). Four dies for the manufacture of embossed sheets for helmets have been found in Tor-slunda, in the Swedish island province of Öland. On one of these, a man is dancing in front of what is probably a "wolf-warrior" (ON. *úlfeðinn*). He is wearing a horned helmet and a belt around his waist but is otherwise naked. He carries a sword in a strap over one shoulder and holds a spear in each hand. Since he seems to have only

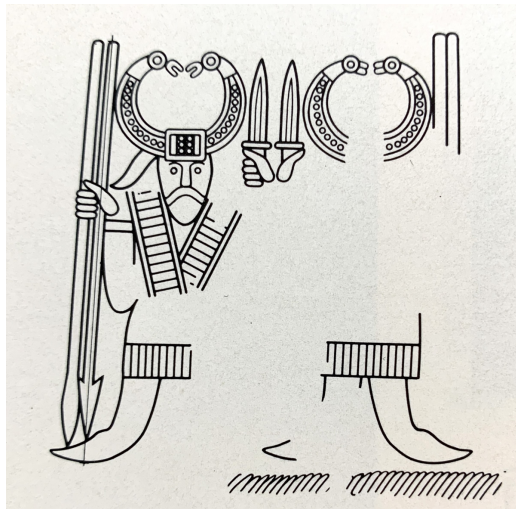


Figure 1. Dancing warriors, motif on a die-impressed panel from Valsgärde 7, Uppland, Sweden. (After Arwidsson 1977, fig. 138). Reproduced with permission.



Figure 2. Dies for the manufacture of embossed helmet panels from Torslunda, Öland, Sweden. (Photo: Statens Historiska Museer, Sweden. Reproduced under a Creative Commons-BY 2.5 license.)



Figure 3. A naked dancing warrior. Gilt bronze buckle from Finglesham, Kent, England. (Photo: Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.)

one eye, he is usually interpreted as Óðinn (fig. 2). A warrior with a spear in each hand is dancing between two wolf-warriors on a foil from Obrigheim in Baden-Württemberg, Germany (Paulsen 1967, fig. 71), and the motif is also reproduced on a belt buckle found in Finglesham, in Kent, England (fig. 3). Again, the man is naked but for a horned helmet and a belt. As many have pointed out, the curved posture of the warrior's legs indicates that he is dancing (Chadwick Hawkes 1965).

War dances are thus well documented in iconographic evidence from the Germanic Migration period. A war cry is for obvious reasons more difficult to reproduce in pictorial form, but nevertheless there are certain depictions which may portray warriors chanting into their shields. One such image is represented on one of the

additional die-impressed panel decorations on the helmet from Valsgärde 7. This plate portrays two warriors clad in kaftans and eagle-crested helmets. The men seem to be moving uniformly. Both carry spears in their right hand and shields in their left (Arwidsson 1977, fig. 115; fig. 4). The fact that the two warriors are holding up their shields close to their mouths, may indicate that they are indeed chanting into them (Speidel 2004, 12).



Figure 4. Warriors chanting into their shields, motif on helmet panel from Valsgärde 7, Uppland, Sweden (After: Arwidsson 1977, fig. 115). Reproduced with permission.

Confrontational Chants and Gestures in Viking-Age Depictions and Old Norse Texts

Figurative representations of men in horned helmets are also testified in the Viking Age, for example, in the form of small pendants found in Ekhammar in southern Uppland, and in Birka on the island of Björkö in Lake Mälaren, both in Sweden (Ringquist 1969, 287–296). The same motif is also reproduced in one section of the Norwegian Oseberg tapestry, dated to the early ninth century. The scene depicts a group of warriors behind a shield-wall. Four additional warriors are standing in front of the shielded war-host. Two of them wear horned helmets and hold what seem to be two spears in each hand. The other two are wearing what looks like boar skins and they are holding up their shields close to their mouths, as if they are singing into them (fig. 5).

In Old Norse myth, singing the war chant into the shield is explicitly associated with the god of war himself. In *Hávamál*, stanza 156 (Edda 1983, 43, ed. Neckel and Kuhn), Óðinn says (in Carolyne Larrington’s translation, Edda 2014, 34):

Þat kann ec iþ ellipta,
undir randir ec gel,
heilir hildar til,
koma þeir heilir hvaðan.

ef ec scal til orrosto leiða langvini:
enn þeir með ríki fara
heilir hildi frá,

I know an eleventh if I am to lead long-loyal friends into battle; under the shields I chant,
and they journey confidently, safely to the battle, safely from the battle, safely they come
back from everywhere.

Other mythic sources attribute even intimidating gestures and war cries to the gods. In the prologue to the Eddaic poem *Lokasenna*, for example, *scóco æsir scioldo sína oc æpþo at Loca* “the gods shook their shields and cried at Loki”, before chasing him away into the woods (Edda 1983, 96). This custom is also testified in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* (ch. 64). Egill met a man called Friðgeirr, who had been challenged to single combat by a berserk named Ljótr. Preparing for the battle, Ljótr *kom á hann berserkagangr, tók hann þá at grenja illiga ok beit í skjöld sinn* “went into the berserk’s rage and started to howl hideously and bite his shield”. Noticing the berserk’s great size and strength, Egill said that Friðgeirr did not seem to be much of a challenge for a warrior who bites the shield (*bitr skjöld*) and sacrifices to the gods. He then declared that he would fight in Friðgeirr’s place, drew his sword, and shook it (*skók sverðit*) at Ljótr (*Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, 1933, 202–204).

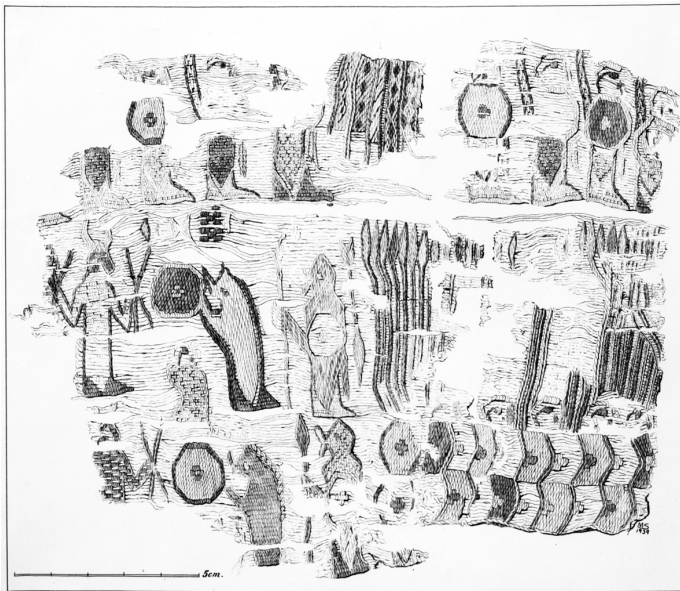


Figure 5. Weapon dancers and chanting warriors, depiction from the Oseberg tapestry, Norway. (Photo: Kulturhistorisk museum, Reproduced under a Creative Commons 4.0 BY-SA license)

From a perspective of the history of Norse literature, the Ljótr-episode is problematic, since there is much to suggest that this section is a Mediaeval interpolation (Poole 1991,

173–181). However, the forms of confrontational gestures, movements, and sounds attributed to Egill and the berserk are also testified in earlier sources. For example, in the skaldic poem *Haraldskvæði* from c. 900 AD, the poet Þórbjörn hornklofi gives a brief account of the Norwegian king Haraldr hárfagri's warband. According to Þórbjörn, the king's *berserkir* and *ulfheðnar* (groups of elite warriors who identified themselves with bears and wolves) prepared for battle by howling, bellowing (*grenja*, *emja*), and rattling (*dýja*) their weapons (ed. Fulk 2012a, 102).⁴ Since Haraldr hárfagri was the father of Hákon góði, it seems probable that Hákon too was familiar with these forms of warrior customs in one way or another.

Did Hákon góði Dance in Front of His Army before the Battle at Fitjar?

Hákon góði's death in the aftermath of the battle at Fitjar (c. 961) and his subsequent initiation among the heroes in Valhøll is portrayed in detail by Eyvindr skáldaspillir Finnsson (c. 916–990) in the praise poem *Hákonarmál*. In its first three stanzas, Eyvindr declares that valkyries caused the battle between the two armies in order to recruit the fallen warriors to Óðinn's *einherjar* (stanza 1); that Hákon was putting on a mail-shirt and a helmet while standing under his battle standard (stanza 2); that men from all of Norway had joined Hákon's army (stanza 3); and then, in stanza 4 (ed. Fulk 2012b, 178):

Hrauzk ór hervôðum	hratt á vøll brynju,
vísi verðungar	áðr til vígs tæki.
Lék við ljóðmøgu	— skyldi land verja —
gramr inn glaðværi;	stóð und gollhjalmi.

In Robert D. Fulk's edition, prose order, and translation, the first half of the stanza reads: *Vísi verðungar hrauzk ór [hervôðum], hratt brynju á vøll, áðr tæki til vígs* "The leader of the retinue [= Hákon] threw off his war-garments [= armour], cast his mail-shirt to the ground, before beginning the battle".

Why did Hákon first put on his helmet and armour, only to take the armour (but not his helmet) off again just before the beginning of the battle, and then – as seems to be indicated from stanzas 9 and 17 – put it on for the second time to wear it in the actual combat? Snorri offers no explanation in *Hákonar saga góða*, but according to the prose text preceding stanza 4 in *Fagrskinna* (1985, 88) Hákon took off his armour because it was a warm and sunny day. However, this seems to be a later rationalization. At least to me, Hákon's action rather creates associations with the weapon dancers portrayed in Roman sources and in iconographic depictions from the Germanic Migration period and the Viking Age. In some of the Roman testimonies, Germanic warriors danced without coats of arms, or even naked. The pictorial evidence clearly portrays some of the weapon dancers wearing helmets, but otherwise little armour or even clothes (see for example figs. 2-3). This parallels Hákon, who took off his armour but

⁴ The phrase reads *ok ísorn dúðu* 'and rattled iron'. The word *ísarn*, plural *ísorn* 'iron' may refer to 'spear' (Johansson 1991, 101–102; Fulk 2012a, 102), although a safer choice of translation would be 'weapons (with iron blades)' (Olsson 1919, 116; Finlay and Faulkes 2011, 67).

kept his helmet on. In addition, several of the written sources testify that war dances were often performed immediately before battle. What is more, as pointed out by Michael Speidel (2004, 117), the fact that weapon dancers are mostly depicted on expensive artefacts, of which some are even found in aristocratic warrior graves, suggests that war dances were performed by the leaders of the warbands and the armies. Did Hákon throw off his armour (but kept his helmet on) to perform a war dance or some form of martial ritual movements in front of his army before the actual combat began?

The second part of stanza 4, in Fulkr's prose order of words and translation, reads: *Inn glaðværi gramr lék við ljóðmøgu; skyldi verja land; stóð und gollhjalmi* "The cheerful ruler joked with his men; he had to protect the land; he stood under a golden helmet" (Fulk 2012b, 178). The phrase of special interest here is *lék við ljóðmøgu*. Fulkr's interpretation "joked with his men" is in line with most translations of this stanza. Contextually, it seems to rely on the prose text preceding stanza 4 in *Fagrskinna*, ch. 12. Here we are informed that in the eve of battle, Hákon *eggjar menn sína til framgöngu hlæjandi ok gladdi svá lið sitt með sínu yfirbragði blíðligu eptir því sem Eyvindr segir* "urged his men into the advance laughing, and so cheered his troop with his glad demeanour, according to what Eyvindr says [in *Hákonarmál* 4]" (Fagrskinna 1985, 88; translation by Alison Finley in Fagrskinna 2004, 67).

The verb *leika* has several meanings in Old Norse. One is 'to joke (with someone)', but these jokes are usually not in the positive sense 'to joke in a friendly way and encouragingly with someone', but in a negative meaning 'to fool someone, make fun of someone, mock someone', et cetera (see Cleasby and Vigfusson 1874 *leika* 2 "to delude, play a trick on"; Fritzner 1891, *leika* 5 "spøge, spotte, drive sit Spil med en, spille en et Puds"; Heggstad 1963, *leika* 4 "driva gjøn med, spotta, hava til narr (*e-n*); ogso: lura, svika"). This meaning cannot be the case in *Hákonarmál* 4.⁵ If the explanation given in the prose text in *Fagrskinna* is to be accepted, a more suitable meaning of *leika* in stanza 4 may be 'to engage in an entertaining or rivalrous dealing, social gathering with someone', of which Johan Fritzner offers two proofs in his second and greatly enlarged edition of *Ordbog over det gamle norske sprog* (Fritzner 1891, *leika* við 1 "indlade sig i et underholdende eller rivaliserende Mellemværende, Samkvæm med nogen"). However, both of these cases stem from late Icelandic translations of high medieval European literature in French and Latin, which may have influenced the usage of the word in this specific meaning.

Is there another possibility? The verb *leika* is derived from the noun m. *leikr*. This word had a wide range of meanings in Old Norse, such as 'play', 'sport', 'combat', et

⁵ In *Lexicon Poeticum* Finnur Jónsson (1913–16, 366, *leika* 2.1) acknowledges only one parallel to the phrase *leika við (e-n)* in *Hákm.* 4, in the meaning 'to play with, to joke with'. However, in my opinion this proof too must be understood in its negative sense 'to delude (someone)', et cetera. In the Eddaic poem *Hárbarðzlióð*, stanza 30, Óðinn boasts that he *lék við* a linen-white maiden and gave her pleasure during a secret meeting (Edda 1983, 83). When Óðinn courts and seduces maidens in mythic narratives, he always uses them for his own needs, and then betrays them (compare Neckel 1936, 103 "ich trieb mein spiel mit d. mädchen"; La Farge and Tucker 1992, 158 "I played fast and loose with the linen-white girl").

cetera. However, it also appears frequently in contexts best understood as ‘ritual’, ‘dance’, ‘acrobatic movement’, and ‘drama’. From an abundance of examples, moreover, Terry Gunnell argues convincingly that these latter meanings must have been most significant (Gunnell 1995, 24–92). Similar denotations are also testified in the meanings of the verb *leika*. For example, Finnur Jonsson offers the following explanation of *leika*: “to play, to move from side to side, or back and forth, or up and down (but not in one direction only), hence the meaning ‘to dance’ in other Germanic languages” (“lege, bevæge sig (vistnok altid til siderne eller frem og tilbage, op eller ned, men ikke i lige retning fremad, deraf betydn. ‘danse’ i andre germanske sprog”, *Lexicon Poeticum*, 1913–16, 365). Among the many meanings listed by Fritznér, we find “to move oneself around” (“bevæge sig, være i Bevægelse, røre sig”), as well as “to dance”, although in the latter case all proofs stem from high medieval Christian literature only (Fritznér 1891, *leika* 7, 8). Similarly, Cleasby and Vigfusson lists “to perform” (1874 *leika* 2), and Heggstad introduces the word with the general explanation “to play, move, dance, swing” (“leika, spela, svinga seg, røra seg, dansa”; 1963, 411).

Would a meaning “to perform, to move oneself around from side to side, or back and forth, to dance”, et cetera, make sense even in *Hákonarmál* 4? Heinrich Beck has pointed out that there is a strong association between battle, war dance, and the Proto-Germanic word *laikaz* and later cognates in Germanic languages (Beck 1968, 244–247). Perhaps such an association exists in *Hákonarmál* 4 as well. The scene would then be as follows: Before the battle, Hákon threw off his armour (but kept his helmet on), and *lék við ljóðmøgu*, that is, he performed certain combative ritualised movements, gestures and dance steps in front of the army to encourage his men – similar to how Germanic warriors performed their Lat. *gestus* ‘bearing, posture, gesture, dance’ for inspiration and to put fear in the enemy.

So, What Did Hákon góði Do After the Battle at Avaldsnes?

At the battle at Avaldsnes, Hákon góði clashed spears together over the heads of the slain warriors on the battlefield – at least if we are to believe stanza 6 in *Hákonardrápa*. Hákon’s act is mentioned only briefly in the poem, which indicates that its author Guthormr sindri expected his audience to elicit a much broader understanding from this one essential *pars pro toto* detail.

Since shaking and clashing weapons and shields together formed parts of the intimidating bearings and movements performed by continental Germanic and Scandinavian warriors, and since such martial rituals were performed both before battle to strengthen courage and to intimidate the enemy, and after battles to celebrate victory (Hauck 1954, 43; Speidel 2004, 115), it seems reasonable to view Hákon’s action within this contextual framework. In my view, clashing spears together over the dead bodies on the battlefield, may have been part of a martial ritual to celebrate victory.

And, Maybe Something More?

From a wide group of sources stemming from the Roman Iron Age and later, it is evident that the sacrifice of weapons, defeated warriors, or even entire armies, to the god

of war played a vital part in Germanic warrior religion. Archaeological evidence and written sources suggest that such customs existed in Scandinavia well into the Viking Age (see Wikström af Edholm 2020, 146–246 with references). In skaldic poetry, some poets even seem to symbolically, or explicitly, equate the actual slaying on the battlefields to a sacrificial act. The slashing, piercing, cutting, stabbing, hacking and murdering in combat are sometimes portrayed with pre-Christian sacrificial terminology, such as *gefa* ‘to give, to offer (a gift to the god)’, *senda* ‘to send, to transmit (the sacrifice to the god)’, *gjalda* ‘to pay (with an offering in return for something)’, and so forth (I. Beck 1967, 120–125; Näsström 1999, 161–162; Nordberg 2003, 121–148). In Þórbjörn hornklofi’s praise poem *Haraldskvæði*, stanza 12, this same idea is introduced by the term *vitinn* ‘dedicated’ (ed. Fulk 2012a, 107):

‘Valr lá þar á sandi	vitinn inum eineygja
Friggjar faðmbyggvi	fögnuðum dôð slíkri.

‘The slain lay there on the sand, dedicated to the one-eyed embrace-occupier of Frigg [= Óðinn]; we welcomed such doings.

It is of course possible that Þórbjörn hornklofi expresses no more than the idea that the warriors who had been slain by Haraldr were to join Óðinn in the afterlife. On the other hand, the word *vitinn* ‘dedicated’ indicates something more. A dedication involves an active agent. For the slain to be dedicated to Óðinn, someone must perform the dedication. In *Haraldskvæði*, this agent is Hákon góði’s father, Haraldr hárfagri. Unfortunately, the stanza does not mention exactly how Haraldr conducted the dedication, but similar forms of martial rituals are known from other sources (see Kuhn 1978, 247–258). For example, several Old Norse texts relate of warriors who verbally dedicated enemies to Óðinn as they ritually threw a spear towards them on the eve of battle (see Nordberg 2003, 107–112, with references). Other sources account of aged warriors, who rather than dying from infirmity of old age had themselves killed by a spear (or a sword) as a sacrifice to Óðinn (see Nordberg 2002, 20–22 and 2003, 275–283; Wikström af Edholm 2020, 214–222, with references).

Were similar ritual dedications performed after battles too? A motif on a picture stone from Tjängvide (I) in Alskog parish, in the Swedish island province of Gotland, dated to the eighth or ninth century, may indicate this. Its main scene portrays a mounted warrior on an eight-legged horse (Sleipnir?), who is welcomed to a hall building (Valhöll?) by a lady who is offering him a mead horn (a valkyrie?). Above the mounted warrior is another scene, which may well refer to an earlier sequence of the drama. This area of the stone is somewhat damaged, but the motif seems to portray a man who is leaning or swaying sharply over a fallen warrior, while holding or waving a spear above him (fig. 6).⁶ The acrobatic posture of the swaying man also appears among the motifs on a picture stone from Ardre (VIII), as well as on much older pictorial art. As has been persuasively argued by Gunnell (1995, 38–39), the posture most likely mirrors a ritual dance or performance of some sort.

⁶ In his high-resolution photogrammetry analyses of the Gotlandic picture stones, Sigmund Oehrl confirms the presence of the spear on Tjängvide I (vol. 2, pl. 188–194, NB fig. 192a-c).



Figure 6. Picture stone (G-110) from Tjängvide, Alskog parish, Gotland, Sweden. (Photo: Historiska museet, Sweden. Reproduced under a Creative Commons BY 2.5 license.)

If the fallen warrior in the upper scene on Tjängvide I is identical to the man who arrives to Valhöll (?) in the lower scene, this pictorial composition parallels the narrative in *Hákonarmál* (and *Eiríksmál*), where Hákon góði (and Eiríkr blóðøx) is killed in battle, travels on horseback between the cosmic worlds, and is welcomed to Valhöll. But if this is correct, what part does the man with the spear in the upper scene on the picture stone play in this narrative? He is holding or waving his spear over the fallen warrior. This reminds us of Hákon góði, who, according to *Hákonardrápa*, clashed his spears together over the slain warriors after the battle at Avaldsnes.⁷ Why are they doing this? To conclude this essay, I will offer an interpretation, as hypothetical as it may be: I

⁷ One additional detail, which is most likely a coincidence but is still worth pointing out here, is that the man with the spear on Tjängvide I is actually leaning over the dead man's head, while Guthormr sindri says explicitly that Hákon góði clashes his spears together over the heads of the slain warriors.

suggest that what we are offered a glimpse of here is a part of a martial ritual to celebrate victory in battle, and to dedicate the slain warriors to Óðinn.

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