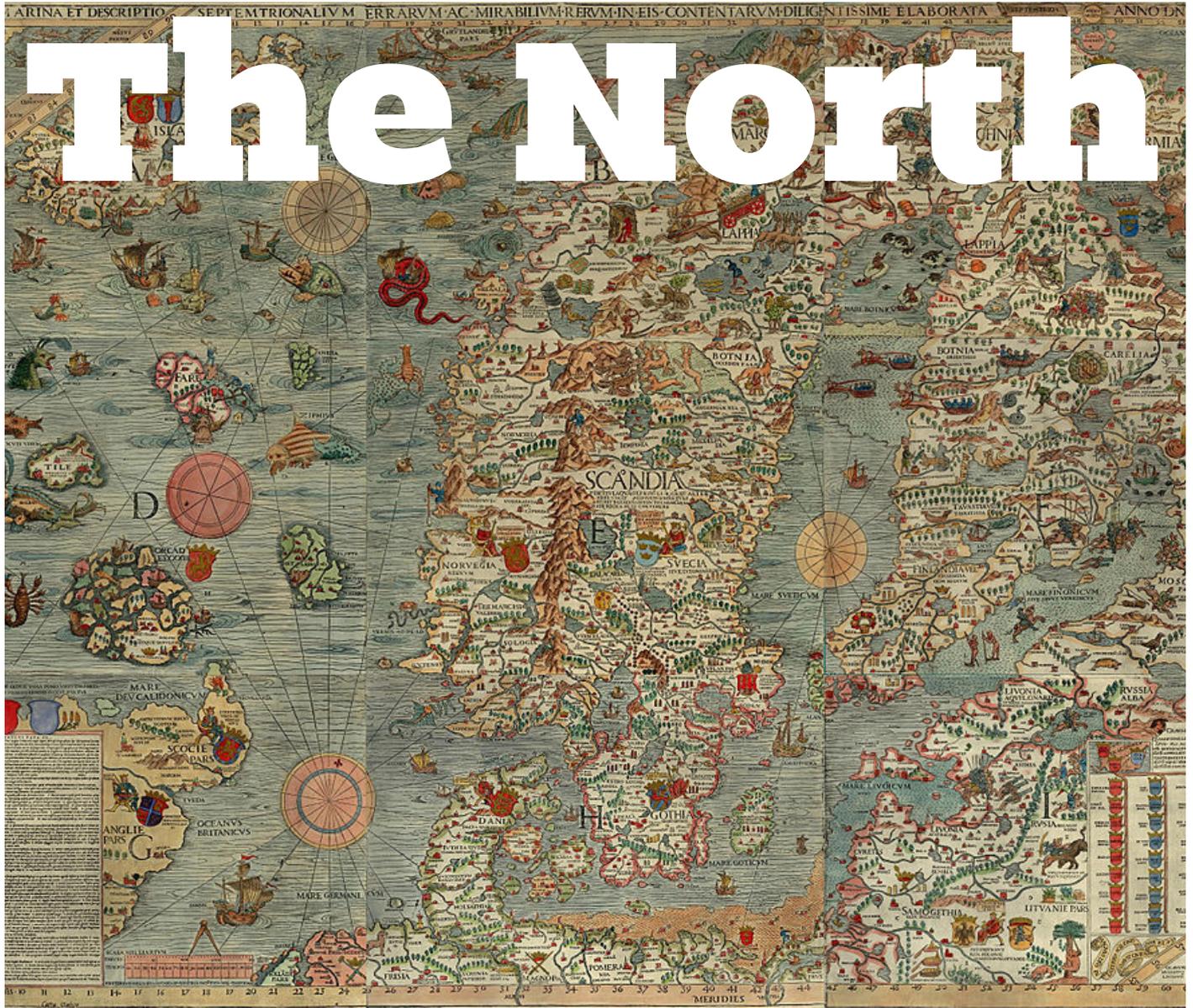


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Taking a look how medieval people were strapping on skates and taking a twirl (or a tumble!) on the ice.



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## Five Medieval Games to Get You Through Long Winter Nights

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Medieval News

# Viking Hoard discovered in England



**A selection of items in the Watlington Hoard after examination work. Photo courtesy the Trustees of the British Museum**

Over 200 items from a Viking hoard has been discovered in England. Uncovered near Watlington, Oxfordshire, the hoard dates from the time of the 'last kingdom', when the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of Mercia and Wessex were fighting for their survival from the threat of a 'Great Heathen Army', a fight which was to lead to the unification of England. The hoard dates from the time of the 'last kingdom', when the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of Mercia and Wessex were fighting for their survival from the threat of a 'Great Heathen Army', a fight which was to lead to the unification of England.

The find includes rare coins of King Alfred 'the Great' of Wessex (r.871-99) and King Ceolwulf II of Mercia (874-79), as well as Viking arm-rings and silver ingots, and is said by archaeologists to be nationally significant. The hoard was found at Watlington by James Mather, a metal-detectorist, and excavated by the Portable Antiquities Scheme. The find was block-lifted and brought to the British Museum where the soil-block was excavated in the lab, and the finds studied by experts from the Ashmolean and British Museums. The hoard consists of 186 coins (some fragmentary), 7 items of jewellery and 15 ingots.

The hoard was buried around the end of the 870s, in the period following Alfred's decisive defeat of the Vikings at Edington in 878. Following their defeat, the Vikings moved north of the Thames and travelled to East Anglia through the kingdom of Mercia. It seems likely that the hoard was buried in the course of these events, although the precise circumstances will never be known.

James Mather, the finder of the hoard, explained that "discovering this exceptional hoard has been a really great experience and helping excavate it with archaeologists from the PAS on my 60th birthday was the icing on the cake! It highlights how responsible metal detecting, supportive landowners and the PAS contribute to national archaeological heritage. I hope these amazing artefacts can be displayed by a local museum to be enjoyed by generations to come."

Gareth Williams, Curator of Early Medieval Coinage for British Museum, added "the hoard comes from a key moment in English history. At around the same time, Alfred of Wessex decisively defeated the Vikings, and Ceolwulf II, the last king of Mercia quietly disappeared from the historical record in uncertain circumstances. Alfred and his successors then forged a new kingdom of England by taking control of Mercia, before conquering the regions controlled by the

Vikings. This hoard has the potential to provide important new information on relations between Mercia and Wessex at the beginning of that process."

If the Watlington Hoard is declared Treasure, the Ashmolean Museum and Oxfordshire Museums Service will be working in partnership with others, and potential funders, to try to ensure that this important find can be displayed for local people to learn about and enjoy.

The announcement of the discovery was made during the release of the Portable Antiquities Scheme's annual Treasure report. The report noted that 113,784 archaeological finds have been recorded by the Portable Antiquities Scheme in 2014.

Ed Vaizey, Great Britain's Minister of State for Culture and the Digital Economy, commented "Fascinating finds like this Viking hoard are a great example of the 1 million discoveries that have been unearthed by the public since 1997. Sharing these archaeological treasures with the country means protecting them for future generations to learn more about our nation's rich and complex past."

If a find is declared a treasure, arrangements are made for the items to be bought by museums, including the British Museum.

Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum, added, "The publication of the latest Portable Antiquities Scheme and Treasure annual reports highlight the ongoing contribution of finds discovered by the public to our understanding of Britain's past. Supported by the British Museum and its national and local partners, many of the most important finds from England and Wales have been acquired by local museums and displayed for people to learn about and enjoy through the Portable Antiquities Scheme. "

# Massive Earthquakes struck medieval Nepal, study finds



Nepal - Photo by Mike Behnken / Flickr

Pokhara, the second largest town of Nepal, has been built on massive debris deposits, which are associated with strong medieval earthquakes. Three strong quakes, in 1100, 1255 and 1344, with magnitudes of around Mw 8 triggered large-scale collapses, mass wasting and initiated the redistribution of material by catastrophic debris flows on the mountain range. An international team of scientists led by the University of Potsdam has discovered that these flows of gravel, rocks and sand have poured over a distance of more than 60 kilometers from the high mountain peaks of the Annapurna massif downstream.

Christoff Andermann from the GFZ German Research Centre for Geosciences in Potsdam participated in the study, published now in the Science magazine. "We have dated the lake sediments in the dammed tributary valleys using  $^{14}\text{C}$  radiocarbon. The

measured ages of the sediment depositions coincide with the timing of documented large earthquakes in the region".

One big boulder, situated on top of the sediment depositions, has raised the interest of the scientists: "The boulder has a diameter of almost ten meters and weighs around 300 tons. At the top of the boulder we measured the concentration of a Beryllium isotope which is produced by cosmogenic radiation." This  $^{10}\text{Be}$  chemical extraction was carried out in the isotope laboratory at the GFZ in Potsdam and was measured with the accelerator mass spectrometer at the Helmholtz-Zentrum Dresden-Rossendorf, Germany. The results show that the deposition of the big boulder matches the timing of another large earthquake from 1681. Pokhara lies at the foot of the more than 8000 meters high Annapurna massif; whether the big boulder was transported

during the last dated earthquake with the debris, or was just toppled by the strong shaking needs to be further investigated. Nevertheless, the movement of the big boulder can be connected to this strong earthquake.

This research has several important implications reaching beyond fundamental earth sciences. The study provides new

insights into the mobilization and volumes of transported material associated with strong earthquakes. Dating of such sediment bodies provides information about the reoccurrence intervals of earthquakes in the Himalayas, and ultimately demonstrates the role of earthquakes in shaping high mountain landscapes. This knowledge is crucial to better evaluate the risks in tectonically active mountain belts.

# Early Medieval Hebrew inscription discovered at the Sea of Galilee



Early Medieval Engraving - photo by Jennifer Munro / University of Haifa

Excavations at the Kursi site on the shores of the Sea of Galilee in Israel have uncovered an inscription in Hebrew letters engraved on a large marble slab, dating back to about the year 500 AD.

The marble slab was made from a single piece with dimensions of 140 cm by 70 cm, and bears an engraving written in the Aramaic language in Hebrew letters. Researchers from the University of Haifa have already

managed to decipher two words from the inscription: "amen" and the word "marmaria." This latter word is probably the word for "marble," although some scholars suggest that it could refer to Maria's great Rabbi, as 'mar' means Rabbi.

Additional archeological findings at the site include earthenware vessels and an earthenware oil lamp featuring fish, as well as another ceramic oil lamp featuring a ship.

# Arctic encounters between Norse and Natives

Contact between the Norse and Native peoples in Canada's Arctic was more extensive and earlier than first believed, according to recent archaeological evidence. The research of Dr. Patricia Sutherland has revealed that Europeans and North Americans had "more complex and interesting relationships that existed over a longer period of time."

Historians have already made use of Icelandic sagas and archaeological evidence to show that the Norse established a settlement of up to 2000 people in Greenland, and explored into Newfoundland and the Gulf of St. Lawrence region. In Greenland itself, the people survived by raising livestock and hunting walrus. The ivory from walruses was the main trading good for Greenlanders with the rest of Europe.

Sutherland, who helped establish the **Helluland Archaeology Project**, has found evidence of a Norse presence on Baffin Island and in northern Labrador, an area that the Norse called Helluland for its barren and bleak appearance. The archaeological evidence suggests that the Norse established trading outposts with the Dorset Eskimos, a people that lived in the western part of Canada's Arctic.

Furthermore, this contact seems to have existed prior to the Norse settlement of Greenland around the year 1000. This relationship continued on until the 13th and perhaps 14th centuries, when the Dorset peoples died out. It was also around this time

that another native group, the Inuit, moved into the Baffin Island area – they seemed to have had a more antagonistic relationship with the Norse, using piracy to capture Norse boats.

Archaeological finds from Baffin Island and Labrador include:

1. many pieces of cordage – spun wool made from Arctic hare, fox, and dog – the Dorset people did not make clothing in this way
2. pieces of wood, including white pine, which date back to the 13th century and have evidence of once having iron nails in them.
3. distinctive rectangular whetstones made in the same fashion as those in Greenland and northern Europe
4. smelted metals such as iron, tin, brass and bronze
5. a spade made from whale bone
6. small notched tally sticks, which are used in counting and recording trade transactions by the Norse
7. the remains of a building on Baffin Island that had straight walls made of boulders and turf and which had a drainage feature. This building also had rat remains, an animal which could have only come from Europe



**Satellite image of Baffin Island in Canada**

Sutherland believes that the Norse probably established shore stations on Baffin Island where they could hunt and trade for a short time before returning to Greenland, which two days away by sail. Sutherland notes that desire to gain ivory was the motivation for the Norse to trade with the Dorset: "Hunting walrus was dangerous business. If you could get someone to do it for you, you would."

There have also been archaeological finds from the Dorset peoples that includes artwork which depict European faces and a Norse pot which dates from the 13th century.

By the thirteenth-century the Inuit peoples had spread throughout large parts of the Arctic, including Ellesmere Island (Canada's most northerly island). There have been many finds of medieval European goods among the Inuit – including chainmail, parts of boats, a carpenter's tool, a gaming piece and a piece of a bronze weighing balance. While some of these goods may have come

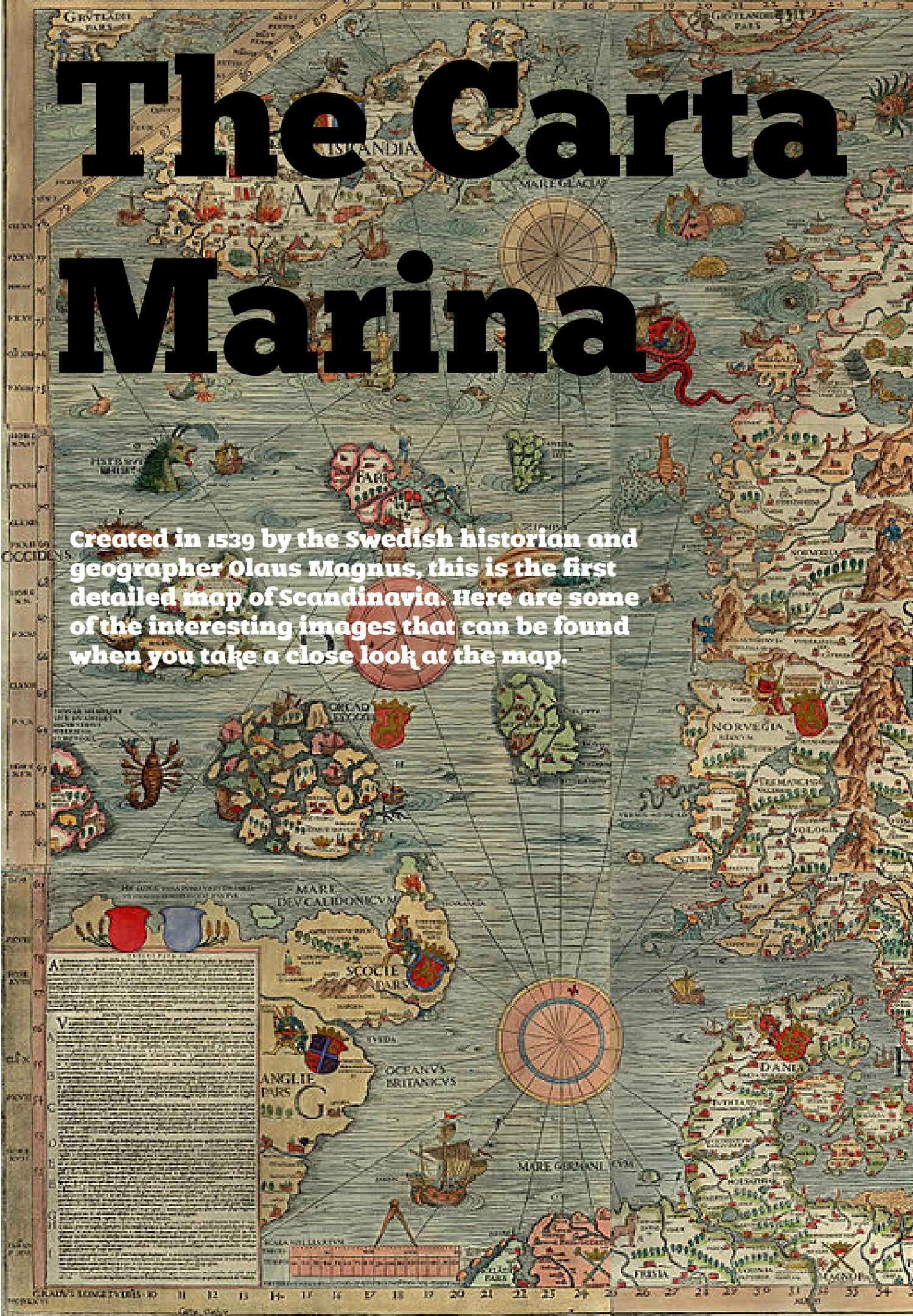
from trade or piracy, Sutherland speculates that there might have been a shipwreck of a Norse vessel from the 13th century that left the Inuit with many of these artefacts.

Sutherland, who is an Adjunct Professor in Carleton and Memorial Universities, and a Research Fellow in the University of Aberdeen, asserts that Norse and Native contact lasted hundreds of years, but after the year 1300 this relationship declined as both the Dorset peoples and the Norse in Greenland disappearing by the end of the Middle Ages.

Her most recent article, "Evidence of Early Metalworking in Arctic Canada" was published earlier this year in the journal *Geoarchaeology*. [Click here to read the article.](#)

# The Carta Marina

Created in 1539 by the Swedish historian and geographer Olaus Magnus, this is the first detailed map of Scandinavia. Here are some of the interesting images that can be found when you take a close look at the map.



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This scene shows the location of magnetic north, described as "Insula Magnetu", which means "Island of Magnets". Meanwhile, the man holding the rune staffs is the mythological Norse hero Starkad.

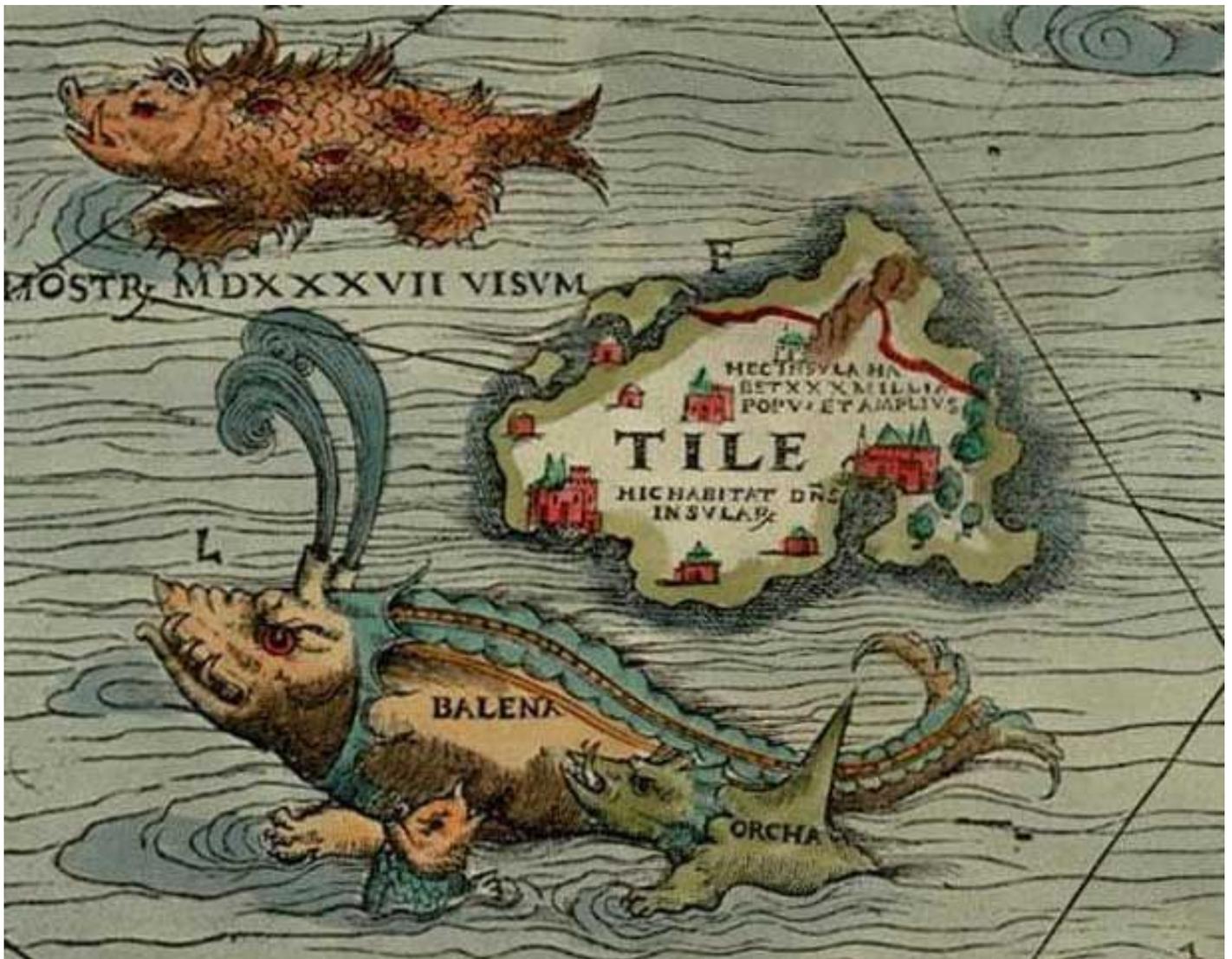


In this scene a woman is milking a reindeer.





The map shows the Swedish city of Stockholm, which by the end of the 16th century has a population of 10,000.



As late as the 19th century it was believed that an island called Thule existed somewhere in the North Atlantic.



Denmark



The map even includes a corner of England - here it shows the city of London, erroneously placing it at the mouth of the Thames River by the sea.



Almost in the middle of the map Olaus Magnus quoted Pliny's and Procopius's texts telling us that Scandia was a whole world in itself, ten times as large as Britain and containing thirteen kingdoms. Under the text King Gustavus, most mighty king of Swedes and Goths enthroned, and the coat of arms of Sweden.

Isidore of Seville on...

# The seasons of the year

Isidore of Seville's, 7th-century work *Etymologiae*, even covers some games and sports. Here is what he writes about the seasons of the year:

There are four seasons of the year: spring, summer, fall, and winter. They are called seasons (*tempus*) from the 'balance of qualities' (*temperamentum*) that each shares, because each in turn blends (*temperare*) for itself the qualities of moisture, dryness, heat, and cold. The seasons are also called circuits (*curriculum*) because they do not stand still, but 'run a course' (*currere*). Further, it is clear that after the world was made the seasons were divided into groups of three months because of the nature of the sun's course. The ancients divided each season, so that in its first month spring is called 'new,' in its second 'mature,' and in its third 'declining.' So in its three months summer is new, mature, declining; likewise the new, mature, and declining fall, and the new, mature, and declining or 'extreme' winter. Hence the verse (cf. Vergil, *Geo.* 1.340):

*At the setting of extreme winter.*

Spring (*ver*) is so called because it 'is green' (*virere*), for then, after winter, the earth is clothed with plants and everything bursts into flower. Summer (*aestas*) takes its name from *aestus*, that is, "heat"; also *aestas* as if it were 'burnt' (*ustus*), that is, 'burned out' (*exustus*) and arid, for heat is arid. Fall (*autumnus*) is so called from the season when the leaves of the trees fall and everything ripens. The condition of the celestial hemisphere (*hemisphaerium*) gave its name to winter (*hiems*), because at that time the sun wheels in a shorter course. Hence this season is also called *bruma*, as if it were, that is, short (*brevis*). Or the name 'winter' is from food, because at that time there is a greater appetite for eating, for 'voracity' in Greek is called *W* (lit. "food") – hence also a person who is squeamish about food is called *inbrumarius*. The 'hibernal' (*hibernus*) time is between winter and spring, as if it were *hievernus*; this commonly signifies "winter," giving the name of its part to the whole season.

***The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*** has been edited and translated by Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach and Oliver Berghof, and was published by Cambridge University Press in 2006

**Click here to visit the Publisher's website for more details**

# **Ten Icelandic Sagas you may not have heard of**

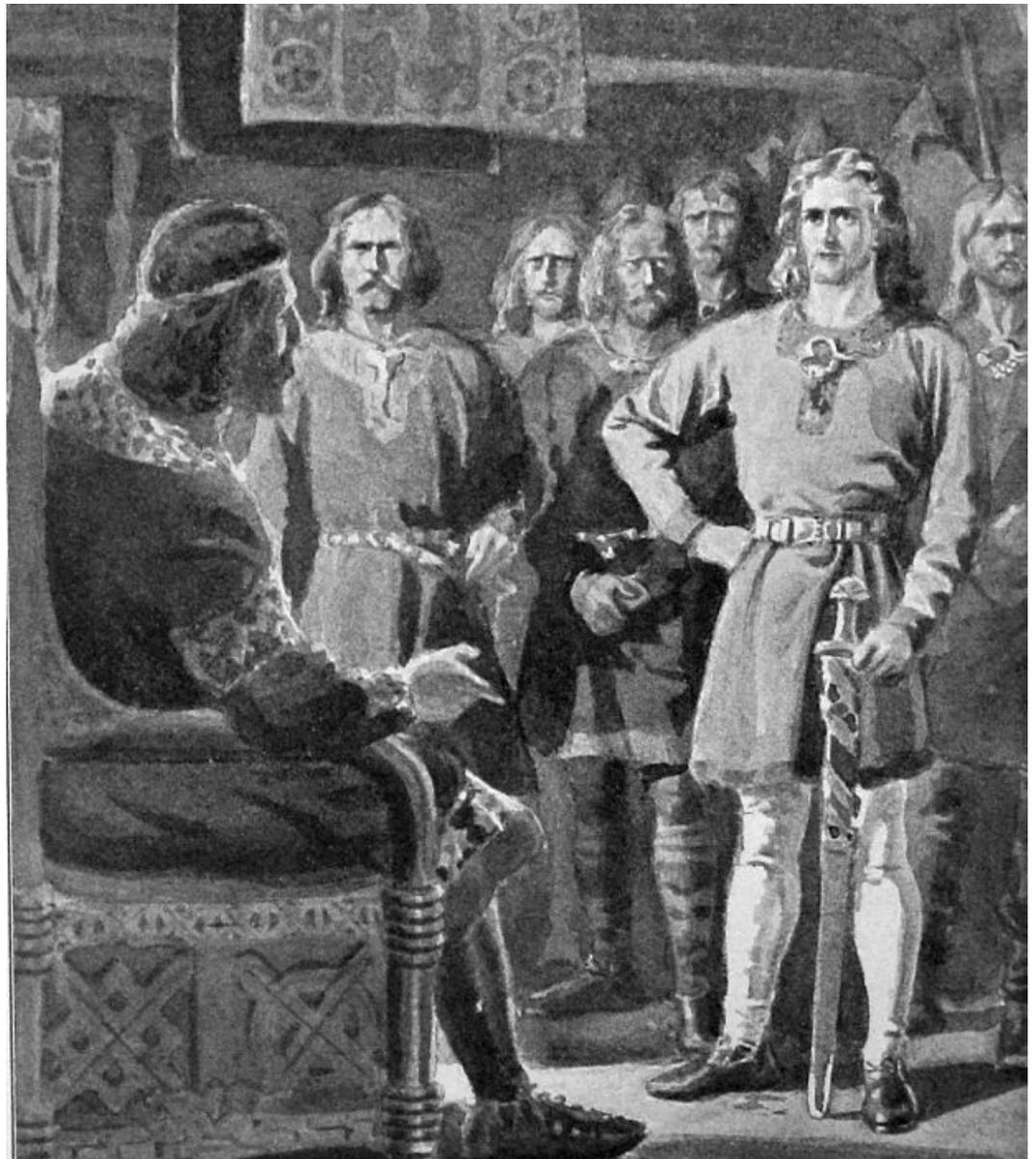
Some of the richest and most interesting writings from medieval Europe come from one of its furthest corners: during the 13th and 14th century Icelanders began to write down the stories they had collected orally from previous centuries. These sagas would cover events in Iceland and elsewhere, going back to the days when the island was first discovered and settled back in the ninth century. They are stories of family feuds, outlaws and the occasional monster lurking somewhere the uninhabited stretches of the Iceland.

Many readers will know some of these Icelandic sagas, such as Egil's Saga or Njal's Saga, but the Icelandic writers penned dozens of these stories. Here are ten sagas that you may not have heard of, but offer a fascinating tale. All of these works are available in an English translation, but it maybe difficult to find a copy:

## **1. The Saga of Finnbogi the Strong**

It follows the adventures of Finnbogi Asbjornson, a 10th century Icelander known for his great strength. It doesn't look good for Finnbogi when his birth mother decides to abandon him shortly after he is born, but another family rescues the infant and raises him. As a child he begins to show his great strength – when Finnbogi 12 he breaks the neck of a bull, and a few years later he takes on a bear and breaks his back. In some ways the story is like Egil's Saga, as Finnbogi faces various challenges in Iceland and Norway.

**Illustration from  
an 1898 edition  
of The Saga Of  
Gunnlaugur  
Snake's Tongue**



## **2. The Saga Of Gunnlaugur Snake's Tongue**

A classic love-triangle tale, where two men love the same woman. Being Icelanders they decide to settle it by a duel to the death.

## **3. Audun's Story**

A poor farmhand in Greenland decides to buy a polar bear and goes a journey to give it to the King of Denmark. It was recently translated by William Ian Miller and **we interviewed him about the story.**

## **4. Magnus' Saga**

A short account of the life of St. Magnus, Earl of Orkney (1075-1116). Magnus is one of two earls who share rule over the Orkney Islands, but discord between them leads to battle, where Magnus is captured and executed. But that is the only the start of his story, as we read of the miracles performed by Magnus as he is declared a saint. There is also a longer account of his life.

## 5. Viga-Glums Saga

A struggle for power set in tenth-century Iceland, it features a ruthless chieftain named Glum who is determined to get his way, by legal means or by force. You can read a 19th century translation of this saga from the **Icelandic Saga Database**.

## 6. Heidarviga Saga

Most of this story involves Bardi Gudmundson and the feud he has that gets more violent and leads to a bloody battle taking place on a moor in 1018. You can read a 19th century translation of 'The Story of the Heath-Slayings' from the **Online Medieval and Classical Library**.

## 7. The Saga of the Confederates

A kind of comedy saga, this story set in eleventh-century follows Odd and his father Ofeig. While Odd goes into business and becomes wealthy, his father remains a poor farmer. But when the eight most powerful chieftains of Iceland come together in a confederacy so they can legally outlaw Odd and take his wealth for themselves, it is Dad who comes to the rescue, using his wits to get his son out of trouble. You can learn more about the saga from the thesis **The Saga of the Confederates: Historical Truth in an Icelandic Saga**.

## 8. Gongu-Hrolfs Saga

A romantic saga, where a Russian princess is doomed to marry the man who killed her father unless a young Norwegian warrior can rescue her. This story has everything – sorcerers, demons, dwarves and legs that are cut off and sewn back on! And yes, he gets the girl. Read more about it in **History or fiction? Truth-claims and defensive narrators in Icelandic romance-sagas**.

## 9. Svarfdale Saga

Set first in Norway and Sweden, and then the Svardsdale region of Iceland, it follows three generations of a family who have feuds and need to gain revenge for the wrongs done to them. Similar to other family sagas, historians haven't been particularly interested in this work as it lacks the style found in works like Njal's Saga. You can read some of the proverbs and quotes from **this saga** at this site, including lines like: "Someone who loses his gloves cannot be happy even if he gets another pair."

## 10. The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki

A mythic saga, it is the story of King Hrolf, the ruler of Denmark from the 6th century AD. Similar to Beowulf, this story has wizards, berserkers and several interesting female characters. Learn more and read some excerpts from the saga from **The Viking Site** by Jesse L. Byock.

# Outlaws, trolls and berserkers: meet the hero-monsters of the Icelandic sagas

By Rebecca Merkelbach

"I've come to kill your monster!" exclaims Beowulf in the 2007 film version of the epic poem. But how do his suspicious Danish hosts know that this monstrously huge stranger is actually a hero searching for glory? And, by the same token, how do modern audiences with no prior knowledge of the Marvelverse know that the Incredible Hulk is a "good guy"? At least readers of the Icelandic sagas had an advantage: they were used to their heroes being monsters – at least part of the time.

Iceland's medieval literature is rich in many regards: in **Eddas** and sagas, it tells us about early Scandinavia and its expanding world-view, ranging from the mythology of the North, the legends and heroes of the migration age, the Viking voyages and the settlement of Iceland all the way through to the coming of Christianity and the formation of kingdoms in Scandinavia.

It also tell us about monsters – for the literature of medieval Iceland is also rich in the paranormal. In mythology, gods and men fight against giants. In the sagas, humans battle the forces of disorder, the trolls and revenants – think a cross between a vampire and a zombie – that inhabit the wild

mountains and highlands of Norway and Iceland. Or at least that is what, on the surface, appears to happen.

## Trolls won't always be trolls

Monstrosity, however, is never clear-cut. Because of their hybrid nature, monsters cannot easily be categorised – instead, they demand to be approached and read in a more nuanced way. Such a reading will soon lead to the realisation that not all monsters are created equal, that they do not all pose the same threat. For trolls are not always trolls.



**Grettir depicted  
in this  
illustration from  
a 17th century  
Icelandic  
manuscript**

In fact, the word “troll”, which we now understand to denote some kind of mountain-dwelling ogre, was used for a number of different kinds of figures: witches, the undead, berserkers, but also people who were larger or stronger or uglier than ordinary humans. Which leads us to the monstrous heroes of the medieval Icelandic family sagas, or *Íslendingasögur*.

### **Half monster, half hero**

In these texts, we encounter characters that

are both troll-like monster and human hero – that both threaten and defend society and that therefore draw our attention to the fact that the boundary between monstrosity and heroism is not only thin but also regularly crossed.

While some of the creatures that are referred to as “trolls” – especially revenants, but also witches and even berserkers – are unequivocally monstrous, the characters that occupy the most ambiguous position suspended between monstrosity and

heroism is not only thin but also regularly crossed.

While some of the creatures that are referred to as “trolls” – especially revenants, but also witches and even berserkers – are unequivocally monstrous, the characters that occupy the most ambiguous position suspended between monstrosity and heroism are outlaws. These, however, are also the characters that have captured the Icelandic imagination the most: there are three sagas that scholars agree to be major outlaw stories, the sagas of **Grettir Ásmundarson**, **Gísli Súrsson**, and **Hörðr Grímkelsson**.

There are also some sagas that draw on similar narrative motifs to tell the story of men who are outlawed for at least parts of their lives, like the **saga of the Sworn Brothers** (*Fóstbræðra saga*) or the **saga of the people of Kjalarnes** (*Kjalnesinga saga*). All of these marginal heroes border not only on society, but also on that which one encounters when one leaves the social spaces behind: the monstrous.

This has less to do with their physical location in the “wild”, and more with the way they interact with society: when Hörðr goes raiding with his outlaw band, he becomes a threat to the local community. And such a threat to economic growth and social stability has to be removed. However, if these characters were only threatening, only monstrous, they would not have their own sagas. They are not only monsters: they are also heroes, defenders of the society they themselves threaten.

## **Fringe dwellers**

The story of Grettir “the Strong” Ásmundarson is a particularly interesting example of this. In the 19 years Grettir spends as an outlaw both in Norway and Iceland, he constantly moves back and forth between human society and isolation as a “monster”, never fully belonging to either. When he steals from the

local farmers or simply sits on their property and refuses to let go, he becomes a monster in the eyes of society. But when he fights against trolls and revenants, performing tasks no one else would be able to perform, he becomes a guardian of the medieval Icelandic galaxy that consists of farms and sheep.

In this duality, Grettir and Hörðr and other strong, troll-like men, are not too dissimilar from the monstrous heroes of the present day. Bruce Banner has clear anger management issues, but when he transforms into the Hulk, his strength enables him to perform amazing feats of heroism in defence of society. But the dual nature of his character can also make him turn against his friends and allies, just as Hörðr turns against his family when he wants to burn his own sister in her house.

This fluid continuity between monstrosity and heroism has been explored extensively in medieval literature: Beowulf or the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, (the Cattle Raid of Cooley) – just like the Icelandic sagas – have their fair share of monstrous heroes. But it keeps fascinating us even today.

Shows such as **Heroes** have added a new shade to this exploration in recent years. Currently, even the humanness of zombies is on the cultural agenda in **Warm Bodies** or **iZombie**. Let us hope that, as this exploration continues, as we become more aware of the continuity between the monstrous and the human, we will eventually realise that, often, “the other” is just another “self”.

*Rebecca Merkelbach is a doctoral candidate at the University of Cambridge. Her research project addresses the literary construction and cultural use of human monstrosity in the Sagas of Icelanders. Follow her on Twitter @BeccaMerkelbach*

***This article was first published in The Conversation***

# Surviving Winter in the Middle Ages

By Sandra Alvarez



In 2013, a medieval reenactment group set out to see what it would be like to survive a Russian winter in the Middle Ages. They selected one of their members, Pavel Sapozhnikov, to live on a farmstead, with only ninth century tools, clothing and shelter for six months as part of a project entitled, *Alone in the Past*. Once a day, Pavel would speak for half an hour into a camera to recount his day, and share his experiences. The rest of the time, he was completely alone, with a monthly check-in to ensure he was still alive. His experiment provided a first hand glimpse of the struggles people faced surviving the winter in the Middle Ages.

We can also glean bits of information from manuscripts, court records, and coroner's rolls about how people lived and died during the harshest time of the year. How did people stay warm? What did they eat? What did they do? No indoor heating, no double glazed windows, no Netflix, no down jacket, certainly none of the modern day luxuries we consider "necessities". Winter was a frightening time for many people; if there was a poor harvest, you could starve to death, and there was always the chance of contracting illnesses that could easily kill you, such as pneumonia. Add to that, the onset of the Little Ice Age from 1300 until about 1870, and it meant

about 1870, and it meant surviving much colder winters. Winter was the most dangerous time in the medieval calendar year. So, how did medieval people cope?

## Food

Winter to set in just after Michaelmas (September 29) and lasted until Candlemas (February 2) when it became warm enough to till the land again. That's a long time, so for villagers, autumn was spent preserving the harvest for the hard months ahead. For the average person, pottage (a stew made up of boiled vegetables and grains) was a staple during the cold winter months. Everything went into the pot, including fruit if they had any, since it was considered unhealthy to eat fruit raw. Foods commonly found in a villager's diet would include onions, peas, colewort (arugula or rocket), beans, lentils, and herbs, such as parsley. For protein, cheese and eggs, and some meat when they could get it, such as fat bacon or salted pork would be added to the pottage. For the well-to-do, meat, like mutton, and pigeon, along with butter, figs, cheese, grapes, red wine were prescribed to counter the "phlegmy" effects of winter.

## Clothing

How did people stay warm in the dead of winter? Like us, they wore cloaks, scarves, boots and gloves (not the five fingered kind we know, but a more mitten like style). Homes were often smokey from a stone hearth fire that was ventilated by a hole in the roof. This provided warmth but not the kind we would be accustomed to for such cold temperatures. Indoor heating wasn't exactly great, so many people wore their outer garments inside to keep warm. In other cold and drafty places, like churches, villagers often brought their own hand warmers to Mass; hollow metal spheres that held hot coals. Wool was the favoured fabric for clothing, but it was extremely itchy so linen was worn underneath. Sweating would reduce the

warmth of wool, so medieval people often removed layers when they perspired and then reapplied them when they cooled down.

## Games

Just because your chances of surviving winter were grim, and you couldn't marathon a show for fourteen hours on Netflix, didn't mean you couldn't have a little fun. Medieval people did many of the things we do: they played in the snow, they enjoyed sledding, and ice skating (on pieces of polished wood or horse shin bones). Indoors, the most popular past times were games like chess and backgammon. If you were a noble, you might enjoy boar hunting. These activities were a welcomed respite from back breaking labour, and cold winter nights.

## Holidays

Christmas was the longest holiday of the year; there were twelve days from Christmas Eve to Epiphany (January 6) where no one worked at all. The lord would sometimes invite his villeins to dine in his hall for the Christmas meal. In some cases, a lucky peasant would be selected to ask two friends to come with him to eat and drink as much they wanted, and whatever they wanted for the duration of two burning candles (one after another). Other peasants were allowed to carry away as much as they could in their cloths.

In spite of the festivities, peasants still had to pay extra rent to add to the Lord's table, usually eggs, hens and bread. They also had other work to be done even though they were not working on the manor; they had to care for animals, mend fences, tools, and animal pens. There was also general repair work around the home that had to be completed during this brief break.

# Did People Ice Skate in the Middle Ages?

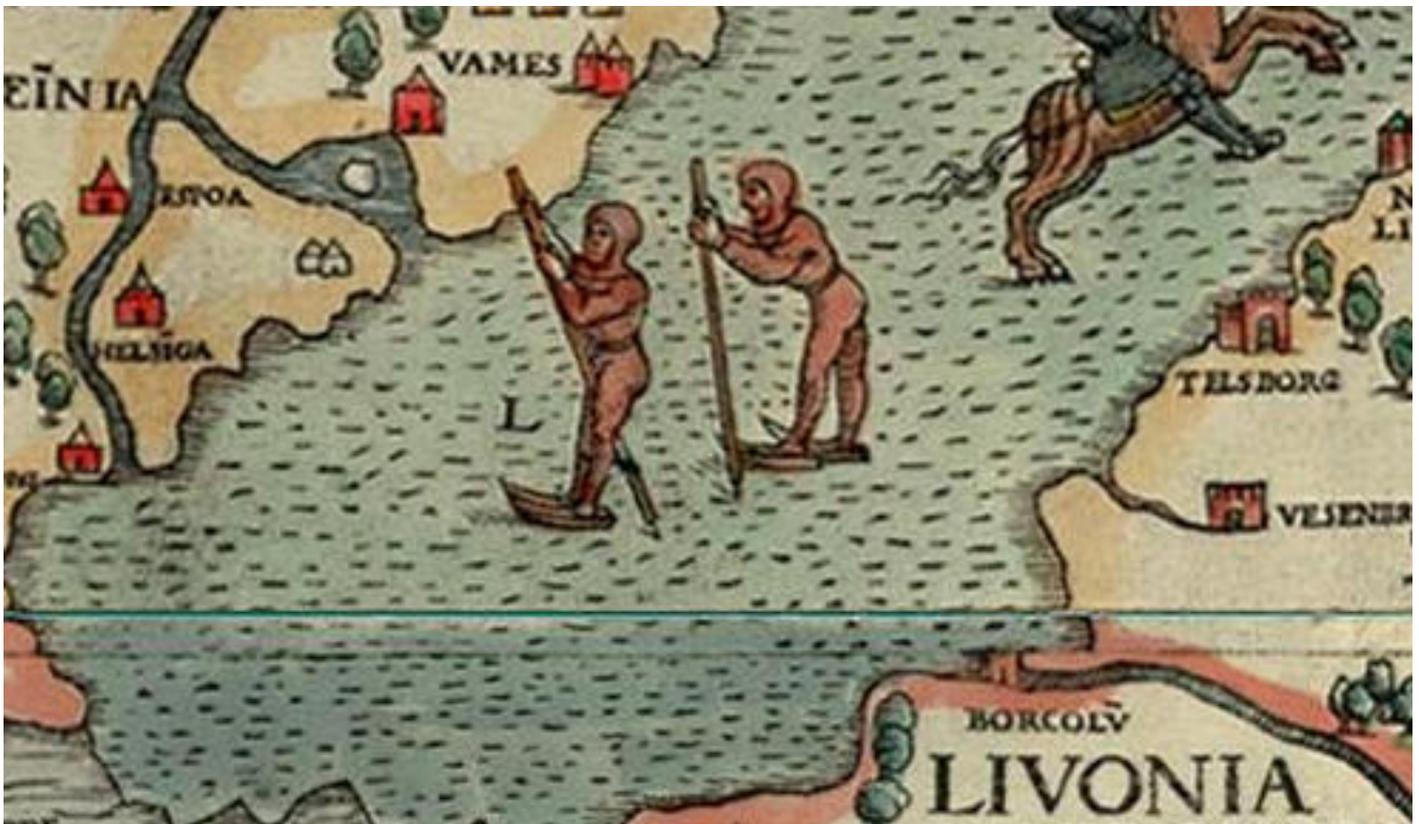


Image of people ice skating using poles to propel themselves forward. From Olaus Magnus', *Carta Marina* (1539).

When I was doing research about surviving winter in the Middle Ages, and how people passed the time during the coldest part of the year, I came across several instances of medieval people strapping on skates and taking a twirl (or a tumble!) on the ice. So where did it begin?

Oxford scholars, Federico Formenti and Alberto E. Minetti conducted a study of ice

skating through the ages using skates from 1800 BC to the present day, to determine how fast and effective skates were as they evolved over the course of history.

The first ice skates appeared about 3,000 years ago in Finland and were made of animal bone. They weren't initially used for recreation, but as a means to get around frozen bodies of water, to move people and

recreation, but as a means to get around frozen bodies of water, to move people and goods, and for trade. They were primarily for survival, to traverse the large number of lakes that dotted southern Finland. Skates were a cheap and efficient mode of transportation. Skating on bone reduced the time and energy of travelling in Scandinavia during the frigid winter months.

Skates were developed around the same time as skis for similar reasons – people needed to be able to move across heavy snow without sinking in, or having their journey grind to a halt, although at one point, there was some conflict found between Old Norse texts and the archeological record. It was believed that skis predated skates in Scandinavia due to skates not being mentioned in Old Norse literature. The archeological evidence suggested that both existed at the same time, with Vikings leaving bone skates behind in Denmark, Sweden and Germany from the eighth to the twelfth centuries. According to B.A. Thurber, the discrepancy was linked to the idea that bone skates and skis were considered to be related, if not the same. Thurber added, "One possible explanation for this is that Scandinavian skiers interpreted bone skates as small skis suited to different environmental conditions because of the similarities between the two technologies."

The skate was strapped to the feet with pieces of leather that were threaded through holes in the back and front of the bone. Why animal bones? Animals bones had an oily surface that worked as a natural wax enabling skaters to glide smoothly across the ice. Over time, skate materials evolved from bone, to ash and iron, to fibre glass and steel. Minetti and Formenti employed one type from each period for their tests:

- 1800 BC – animal bone
- 1200 AD – ash and iron
- 1400 AD – ash and iron
- 1700 AD – birch and steel

Present Day – fibre glass, kevlar steel and carbon fibre

It might not come as a surprise, but modern skates are four times faster than their bone and wood predecessors. Bone skates only moved at about 8 kilometres per hour, far from the break neck speeds we're used to seeing today with hockey players, or speed skaters who can reach speeds of 60 kilometres per hour.

The pastime we associate ice skating with today didn't become popular until the Middle Ages. The earliest mention of ice skating was discovered in the twelfth century writing of English monk, William Fitzstephen (†1191). William was employed as a clerk to Thomas Beckett (1118-1170), and wrote extensively about the city of London in his work, *Descriptio Nobilissimi Civitatis Londiniae*. In the account, he mentioned children attaching bones to their ankles and 'flying like birds across the ice'.

Another famous medieval story about ice skating involved the Dutch saint, Lidwina of Schiedam (1380-1433). Lidwina was one of the first recorded cases of multiple sclerosis and some scholars have attributed her disability to her fall while ice skating. The story of the incident was recounted in detail in the German friar Johannes Brugman's account of her life"

*However, as she could not succeed in recovering her strength, she was confined to her room, where, some days before the Feast of the Purification, some friends visited her. It was freezing hard at the moment ; the river Schie, which runs through the town, and the canals, were frozen over; and in this wintry weather all Holland was skating. These young girls invited Lydwine to skate with them, but, preferring to be alone, she made the bad state of her health a pretext for not going with them. They insisted so much, however, reproaching her for not taking more exercise and assuring her that the open air would do her good, that,*

biuens: et si vim passa fuero talē in corpore michi defor-  
 mitate ipsecauor a dño q̄ de cetero ad sp̄saliciuz nō co-  
 artat. q̄ audito cessauit q̄latio Cessauit eā extūc anga-  
 riare p̄: quid p̄t n̄iacū in filia sua disposuerit paciēter  
 expectās. Scīēs h̄id̄ uia qm̄ inter lateūculos necesse  
 habēt inter dū cōuersari et qm̄ p̄pter uerpes et spinas  
 ac saca op̄z declinare uias p̄ditionis anfractuolas et la-  
 tas: cepit custodire uias duras: cepit extunc magis ab  
 hoim̄ simul et coetaneaz aspectibz se s̄strahere: cepit  
 simpl̄t̄ domi cōsistere: cepit insup et dignitatis p̄posi-  
 tū gemebūdis p̄cibus deo cōmendare. Deo cū se ab oī  
 simultu secularis uanitat̄is et turbiniis se q̄straretur:  
 succreuit in solitudie simplicitas: in simplicitate deu-  
 otio: in deuotioe dilectio h̄ātelcē cepit. Ignorabat ad-  
 huc tenella d̄go celestis allocutōis archani: donec sc̄a  
 manu sup eā discēt hūiliari: et in uuida carne terrestris  
 hois scoria cōpurari. uidebat enī adhuc in forme q̄d  
 dā cahos ad diuina degustāda: qz cura p̄ ue dom̄? ex ca-  
 to sibi necdū uiluerat. Sed hic qui paup̄erē facit et di-  
 tat: humiliat et subleuat adolescentulā suā paulisp̄  
 emundando deduxit ad hec. et quidē sp̄s dñi bonus in  
 paup̄culos respicit et cōtritos sp̄u atqz tremētes se-  
 nes eius. Ut igitur ad sp̄s sc̄i p̄suauissia susurr̄ia coap-  
 taretr̄ aīa ei? uisitās uisitauit eam orōis ex alto dñs  
 ita ut dicē possit illō psalmi. Castigās castigauit me et  
 morti nō tradidit me dñs. eniuero multiplicatē sūt infir-  
 m̄tates ei? ut acceleraret: accelerādo dñm q̄retet: q̄rendo  
 p̄iem iueniet: iueniēdo dñm possideret.



De principio infirmitatū eius: et quō a medicis dere-  
 licta sit. Ca<sup>m</sup>. sc̄dm.  
**D**oro etatis sue āno. xv. uel circiter aggruata et  
 manus dñi sup eā. nā delecta p̄lici lāguoris grauedie  
 facta est facies eius squalida: recessit decore eius p̄mus  
 adeo ut ignerent eā qui prius nimio amore capti fue-  
 rant faciente illo q̄ pulchras aīas in corpibz deformi-  
 bus nō abhorret. Cūqz despiciabilis admodū esset cūctis  
 effecta: factū est una die t̄p̄e h̄p̄emali cū stridētes eā  
 p̄i pre algore cōiter ihorrescūt et flumina p̄fert̄ in p̄tibz  
 aquilonis in glaciē cōstringūtur: et d̄go n̄a h̄id̄ uina  
 strātū infirmitatis nup̄ime dimissit: et ecce recreatōis  
 gr̄a uenit et relique locū d̄gies iuitantes eā quatū?

## Fall of Saint Lidwina in an ice skating accident, depicted in a late 15th century book of her Vita

*for fear of annoying them, she finally, with the consent of her father, accompanied them on the frozen water of the canal behind which the house was situated. She was just starting, after having put on her skates, when one of her comrades, going at a great pace, threw herself against her before she was able to get out of the way, and she was dashed against a piece of ice whose edges broke one of the lower ribs on her right side.* ~Johannes Krugman, *Saint Lydwine of Schiedam*, trans. by Joris-Karl Huysmans.

Skates at this time weren't edged like modern ones, so skaters used poles with iron tips to propel themselves across the ice, and mock joust with each other and they passed by. Formenti added, "Bones did not have an edge that allowed the typical skating movement pattern, so the forward propulsion was given by the upper limbs as a stick was pushed backwards between the legs while the legs were kept almost straight." Edges were added by the Dutch in the thirteenth century. The first wooden

skates appeared in the Netherlands in the fourteenth century and had a metal blade fixed to the bottom. From this period forward, skates became 30% lighter and were the most popular way of getting around in the Netherlands.

Swedish writer, Olaus Magnus (1490-1557), best known for his work, *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus* (*Description of the Northern Peoples*), also described ice skating in great detail. His writing was translated into German, Dutch and Italian and was a popular sourcebook for the traditions and customs of Nordic people:

*The other kind of men are those who attach to the soles of their feet a piece of flat, polished iron, a foot long, or the flat bones of deer or oxen, the shin bones, that is. These are slippery by nature because they have an inherent greasiness and achieve a very great speed, though only on smooth ice, and continue to shoot forward without pause as long as the ice remains level. Among this sort too there are*

*found everywhere men who take pleasure in racing for a prize. Their race-course over frozen lakes as smooth as a mirror is fixed at eight to twelve Italian miles from one end to the other, or it can be less. The prizes are silver spoons, copper pots, swords, new clothes, and young horses, but more often the last. The rest are outrun by those competitors in the race who attach to the soles of their feet the shin-bones of deer thoroughly smoothed and greased with pork fat, since, when the cold drops of water rise as it were through the pores of ice during fierce cold, the bones smeared in this way cannot be hampered or kept in check, as iron can however much it is polished or greased. For no greasing suits iron as much as it does the shin-bones of deer or bullocks, which have an innate slipperiness of their own. In this way, whenever the ice, two or three fingers thick, is clear and bared of snow, these shows are performed easily and with little fear of danger; but this is by no means the case at other times, for you are never in greater peril or nearer to death than when you set off skating while the ice is covered with even the thinnest layer of snow. For rivers or brooks, silently and swiftly entering the lake from its shores, wear away*

*the ice by their constant movement so that it cannot grow thick and firm, unless the streams themselves are held in check by a very hard frost. But sometimes rash skaters, ignorant of our scorning the properties of ice and racing with more temerity than caution, are drowned, their bodies lamentably left under the ice and on top of it their heads, which have been sliced off by the sharp edge of the ice as if by an axe.*

Bone skates were used well into the eighteenth century in certain places such as Iceland, Gotland, Hungary and Germany. While skating on bone skates was demanding and required expending more energy, it was still safer than walking on ice. Ice skating clubs didn't appear until well into the eighteenth century, the first being opened in Edinburgh, Scotland. London didn't establish an ice skating club until 1830. While initially an activity that everyone could afford and enjoy, it eventually became the preserve of the nobility and upper classes. From bone to blade, functional to fun, it's once again an activity that everyone can enjoy. Happy skating!



**Hendrick Avercamp's *A Scene on the Ice* - early 17th century**

# Five Medieval Games to Get You Through Long Winter Nights

By Danièle Cybulskie

On cold winter nights, medieval people did the sensible thing and stayed indoors, passing the time by playing games together by candlelight. Here are five games that date back to (at least) the Middle Ages that you can stay in and play on these long nights of winter.



15th century image of a King and queen playing chess – from British Library

## Chess

Chess is a very old game, with disputed origins. It seems to be agreed upon, though, that chess came to medieval Europe via **India and Persia**, at which point some of the pieces changed from elephants to bishops, from counselor to queen, and from chariot to castle (rook). In *Sports and Games of Medieval Cultures*, Sally Wilkins notes that changing a chariot to a rook explains something that's puzzled me for a long time: why a stationary object like a castle can move so quickly across a game board (p.100). The world's most famous medieval chessmen are probably the **Lewis Chessmen**: ivory figurines discovered on the Scottish Isle of Lewis. (Check out Nancy Marie Brown's book *Ivory Vikings* for more on their possible origins.) Whether you play with ivory or plastic, to play chess is to get medieval.

## Halatafl

For those of you who would like to get in touch with Viking roots, you can play halatafl or fox-and-geese. Unlike in other games in which both players have equal pieces, a popular version of halatafl involves one player with one piece (the fox) trying to capture all thirteen of the other player's pieces (the geese) without getting captured himself (Wilkins, p.106-107). According to Wilkins, this Viking game has been found "scratched in stone in ancient buildings and painted on boards" (p.107), because like checkers, halatafl involves no special technology: just some stones, a drawn "board", and an opponent.

## Queek

Queek is a game I hadn't heard of before, and its name is just so fun to say. To play queek, all that's needed is a checkerboard or cloth (or a checkered drawing) and some stones. Play involves betting on how many thrown stones will land on black squares and how many will land on white squares. The person who's right (or close enough, depending on how friendly the game is) wins. It's as simple as that – or would be, that is, if sneaky medieval people hadn't found ways to cheat, like making some squares marginally deeper than other squares (Wilkins, 114).

## Raffle

Wilkins calls raffle "a three-dice game that might be considered the ancestor of the modern slot machine" (p.114). To play raffle, all that's needed is three dice. The object of the game is for players to take turns rolling the dice until a player gets all three dice to come up with the same number. This is the type of game I imagine medieval soldiers playing in their downtime, as it would have been easy to carry around, and easy to bet on, but not so easy to win. When playing raffle with your friends, be sure to watch for weighted dice (Wilkins, 114).

## Backgammon

Another very famous game which came to Europe alongside chess is backgammon, a relatively simple game played with two dice, some flat discs, and some triangles drawn on a board. This made it possible for backgammon to be played anywhere from a fancy, decorated table, to a patch of sand. Backgammon (or “tables”) was popular enough that other games were invented which could make use of the same distinctive board. It’s also a lot more fun to play than this fifteenth-century book of hours illustration suggests.



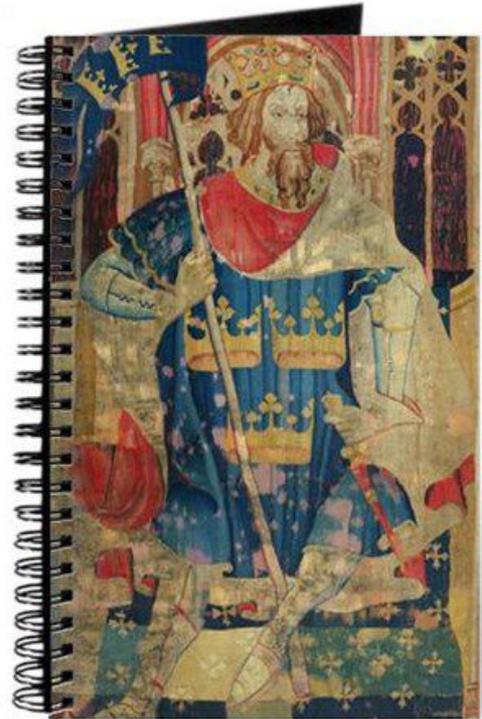
**Medieval Game playing from a 15th century Book of Hours – image courtesy Walters Art Museum**

For more on the Persian roots of chess and backgammon, check out “**The Games of Chess and Backgammon in Sasanian Persia**” by Touraj Daryaee. For more about halatafl, queek, raffle, and other games, check out Sally Wilkins’ *Sports and Games of Medieval Cultures*.

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