

Remigiusz Gogosz

Horse fights: The brutal entertainment of the Saga Age Icelanders

Średniowiecze Polskie i Powszechne 5 (9), 17-32

2013

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Remigiusz Gogosz

Instytut Historii, Uniwersytet Rzeszowski

Horse-fights: The brutal entertainment of the Saga Age Icelanders

Introduction

It is an arguable assumption that horse-fights should be grouped with sports activities or even games as a whole. However, asserting this is not pointless because it seems clear that horse-fights were a kind of entertainment and they also satisfy the established rules on the terminology of games. What is more, the way horse-fights were organized by the Icelanders of the Middle Ages is quite similar to other games or sports such as *knattleikr* or *glíma*. This article is an attempt to re-create the method of horse-fighting in Iceland in the medieval period — including the cultural significance of the event.

For the Icelanders and other Nordic peoples of the Saga Age, horses were one of the most important animals (as significant as cattle). This comes as no surprise due to their many uses, such as for transport, food and in pagan rites (in funerals as grave sacrifices, in divination, i.e. hippomancy, and as sacred horses)¹, and additionally for sport. The sport in question was called

¹ Although there are only a few instances about using horses for divination. Divination was made from the walk of the horse. We can see it in *Germania* by Tacitus and in *Landnamabók*. Depending on which leg the horse went first through the line, the fate was to be bad or good (see L.P. Słupecki: *Wyrocznie i wróżby pogańskich Skandynawów. Studium do dziejów idei przeznaczenia u ludów indoeuropejskich*. Warszawa 1998, pp. 129—154), for funerals see: N. Price: *The Viking Way: Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*. Uppsala 2002. Sacred horse occurs in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða, Austrfirðinga sǫgur*. Ed. J. Jóhannesson. In: *Íslensk fornrit*. Ed. J. Jóhannesson. Vol. 11. Reykjavík 1950.

horse-fighting (*hestavíg*), but as it will be demonstrated later, it was only a part of a larger gathering called *hestaping*, during which people were also selling horses and enjoying other forms of entertainment. In this case it is not problematic to reconstruct the rules of this sport. Interestingly, we can find horse-fighting nowadays in some parts of the world, such as Southeast Asia. It will be elaborated on later in this paper.

In reference to Scandinavians and their interest in horse-fights, it is also worth mentioning the pagan and religious past of the Vikings. Maeve Sikora describes the role of the horse in fertility cult and its association with Freya. He states that horse-fights were on “important component of fertility cults”². By contrast Ulf Erik Hagberg suggests that horses were put to fight or race to increase their blood circulation so it was “easier to bleed them at slaughter”³. Peter Shen supported this arguments by comparing it to Ibn Fadlan’s description of Rus’ burial⁴ but I am far from claiming that before a burial horses were put to race or fight. Terry Gunnell claims that “both horse-racing and horse-fighting must have had particular significance within the pagan religion of Scandinavia”⁵. He illustrates his thesis with an example from Finnur Jónsson’s *Historia ecclesiastica Islandiæ* where we can read about Bishop Oddur Einarsson’s prohibition in Iceland (1592) forbidding priest to attend “horse-fights, vigils, gatherings of common people and shepherds, and other relics of pagan ceremony”⁶. But as Terry Gunnell rightly observed, there is no evidence which can link horse-fights to any pagan festivities in Iceland according to their calendar e.g. *jól* or *vetrnætur*⁷. Horse-fights are more commonly seen being held during the summer or autumn, which does not match any events on the pagan calendar.

Svale Solheim points to the fact that the life of Norwegians and Icelanders did not differ much in this matter. He wrote that horse-fights came from Norway to Iceland, where this entertainment evolved, with the Norwegian emigrants who settled on the island⁸. It is certain that horse-fights came at the time of the first settlers, and what supports this statement is the fact that the first laws of Norwegians which provide information about the sport had been written before their equivalents in Iceland. It is worth quoting Solheims’s ac-

² Maeve Sikora: *Diversity in Viking Age horse burial*. “The Journal of Irish Archaeology” 2003—2004, Vol. 12—13, p. 79.

³ U. Hagberg: *The Votive Deposits in the Skedemosse Fen and their Relation to the IronAge Settlement on Öland, Sweden*. In: *The Archaeology of Skedemosse II*. Stockholm 1967, p. 80.

⁴ Peter Shenk: *To Valhalla by Horseback? Horse Burial in Scandinavia during the Viking Age*. An unpublished MA thesis on Nordic Viking and medieval culture. Oslo 2002, p. 60.

⁵ T. Gunnell: *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia*. Cambridge 1995, p. 31.

⁶ F. Jónsson: *Historia ecclesiastica Islandiæ*. Vol. 3. Havnæ 1775, p. 336.

⁷ T. Gunnell: *The Origins...*, p. 36.

⁸ S. Solheim: *Horse-Fight and Horse-Race in Norse Tradition*. Oslo 1956, pp. 52—53.

count on similarities of the Norwegian and Icelandic horse-fights: “Moreover, all of these descriptions are very similar, a fact which indicates that the manner of proceeding was traditional and ancient. If we compare these descriptions with the accounts of the *skeid* in Setesdal and Telemark, the similarity is striking. Both in the Icelandic descriptions and the Norwegian accounts we find identical spectacles... It seems unbelievable to discover almost identical methods of proceeding in both the overall picture, as well as in a number of details, in accounts which are so far apart both geographically and chronologically. Literary connection here is out of the question, so the similarity, then, is a conclusive proof of the historical connection, of the same origin of these customs”⁹.

In his work, Solheim also lists differences between the horse-fights in Norway and those in Iceland. Norse horse-fights were a part of in of bigger, general assemblies, which took place in autumn. However, Icelandic horse-fights seem to be a separate events not restricted to the assemblies, but also taking place at different times and places. Furthermore, Solheim stresses that Icelandic *hestavíg* can be easily included in the category of games-gatherings with their sport contests. He believes that the horse-fights have a lot in common with foot-races and horse-races.

There is no comprehensive description of the horse-fights (alike all the games and sports in saga literature) for a one particular reason. Those games were popular in Norway and in Iceland at the time the sagas were written. Thus, there was no need for the saga authors to explain the audience what the sport looked like and how to “play” it.

Problems concerning names and terminology

It is necessary to deal here with the terminology pertaining to horse-fights first, in order to avoid misunderstandings while using it within the scope of this paper.

The translation of the term *horse-fight* itself may cause some problems. Among academic authors it is common to translate *hestaþing*, *hestavíg* and *hestaat* as horse-fighting¹⁰. In general discussion there is no standard form and

⁹ Ibidem, p. 62.

¹⁰ *Saga of Bjorn*. In: *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*. Ed. V. Hreinsson. Vol. 1. Reykjavík 1997, p. 286: “*áttu þeir hestaþing*” (held a horsefight); *Njal’s saga*. In: *The Complete*

the most widely used Old Icelandic word for horse-fighting is *hestaping*. All these words are compounds that in closer view have different meanings and for further reading and understanding the subject, it is required to comment and try to order them. It will serve to simplify matters to find one name for this sport before undertaking the further exploration of the subject.

Hestaping is made by two words: *hestr* — ‘a horse’ in genitive plural and *ping* — ‘a meeting’ in nominative¹¹. So, in simpler terms, the meaning of the word is a meeting of horses. But it can be said that it was a meeting the central point of which was a horse-fight¹². The meeting of horses is most likely not only the name of this sport, but a sport event taking place due to the meeting of people who would gather to buy and sell horses, or on such occasions like *réttir*. I am sure that this word was used to describe horse-fighting as an event (or part of) bigger event and, not a particular fight between two horses.

The second term which occurs in literature is *hestaat*. This compound word includes *hestr* as it was in the previous one and *at* which in the Zoega dictionary means: “an incited conflict or fight (see *etja*).” *Etja hestum* in Fritzner is translated: “ophide Heste oed hesta víg”¹³.

The last term, which is *hestavíg*, also includes the word *hestr*, with compound *víg*. Fritzner translates it as a fight or even a killing¹⁴. So from here on, the term used for horse-fighting can either be *hestavíg* or *hestaat*.

Other words which describe particular facets of horse-fighting are: *hestakeyrsla* which could have meant to prod or ‘to bange’ the horse, so it simply means ‘to incite the horses to fight’ (a synonym of *hestaat*)¹⁵. *Vighest*, which simply means fighting-horse¹⁶. *Etja saman*, *bíta* — ‘to bite’ simply meant ‘to put horses together to fight’, *hestastafr* meaning ‘horse staff’, were also used in a horse-fight¹⁷.

Sagas of Icelanders. Ed. V. Hreinnsson. Vol. 3. Reykjavík 1997, p. 71: “*ríða menn til hestavígs*” (the man rode to horsefights); *Gunnars þáttur þiðranbanda*, in: *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*..., p. 421: “*mælt var til hestaats*” (horse-fight was called).

¹¹ Á.B. Magnússon: *Íslensk orðsifjabók. Orðabók Háskolans*. Reykjavík 1989, pp. 324, 1179—1180.

¹² J. Fritzner: *Ordbog over det gamle norske sprog*. Vol. 1. Kristiania 1886, p. 808; R. Cleasby, G. Vigfusson: *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*. Oxford 1874, p. 260.

¹³ J. Fritzner: *Ordbog*..., pp. 807—809; R. Cleasby, G. Vigfusson: *An Icelandic*..., p. 134: “*etja* probably means to make a bite, to incite a fight, fighting, biting”.

¹⁴ J. Fritzner: *Ordbog*..., p. 938; R. Cleasby, G. Vigfusson: *An Icelandic*..., p. 260.

¹⁵ J. Fritzner: *Ordbog*..., p. 808.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 938; R. Cleasby, G. Vigfusson: *An Icelandic*..., p. 260.

¹⁷ R. Cleasby, G. Vigfusson: *An Icelandic*..., p. 260.

Sources

The main sources for horse-fights are found within the sagas including four law books. Unfortunately we have only 20 instances in these sources regarding horse-fights. There are 12 sagas and 2 *þættir* and almost all of them are part of the *Íslendingasögur* collection. The reason for it could be that in the saga-writing period horse-fighting did not take place. But we are aware it is not the case — we find some references to horse-fights in *Sturlunga saga* as well as in accounts from the 16th century.

The law books can also provide useful data concerning horse-fights. First of all because some of them had been written during the times before saga-writing began, and secondly, because they deal with the legislation and events which give more reliability to such things as horse-fights. In this section I would like to deal with law books. Two of them are from Norway and represent early laws, and two others are from Iceland and were written in the 12th and 13th centuries. Laws also demonstrate that horse-fights were quite common for both Norwegians and Icelanders, and there was a need to regulate some issues that which sometimes stemmed from them taking place.

There are no sources of horse-fighting in the *Gulaping law*, the first written Norwegian law. The oldest law reference comes from the Norwegian Frostaping law¹⁸. This law encompassed 8 shires of Trondheimsfjord (region Trøndelag). The first instances of this law are preserved in Snorri's *Magnúss saga góða* in *Heimskringla*. There, the law is dated to AD 950—980¹⁹. Even though it does not deal with formal horse-fights, it contains the word *hestavíg* which can provide us with what was happening in these cases. A connection to horse-fights and their basic rules can also be drawn: the owner or the one who is putting his (owner's) horse to a fight with another's horse is responsible for any damages this horse causes²⁰. But this thesis cannot be sustained because of a lack of other sources. The phrase used to describe a horse-fight was *etja saman*, which could relate to a simple horse-fight taking place unofficially.

¹⁸ T. Knudsen: *Frostatingslove*. In: *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder*. Eds. J. Benediktsson, M.M. Lárusson. Vol. 4. Reykjavík 1956, pp. 656—662.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 656—662. For more information about Frostaping, see: L.M. Larson: *Introduction*. In: *Idem: The Earliest Norwegian Laws. Being the Gulathing Law and the Frostathing Law*. New Jersey 2011, pp. 3—31.

²⁰ G. Storm, E. Hertzberg, R. Keyser, P.A. Munch: *Norges gamle Love indtil 1387*. Vol. 1. Christiania 1846, p. 228: “*En ef hestavíg verðr hafi sic siálfan [hverr abyrgðan]. En ef lýfir heft á vígi nauðsynialaust. Gialldi öfundarbót þeim er hest á eptir því sem hann er maðr til. En ef maðr teçr hepting af rossi manns fyrir ráð þess er á. Gjaldi aura .iij. þeim er á. Oc þess áabyrgð á rossi oc öllum vercum þess til þess er eigandi temr höndum á. Oc soeri eið fyrir*”.

The Grágás passage about the value of livestock gives important information about the value of a fighting horse. According to the law this horse has more value than the average one because of its function (here arises the comparison to fighting cocks and dogs which have value that is incomparable with “normal” animals of this kind): “A stud-stallion which is worth more for its qualities as a fighter, and a gelding which is worth more for its qualities as a mount, and a brood mare with foal: their value is subject to assessment”²¹.

Jónsbók gives us strict rules of what is forbidden during horse-fighting. Firstly, no one is allowed to initiate a horse-fight without permission of the owner²². Until this law was written it could have been common for people to initiate horse-fights without permission, probably with weaker horses instigated by the one who desired the horse-fight. Because of this possibility, the instigator of a fight who causes damage must pay a compensation. Unfortunately, there is no data to prove that people incited horse-fights without permission. The information that we do have tells us that when the damages were equal to or more than a halfmark, the case came to legal judgment after which the responsible party was to pay full compensation. The point is that this strict law was most likely written according to the value of a horse and especially that of a fighting or stud horse. A horse which had been injured would surely lose its value. In reference to the laws of horse-fights, William I. Miller says: “Law belonged to all free men, not abstractly, but as a part of the great social occasions that were the annual Thing meetings. Legal proceedings, like horse-fights, were spectator sports. The fans of both had sufficient knowledge of the game to understand and enjoy the contest. And in Iceland, the rules establishing the boundary between the world of the game and the world outside the game were often insufficient to contain the animosities the game engendered. But then the players knew that the boundary was porous. Their decision to play was informed with a knowledge of the range of possible consequences of playing. The difference between law and horse-fighting was presumably that the latter, as a sport, was literally a game, and as such raised greater expectations about its separateness from life after the game. No one, however, expected law to be such or that it should have been so neatly demarcated from life”²³. Miller’s argument is sound but it does not allow to say that horse-fights were part of the legal proceedings. There is only one example of this when someone put forth a case at the *hestaat*. Otherwise there is nothing like this in the sources.

²¹ *Grágás. Lagsafn íslenska þjóðveldisins*. Eds. G. Karlsson, K. Sveinsson, M. Árnason. Reykjavík 1992, pp. 477—478: “Stóðhestur, og sé verði betri fyrir sakir vigs, og geldur hestur, og sé verði betri fyrir reiðar sakir, og fylmer í stóði, það er metfé”.

²² *Jónsbók. The Laws of Later Iceland*. Ed. J.K. Schulman. Saarbrücken 2010, p. 228.

²³ W.I. Miller: *Bloodtaking and peacemaking. Feud, law and society in Saga Iceland*. Chicago 1990, p. 257.

Places, place-names and time

In Iceland we can find about 300 place-names related to horses²⁴. But the number of place-names for horse-fights or, strictly speaking, horse-meetings, is relatively low (only 3). These attest to the custom of holding horse-meetings and the result of these meetings, horse-fights in certain places.

So in Iceland there are places called Hestaþingseyrar (Horse-meeting-sands). Two gathering places are called Hestaþingshöll (Horse-meeting-hill). One of these places, nearby Kaldaðranes in Árnes sýsla²⁵, in the opinion of Kristian Kålund, is the place described in *Flóamanna saga*²⁶. The second one is a place that lies in Rangárvalla sýsla, close to the rivers Fiská and Eystri-Rangá²⁷. Kålund assumes that there the horse-fight between Gunnar from Hlíðarendi and Þorgeir Starkad's son took place²⁸. Another place-name is called Hestavígshamarr (Horsefight-rock) and is placed near Viðimýri²⁹. It was a gathering place for men from *Skagafjörður*³⁰. Another Hestavígshamarr place-name of this kind is quite close to the previous one, on Flugumýri.

Kristian Kålund gives us another place-name, *Hestaþingshamarr* which he finds in *Sturlunga saga*, and relates it to the place where the people from *Skagafjörður* gathered to choose Brandr Kolbeinsson as a chieftain in 1245³¹. This place-name occurs more often in *Sturlunga saga*³². Some more place-names can be found, but they probably do not come from Saga Age (Hestaþingsháls, Hestaþingsflöt, Hestaþingsflatir, Hestaþingshólar)³³.

Solheim finds the connection between place-names and horse-fights with the official Icelandic meetings in the Middle Ages³⁴. He states that place-names connected to horse-fighting are the localities where people gathered

²⁴ According to Landmælingar Íslands maps: http://atlas.lmi.is/kortasja_en/.

²⁵ South-east of Iceland.

²⁶ K. Kålund: *Bidrag til en historisk-topografisk beskrivelse af Island*. Vol. 1. København 1877, p. 182, footnote 1.

²⁷ South of Iceland.

²⁸ K. Kålund: *Bidrag...*, p. 231.

²⁹ North of Iceland.

³⁰ North of Iceland. K. Kålund: *Bidrag til en historisk-topografisk beskrivelse of Island*. Vol. 2. Kjøbenhavn 1882, p. 65.

³¹ *Sturlunga saga*. Ed. G. Vigfússon. Vol. 2. Oxford 1878, pp. 101, 181, 186.

³² *Saga Þórðar Sighvatssonar Kakala*. In: *Sturlunga saga*. Vol. 3. Ed. B. Sveinsson. Reykjavík 1913, p. 118.

³³ Á. Magnússon: *Chorographica islandica*. In: Á. Magnússon: *Safn til sögu Íslands*. S. II. Vol. 1. Reykjavík 1955, p. 33; S. Sigmundsson: *Örnefnaskrár í örnefnasafni Stofnunar Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum*, 2007: http://arnastofnun.is/page/ornefni_hestathing.

³⁴ S. Solheim: *Horse...*, pp. 67—68.

and there is no information about the actual sport. People from the districts were gathering in great numbers and held legal proceedings. But does it mean that horse-fighting became rare or abandoned? Once more, it is worthwhile to quote Solheims words: “These accounts from *Sturlunga saga* indicate that the localities which were called *Hestapingshamarr* or *Hestavigshamarr* were situated at — or close by — the regular, and certainly often ancient, meeting places in the districts where people came together, to the Thing, games and other gatherings of public interest”³⁵. Moreover, Solheim is directly connecting horse-fight meetings with local assemblies (in the examples of *Helganesþing* in *Sturlunga saga*).

As a result, one can attempt to estimate where horse-fights were usually held. Space played a significant role in those cases. Sometimes, it can be seen in the sagas that there was a place where the horses were kept and where they fought. So as seen above, the landscape was changed by people. Going back to the previous examples, there is no precise data about this subject. Yet, *hestaping* had to be held in a special landscape, usually flat, grassy surface, on bottoms of the hills or on riversides where spectators could see the matches clearly. Using a comparison with modern Iceland and instances in the sagas, the following hypothesis can be stated: Horse-fights were mostly held in summer (after the midsummer) or in autumn, at quite the same time when *réttir* is held nowadays. There can be two way of making landscapes friendlier for such gatherings. It can be seen that the influence remains and the modern *réttir* is reminiscent of the types of meetings similar to *hestaping*. *Réttir* are held in late summer or early in autumn so it is matching the time (summer) when horse-fights in the sagas were held. What is even more interesting, some of the *réttir* places which were abandoned, still had their meeting destination, as they were the focal points, for example, for horse trading³⁶. But a problem arises in determining a proof for it, because the oldest reference about *réttir* is in the *Diplomatarium Islandicum* from the 14th century³⁷. On the other hand, there are some references in the law books about pasturing the communal livestock. People built shielings and stayed in them during the summer to take care of their property. Both Jónsbók and Grágás state rules and dates of goings on back and forth from the shielings to the assembly. It is still an unfinished work

³⁵ Ibidem, s. 68.

³⁶ O. Aldrer: *Réttir in the landscape. A study on the context of focal points*. In: *Dynamics of Northern Societies. Proceedings of the SILA/NABO Conference on Arctic and North Atlantic Archaeology, Copenhagen, May 10th—14th, 2004, Publications from the National Museum. Studies in Archaeology and History*. Eds. J. Arneborg, B. Gronnow. Vol. 10. Copenhagen 2006, p. 360.

³⁷ *Diplomatarium Islandicum: Íslenzkt fornbréfasafn*. Ed. J. Þorkelsson. Vol. 2. Copenhagen 1893, p. 666; *Diplomatarium Islandicum: Íslenzkt fornbréfasafn*. Ed. J. Þorkelsson. Vol. 4. Copenhagen 1897, p. 44.

it cannot be said for certain if the hypothesis is correct, but everything points to the idea that it was something akin to *réttir*. However, this particular term did not exist at the time.

Horse-fighting places were perhaps destined for the sport and secondly, more likely, is that they used paddocks (*kom í hringinn*) and a place for sheep. People probably occupied the area, and watched the fight in a ring³⁸. But this is only a hypothesis and it requires evidence from other (new) sources or by new archeological excavations. (“The *réttir* activities, the gathering and sorting, involved a large number of people, which were well organized, and with clearly defined roles and tasks for individuals and groups. It is suggested therefore that *réttir* provide a source for commentary on past societies and the manner in which they interacted with the landscape around them. These places also acted as attractors for activities like trade and exchange of goods, as well as occasions for social activities, such as drinking and singing”)³⁹.

They were held during the summer and autumn. As Valtý Guðmundsson rightly observed, the horse-fights were often held close to midsummer, one week or half of a month after midsummer and then either in or on Sunday⁴⁰. As Solheim argues, horse-fights were entertainment at a *þing* but they were also held in other places for which place-names are our evidence (e.g. *Hestaþing-shóll*). But a very interesting problem arose, because there is no such midsummer celebration according to the Old Norse calendar! It came to Iceland with Christianity. As noted before there are some references in law books. For example, *Jónsbók* says that: “Men are to drive their livestock from their home pastures to the shielings when two months of summer have passed... and later that the people should mark their livestock not farther than”⁴¹. *Grágás*, in turn, claims: “From midsummer there are to be three months of thirty nights to winter. The first day of winter is to be a Saturday and from then there shall be six months of thirty nights to summer; and ten weeks of summer are to have passed when men come to the General Assembly⁴². The editor of *Grágás* states that the midsummer month normally began Sunday, July 13—19⁴³.

³⁸ V. Guðmundsson: *Hestaþing fornanna*. “Eimreiðin” 1903, Vol. 9, p. 35.

³⁹ O. Aldred: *Réttir*..., pp. 354, 358.

⁴⁰ V. Guðmundsson: *Hestaþing*..., p. 33.

⁴¹ *Jónsbók*..., p. 237.

⁴² *Grágás*..., p. 35.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 126.

How the horse-fights were organized

The rules and the organization of the horse-fights were quite simple. The horse-fights can probably be described the following way:

1. The people organized a horse-meeting at an official and unofficial, simple occasion, which leads to the idea that there were not only general meetings like *þing* or *alþing*, where this kind of entertainment was held. Earlier two owners of the horses decided to hold a horse-fight between their horses⁴⁴. Sometimes there was bigger crowd. On the meeting described in *Bjarnar saga Hítadælakappa*, all men from the district came (*alþýða heraðsmanna*)⁴⁵. Probably it was not one special event, but during the year there were more meetings like this. After the decision was made to hold a *hestavíg* a date was set. Mainly it was somewhere in the summer or early autumn. Sometimes it was a part of an assembly like it is clearly written in *Reykðæla saga*⁴⁶.

If there was one man who organized the horse-fight, he sent the invitations for sport to people living around or in the district. It could be just as well that when two men decided to put their horses to a fight, and due to the importance of the event within the community, they wanted to gather other people to see it. On this occasion they could show their wealth and splendor to others. And what could be more important than the result of a fight spread throughout the district or perhaps the whole quarter.

What has significant meaning are the other kinds of entertainment which were held simultaneous to the horse-fights at the horse-meetings. It is clearly written in the sagas that people at these meetings were invited to “*skemmtunar ok hestavígs*” (entertainment and horse-fights) which would be the custom for such gatherings and meetings everywhere. Þórðr from *Bjarnar saga Hítadælakappa* was asked to recreate people by reciting verses, and after that other man made the same⁴⁷.

As mentioned prior there were plenty of people in attendance at these occasions where such sporting events were held. *Víga-Glums saga*⁴⁸, *Reykðæla*

⁴⁴ *Killer-Glum's saga*. In: *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*. Ed. V. Hreinsson. Vol. 2. Reykjavík 1997, p. 287.

⁴⁵ *Bjarnar saga Hítadælakappa*. In: *Íslensk fornrit*. Eds. S. Nordal, G. Jónson. Vol. 3. Reykjavík 1938, pp. 174—175.

⁴⁶ *Reykðæla saga*. In: *Íslensk fornrit*. Ed. B. Sigfússon. Vol. 10. Reykjavík 1940, p. 181.

⁴⁷ *Bjarnar saga Hítadælakappa*..., pp. 174—175.

⁴⁸ *Killer-Glum's saga*..., p. 294: “*var stofnat hestaping, þat er 9llum hestum skal etja, þeim er til váru í heraðinu, ok skyldu þeir í mót ór inum efra hrepp ok inum neðra*” (a horse-fighting contest was arranged at which all the stallions available in the area were to fight. Those from the upper and lower districts of the valley were to oppose each other).

*saga*⁴⁹ and *Brennu-Njáls saga*⁵⁰ show that the horses sometimes represented the region and the people living there. As it is in *Víga-Glúms saga* we see two regions of upper and lower districts put their horses to a fight against each other.

2. Then, when the time came, there were two options for horse-fighting. Because at times there were a lot of horses at the meeting place, people seemed to organize fights with similar rules to that of a tournament: in *Víga-Glúms saga* we read that Kalf's horse "was beating every other horse" and "at some point [...] stallions came together". The second way of holding a horse-fight was to decide before, which horses would be fighting. Valtý Guðmundsson argued for this method; that chosen horses were put to a fight in order to see which of them would be the best⁵¹. But it most likely depended on the number of competing horses during the *hestaþing*.

Another matter was the question of what horses were to fight. Sometimes they were akin to fighting categories, fights for young stallions⁵², old nags, etc. For example, junior weight and heavy weight in boxing. Before a gathering the fighting horses were kept like normal horses. Proof of this can be found in *Eyrbyggja saga*: "Thorarin kept a fine fighting stallion up in the mountains. [...] That autumn it happened that Thorbjorn's horses couldn't be found anywhere"⁵³. The latter statement is related to all horses in the mountains.

3. Then they put the horses to a fight. What shows up at this point is that the people needed to have "a second" who would lead the horse to the inside of the fighting circle. In *Grettis saga* (chapter 29), the owner of the horse asks Atli if he wants to be his second to stand by him (*standa hjá*)⁵⁴. *Kormaks saga* has the same thing. We know only about the act of striking the animals through an analogy of modern horse-fights in southeastern Asia. In Asia, people bring a mare in season to the fight to make the stallions compete⁵⁵. The fight was really bloody and brutal. Horses usually used their front legs and teeth to fight with their opponent. The people responsible for the horses used their staffs to keep the horses away from the crowd. We can also see that sometimes, when two horses were strong and fighting for a long time, people stopped the fight and postponed the last fight until later (e.g. *Víga-Glúms saga*)⁵⁶. In *Reykðæla saga*,

⁴⁹ *Reykðæla saga*..., pp. 221—222.

⁵⁰ *Brennu-Njáls saga*. In: *Íslenzk fornrit*. Ed. E.Ó. Sveinsson. Vol. 12. Reykjavík 1954, pp. 150—151.

⁵¹ V. Guðmundsson: *Hestaþing*..., p. 34.

⁵² See *Þorsteins Þáttur stangarh ǫggs*. In: *Íslenzk fornrit*..., Vol. 11, pp. 69—70.

⁵³ *Eyrbyggja saga*. Eds. H. Pálsson, P. Edwards. Edinburgh 1973, p. 65.

⁵⁴ *Grettis saga*. In: *Íslenzk fornrit*. Ed. G. Jónsson. Vol. 7. Reykjavík 1936, p. 99.

⁵⁵ Nowadays horse-fights: <http://www.horsefund.org/horse-fighting-fact-sheet.php>.

⁵⁶ *Víga-Glúms saga*. In: *Íslenzk fornrit*. Ed. J. Kristjánsson. Vol. 9. Reykjavík 1956, pp. 43—44.

we read that “at some point Thormod’s and Bjarni’s stallions came together”⁵⁷. It may mean that it is true that horses were fighting in several fights with perhaps different opponents. As revealed earlier, fighting would take place as a tournament. It is always put forth that the horses were brought out (*fram leiddir*)⁵⁸, probably from the paddocks inside the circle (*kom í hringinn*)⁵⁹. The circle is also mentioned in *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*⁶⁰. What is of further interest, but much cannot be said, is that it seems that sometimes the horses were fighting in rounds as described in *Reykðæla saga* (*gengnar váru ellifu lotur*). As Valtý Guðmundsson says, “When two good fight horses were put together, their fight could be very long, perhaps hours on end. But then the fight was not held continuously, rather in so many rounds and with breaks between. Otherwise the fight was continued until one of the two horses fled (ran) or fell due to exhaustion or dead to the ground, and then a thunderous cry came from the spectators, after which time there could be either celebrations and victory cries or their displeasure was displayed”⁶¹. But still one important question lingers without an answer: How long the horse-fight lasted, how many rounds they could fight? Maybe if there was no judgement they were fighting to exhaustion?

4. Only *Víga-Glúms saga* tells us about judging. In the saga there were horse-fights organized by the people from upper and lower districts of the valley. But they also chose from each group one man who was to be a judge (those from the upper and lower districts of the valley were to oppose each other, and each side had to choose a man to say which horses had won; the verdict of those who were chosen was to be final)⁶². So two judges from different districts would say which horse had won. And as the saga-writer tells us, this judgement was final (*mann hvárir til taka, ok kveða at, hvárir betr hefði*). So in most cases everyone probably agreed with the score. It is a very good rule because then there is no third person whose voice could be final. Of course those chosen to decide should be honourable men and known in both of the groups. But here it seems that people from both districts put all horses together to a fight. And some of them did not finish their fights (many ways out were seen). Also the possible results of the horse-fighting can be seen. Of course one side wins and the other loses, but there were also draws (*jafnvígi væri*). But there is no data if

⁵⁷ *Reykðæla saga*..., pp. 181—183.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 182.

⁵⁹ *Víga-Glúms saga*..., p. 61.

⁶⁰ *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*..., pp. 174—175: “Þórðr sat á hrossbaki ok reið svá hjá mannhringum ok sá á vígít”.

⁶¹ V. Guðmundsson: *Hestaping*..., p. 35.

⁶² *Víga-Glúms saga*..., pp. 43—44: “skyldu sinn mann hvárir til taka, ok kveða at, hvárir betr hefði, ok skuli þeira atkvæði standa, er til váru kosnir. skyldu þeir í mót ór inum efra hrepp ok inum neðra”.

draws were called by the two judges together or by the audience? It is possible that in a fight organized by two owners it would be up to them to decide whose horses were to fight and who was to declare the winner.

5. The last part of horse-fighting (not as a sport but as an event) could be a quarrel or fight between people. As Glum wisely said: “this is how every horse-fight ends here”⁶³. One can quote similar instances from *Reykðæla saga*⁶⁴ *Brennu-Njáls saga*⁶⁵ and *Guðmundar saga dýra*⁶⁶. But this is too wide a topic to deal with here and I suggest to look on the article by John D. Martin about sport and games in the sagas where he mainly focus on the quarrel between protagonists in the sagas which arose during the sport activities⁶⁷.

Conclusions

It is quite difficult to say what the rules of horse-fighting were because of a lack of information in the sources. I examined every example of horse-fighting that exists in saga literature. An attempt will be made to put things together to inform on what the rules of the *hestaping* were in the Old Norse-Icelandic literature and culture.

Firstly, as it was mentioned in the introduction to this article, horses were really important for Scandinavian society in the Middle Ages. Many scholars connect the sport of horse-fighting to pagan beliefs and rituals⁶⁸. They have a special place there. So it should not be surprising that they were used in such a variety of different ways.

Mostly, horse-fights were held in the assemblies, as at that time people were gathering and had many different types of entertainment and also legal procedures. Sometimes it was organized accidentally and it was probably more common to arrange horse-fights on different occasions and set the meeting some time earlier. One can distinguish three different occasions for horse-meetings, 1. *alþingi*, 2. *þingi*, and 3. horse-meetings between districts.

⁶³ Ibidem, p. 44.

⁶⁴ *Reykðæla saga*..., p. 183.

⁶⁵ *Brennu-Njáls saga*..., p. 151.

⁶⁶ *Guðmundar saga dýra*. In: *Sturlunga Saga*. Vol. 2. Eds. J.H. McGrew, R.G. Thomas. New York 1974, p. 173.

⁶⁷ J.D. Martin: “*Svá lýkr hér hverju hestaðingi*” *Sports and Games in Icelandic Saga Literature*. “Scandinavian Studies” 2003, Vol. 75, no. 1, pp. 25—44.

⁶⁸ W.L. Faraday: *Custom and belief in the Icelandic sagas*. “Folklore” 1996, Vol. 17, no. 4, s. 420; also suggestion from conversations with Terry Gunnell.

The fighting horse (*víghestr*) was perhaps not used as a riding horse and as described in *Víga-Glúms saga* it is he who is going loose⁶⁹. Perhaps the course is not to exhaust the horse and not to tame it, but it could also be aimed for a purpose of rites like holy horses, for example in *Hrafnkel saga Freysgoða*⁷⁰.

As it is said in translation, owners had a second who lead their horses out: *fram leiddir*. This attendance of the second is quite the same as it was in duels. A friend was standing by or holding the clothes and weapons belonging to the fighter.

Time and space were of primary concern in horse-fighting. In the sagas there is evidence written that the sport took place in the summer or early autumn. As Valtý Guðmundsson rightly observed, often the horse-fights were held close to midsummer, one week or half of a month after midsummer and then either on Saturday or on Sunday⁷¹. But we only have one reference regarding this. Moreover, in the pagan calendar there is nothing like midsummer and this occasion can only be related to Christianity.

In regards to space and location, we have plenty of information about where the horse-fights were held. Main sources are sagas, from which we know that horse-fights were organized on riversides or at the bottom of mountains in flat areas (*Bjarnar saga Hitdælakappa*). Additional sources are place-names. In Iceland nowadays we have Hestapingshóll (Horse-meeting-hill), Hestavígshamarr (Horsefight-rock), Hestapingshamarr. Svale Solheim writes that “These accounts from *Sturlunga Saga* indicate that the localities which were called Hestapingshamarr or Hestavígshamarr were situated at — or close by — the regular, and certainly often ancient, meeting places in the districts where people came together, to the Thing, games and other gatherings of public interest”⁷². But this requires further inspection and for this purpose a map will be prepared. Horse-fighting as an event was important for Icelanders as a society and also for individuals. In this sport two things regarding society can be seen. The image that comes to mind after reading all the sagas is that horse-fights (as also found in *knattleikr* and *glíma*) can be seen as an equivalent to war. As it might have been between people from different districts one could envision a place of play as a battlefield. It is not shown clearly but games probably perverted the wars. In having horse-fights, a society can avoid a direct clash between people. Along with this comes the concept of honour. In *Víga-Glúms saga* there is a sentence: “The reason why you don’t want to put your horse to a fight must be that there’s no spirit in him; perhaps the old proverb will prove true, that ‘the livestock’s like its master’”⁷³. By losing or winning

⁶⁹ *Víga-Glúms saga*..., p. 44.

⁷⁰ *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*..., p. 100.

⁷¹ V. Guðmundsson: *Hestaping*..., p. 33.

⁷² S. Solheim: *Horse*..., p. 68.

⁷³ *Víga-Glúms saga*..., s. 43.

the horse, the owner could achieve or lose splendour. Almost every game or sport was taken as serious as possible (there are many examples of killing during a game or shortly after). Eric Christiansen rightly observed that “Feasting performed at least five useful political functions, apart from nutrition: It brought potential enemies and troublemakers together under the rule of conviviality: mimic war (horse-play, riddling, athletics, versification) to forestall the real thing”⁷⁴. The place of a horse-fight changed its role from the everyday life place into place of gaining and losing honour.

Horse-fighting did not disappear in the following age. As it was written above, in 1592 there were still horse-fights held in Iceland⁷⁵. Except for this example from *Alþingisbækur Íslands* one can find a lot of instances in the centuries after. In 1623 we have the last reliable information about horse-fights which were held in *Fnjóskárdalur*⁷⁶. But they show up even in the 19th century. Good work was done by Bjarni Vilhjálmsson in his article in *Gripla*, where he started analysing the horse-fights from medieval times and follows the descriptions through the ages⁷⁷.

The research into horse-fighting is still not finished and needs to be looked at more closely from the point of literary motifs, meanings for Icelanders and symbolism. Many things were not touched upon and this topic is very difficult to condense into one article.

⁷⁴ E. Christiansen: *The Norsemen in the Viking Age*. Oxford 2006.

⁷⁵ *Alþingisbækur Íslands*. Vol. 2. Reykjavík 1915—1916, pp. 255—256. I used the normalized spelling by B. Vilhjálmsson: *Postulínsgerð og hestavíg. Athugun á heimild Jóns Espólins um hestaping á Bleiksmýrardal*. “Gripla” 1990, Vol. 7, pp. 7—50.

⁷⁶ D. Bruun: *Fortidsminder og Nutidshjem paa Island*. København 1928, p. 304.

⁷⁷ B. Vilhjálmsson: *Postulínsgerð...*, pp. 7—50.

Remigiusz Gogosz

**Walki koni
Brutalna rozrywka w islandzkich sagach**

Streszczenie

Walki koni (*hestaat*, *hestavíg*) były osobliwym zjawiskiem w średniowiecznym społeczeństwie. Ów sport, który ukazano w islandzkich sagach oraz późniejszych źródłach, zanika w czasach bliższych współczesności. Część badaczy stara się przypisać początki tego zjawiska rytuałom religijnym, ale pozostaje ono kwestią sporną z powodu braku źródeł je potwierdzających. Organizacja walk koni (*hestaping*) była ważną częścią życia Islandczyków w średniowieczu, gdyż dawała im możliwość nie tylko spotkania się w celach towarzyskich, lecz także po to, by końmi handlować czy je parować. Decydowano, w jaki sposób konie mają z sobą walczyć (jeden na jednego, turniej itd.), oraz wybierano sędziów, którzy mieli decydować o wyniku. Na

miejsce pojedynku (krąg ludzi, krąg kamieni) konia przyprowadzał nieraz sekundant. Walka polegała na kopaniu i gryzieniu przeciwnika. Być może (nie ma na to dowodów) przyprowadzano klacz, by pobudzić ogiery do ataku. Częstym powodem pojawiania się motywu walk koni w sagach jest moment ich zakończenia, liczne kłótnie, pojedynki, które opisują przyczyny późniejszego konfliktu pomiędzy właścicielami koni. Walki koni gromadziły również przeciwników z różnych regionów, których konie walczyły między sobą, co przyczyniało się do tworzenia i umacniania się identyfikacji ludzi z konkretnymi częściami wyspy.

Remigiusz Gogosz

Pferdekämpfe: Brutale Unterhaltung der Epoche der isländischen Sagen

Zusammenfassung

Die Pferdekämpfe (*hestaat*, *hestavíg*) waren ein seltsames Phänomen in mittelalterlicher Gesellschaft. Diese in isländischen Sagen und in späteren Quellen dargestellte Sportart schien in der der Gegenwart näheren Zeit auszusterben. Einige Forscher sehen in den Anfängen des Phänomens ein religiöses Ritual, doch da es durch keine Quellen bestätigt worden ist, bleibt es bis auf weiteres eine umstrittene und unlösbare Frage. Die Veranstaltung von Pferdekämpfen war für mittelalterliche Isländer sehr wichtig und bedeutete nicht nur ein geselliges Beisammensein, sondern auch die Gelegenheit, mit Pferden zu handeln und sie zu paaren. Es wurden hier die Form der Pferdekämpfe (eins gegen eins, ein Turnier etc.) und die Kampfrichter gewählt. Auf die Kampfbahn (Menschen- oder Steinkreis) wurde das Pferd von einem Sekundanten hereingeführt. Der Kampf beruhte darauf, dass sich die Tiere gegenseitig treten und beißen sollten. Man führte auch vielleicht (es gibt aber keine Beweise dafür) eine Stute herein, um die Hengste zum Angriff anzuspornen. Das Motiv der Pferdekämpfe kommt in den Sagen häufig mit den Konflikten zwischen den Pferdebesitzern einher. Pferdekämpfe lockten Mitspieler aus verschiedenen Landgebieten an, was zur Entstehung und Festigung der Identität der Menschen mit den bestimmten Inselteilen beitrug.