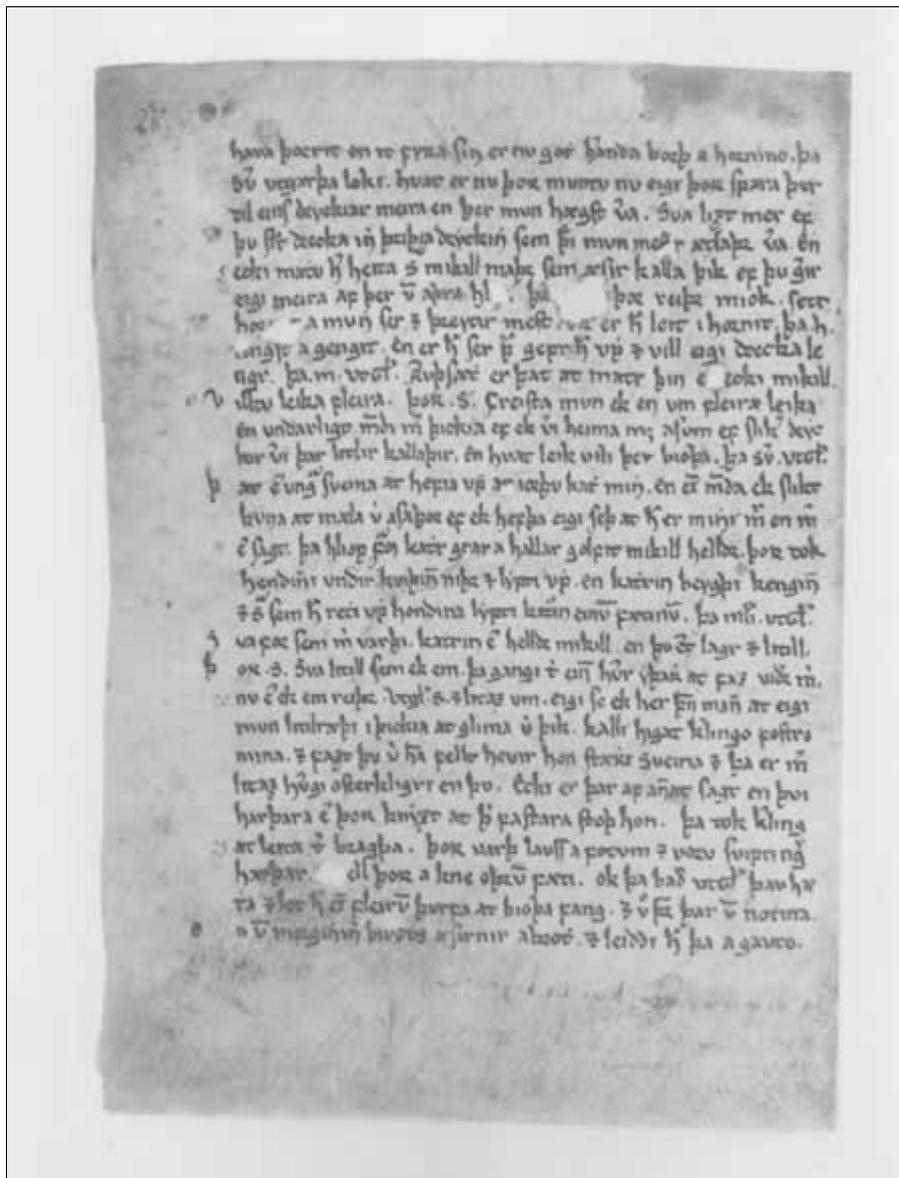


# What does a mythological text in Snorra Edda tell us about the ritual ceremonies that surrounded glíma fights in ancient times?

## *A study by Lars Magnar Enoksen.*

### 1. The sources and their contents

#### 1.1. Background – Glíma and the Snorra Edda



*A page from the oldest vellum of the Snorra Edda.  
On this actual page we find the myth which tells about glíma.*

Glíma is a term of an old Scandinavian martial art which was practiced without weapons in the warrior society of the Viking age and medieval times. The oldest and definitely the most informative text about the ritual ceremonies surrounding glíma fights in ancient times can be found

in the Snorra Edda which was written down in the 1220s by a learned Icelander and a master poet Snorri Sturluson (1178/9–1241).

The Edda of Snorri Sturluson has survived in handwritten copies of expensive vellum from the first part of the 14th Century. They are called Codex Upsaliensis (ca 1300), Codex Regius (ca 1325) and Codex Wormianus (ca 1340–1350) because of their later owners in the 17th Century. These very important vellums of Snorra Edda are known as the best sources of the old traditions and religious beliefs of the heathen North.

In this study I will concentrate on the information from the myth about Thor, God of Thunder, visiting the castle of Utgard's Loki, the chieftain of the giants, which will tell us about the ritual ceremonies surrounding glíma fights in a context similar to what is described in Snorra Edda.

## 1. 2. The myth

The myth of Thor, the God of thunder, and his visit to Utgard's Loki is found in the part of Snorra Edda called Gylfaginning and is a presentation of the pagan mythology of the North. The complete story is found in chapters 44–47 of Gylfaginning, but we shall concentrate on chapter 46 because it mentions glíma and tells how it is practiced in a somewhat ritual context.

At the beginning of chapter 46 it is mentioned that the warriors of Utgard's Loki are sitting on two long benches in the house of the chieftain. These warriors are said to have an impressive stature, which is not strange because they are giants. As the story unfolds, Thor's travelling companions are challenged in different kinds of physical exercises, for example eating fast and running – not at the same time of course.

Thor has to prove himself to be the mightiest and the strongest of the Gods when his friends have lost their competitions. But he fails miserably in a drinking contest as well as in a strength contest. The reason for Thor's failure is that he is tricked by Utgard's Loki and does not understand that the mead he is drinking is the world's sea and a cat he is lifting is in fact the Midgard's serpent. It is at this stage the myth is telling us about what this study focuses on.

The myth will be presented in Old Norse and English due to the importance of the text. Using the sources available, I will use all the handwritten vellums we have at our disposal in the mythological text that follows, just as it was done 1848 in the first critically scientific and still the most informative presentation of Snorra Edda and its historical source material. I have put some passages in italics both in the Norse text and in the English translation in order to make the important terms clearer for the reader.

## 1.3. The text in Old Norse

[...] Þá mælti Útgarda-Loki: "Svá fór þessi leikr sem mik varði. Köttrinn er heldr mikill, en Þórr er lágr ok lítill hjá stórmenni því, sem er hér er með oss."

Þá mælti Þórr: "Svá lítinn sem þér kallid mik, þá gangi nú til einnhverr ok fáiz við mik! Nú em ek reidr!"

Þá svarar Útgarda-Loki ok litast um á bekkina ok mælti: "Eigi sé ek þann mann hér inni, er eigi mun lítilræði í þykkja at glíma við þik." Ok en mælti hann: "Sjám fyrst, kalli mér hingat kerlinguna fóstura mína, Elli, ok fáiz Þórr við hana ef hann vill. Fellt hefir hon þá menn er mér hafa sýnnz eigi ústerkligri en Þórr er."

Því næst gekk í höllina kerling ein gömul. Þá mælti Útgarda-Loki at hon skal taka fang við Ása-Þórr. Ekki er langt um at gera. Svá fór fang þat, at því harðara en Þórr knúdist at fanginu, því fastara stóð hon. Þá tók kerling at leita til bragða, ok varð Þórr lauss á fótum, ok vóro þær sviptningar allharðar, ok eigi lengi áðr en Þórr féll á kné öðrum fæti.

Þá gekk til Útgarda-Loki, bað þau hætta fanginu ok sagði svá at Þórr myndi eigi þurfa at bjóða fleirum mönnum fang í hans höll. [...]

## 1.4. The translated text

[...] Then Utgard's Loki said: "So it went with this game as I thought. The cat is very big and Thor is low and little in comparison with the impressive men that are here with us."

Then Thor said: "So little as you call me, let any one of you now come hither and wrestle with me! Now I am wrath!"

Then Utgard's Loki answered, and looked about on the benches and said: "I do not see the man here within, who does not think it is a trifle to glíma with you." And he also said: "Let me see first, call me hither the old woman, Elli, who was my wet-nurse and let Thor wrestle with her if he wants. She has felled men who have seemed to me no less stronger than Thor is."

Then an old woman came into the hall. Then Utgard's Loki said that she should take hold on Asa-Thor. The tale is not long; so fared the grapple, that the harder Thor tightened his hold the faster she stood. Then began the old woman to try to trip him, and then became Thor loose on his feet, and there were very hard tugging, and it was not long until Thor fell down on one knee.

Then Utgard's Loki went up and told them to stop the fight, and said that it was no use for Thor to ask anyone else in the hall to wrestle him. [...]

### 1.5. Important terms explanation

Before we go any further I want to give an explanation of certain terms that are used in the myth.

The Old Norse word fang is an ancient term for wrestling/grappling and its exact meaning is "the area which one claps and embraces with the arms and breast" and in Swedish we still use the term fång to describe anything that can be embraced with the arms and breast together. This means that a grip or a hold with the part of the body that is called fang in Old Norse and is still called fång in Swedish, and is most likely the major grip or hold in ancient Scandinavian wrestling. It is also interesting to note that famntag, favnetag and favnetak were Swedish, Danish and Norwegian expressions of wrestling and have the same meaning as fang.

The medieval text states that the actual wrestling starts when both fighters "take hold" or taka fang as it is called in Old Norse. These words clarify that the ancient Scandinavian wrestling, as it is described in Snorra Edda, has been practiced with a fixed hold. The text does not tell us where this hold is taken, but it is obvious that it is taken with the arms and that it has made a wrestling match possible. I do not think it is too daring to presume that it was some kind of back-spanning or back-hold, because it says "that the harder Thor tightened his hold" (at því hardara en Þórr knúðist at fānginu) and that seems to indicate that we are talking about a hold with both hands clasped together probably around the opponent's back. This style of wrestling is known to have been a popular physical activity of the Scandinavian country people and was called Ryggtag or Ryggkast in Swedish, Ryggjetak, Ryggspenna or Ryggjekneppa in Norwegian and Hryggspenna in Icelandic. The ancient Norse wrestling could obviously also be called glíma because it is used as a synonym for fang in the text. It should be mentioned that it is the oldest of the three surviving medieval manuscripts of the Snorra Edda that use the word glíma. The other two vellums use fáz instead. To be more exact, fáz and fáiz are verbs used in different tempus made out of the substantive fang. However, the important observation is that the writer of Codex Upsaliensis of the Snorra Edda thinks that glíma is the same thing as fang.

The main objective of a glíma fight is to throw the opponent to the ground and the text states that Elli is known for her skills in glíma because she has "felled" (fellt) men that seemed to be strong enough to put up a good fight. The action needed to fell someone is the use of bragð (or brögð in plural) which is a quick or sudden motion in Old Norse. The myth says that the old woman is leita til bragða and that makes Thor lauss á fótum. This means that Elli is using some kind of tripping techniques that makes Thor lose his balance and start to stumble.

When Thor has lost his balance, Elli puts in the final attack and uses "very hard tugging" (sviptningar allharðar) which ends with that Thor "fell down on one knee" (féll á kné öðrum fæti). To be victorious in glíma/fang in ancient times it seems that the fighter only had to make the

opponent touch the ground with anything other than his/her feet, because Utgard's Loki immediately "told them to stop the fight" (bað þau hætta fanginu) when Thor fell down on one knee. It is totally clear that the game is over at this point and that Thor has no right to ask anyone else in the hall for a rematch.

I hope that I have made a fairly good picture of the major points in glíma with this explanation before we continue with this study's major subject.

#### 1.6. The ritual ceremonies and their components

One of the things that strikes me mostly when I study the myth of Snorra Edda is that there are a lot of elements in it that indicate many of the ritual ceremonies surrounding the glíma fight in ancient times.

First of all we have the arena. In this case it is a hall of a chieftain. The beginning of chapter 46 in Gylfaginning says that it was a "great hall" (höll mikla) in a "burg/fortress" (borg). In this hall there were "many men sitting on two benches" (marga men á tvá bekki). Later in the text the men on the benches are specified as "the chieftain's bodyguard/warriors" (hirdmenn). This means that we have a great hall where the action is supposed to happen and trained warriors are sitting on two benches which are the seats of honour.

Then we have the challenger, or more exactly the person who is trying to get recognition from the distinguished people sitting on the benches in the hall. In the myth, Thor is the challenger. The ruler of the burg and the warriors is called "the king" (konunginn) and he is the only person who communicates with the challenger. In the myth it is Utgard's Loki who is the ruler. As we see in this study, the challenger is allowed to make challenges only, but the ruler explains the terms and judges the effort made by the challenger.

The challenger must perform three feats of impressive nature in which the last is the glíma fight in order to prove himself worthy. The contest of feats starts with the ruler asking the challenger: "what kind of arts/feats would he be willing to show before them" (hvat þeira íþróttá mun vera birta fyrir þeim). As we can see, the challenger is allowed to choose what the first feat will be.

In the myth, the first feat is made by drinking an alcoholic beverage from a great horn and the challenger is supposed to empty it in three attempts. The challenger starts by saying: "that he most of all wants to compete in a drinking bout with any man" (at helzt vill hann þat taka til at þreyta drykkio við einhvern mann). The ruler answers and sets terms for the challenger: "Of this horn it is thought well drunk, if it goes off in one draught, though some men drink it off in two, but no one is so little a man in his drink that it does not go off in three." (Af horni þessu þikkir þá vel drukkit ef í einum drykk gengr af, en sumir menn drekka af í tveim drykkjum, en engi er svá lítill drykkjumadr at eigi af í þrimr). In the myth, Utgard's Loki mocks Thor after each draught because the challenger is not showing proof of impressive behaviour. The mocking is made in a courteous way, like "This is well drunk and yet it was not that much." (Vel er drukkit, ok eigi til mikit.). It should be mentioned that the actual drinking horn is called "the horn of harm" (vítis-horn) in the text, which indicates that it is some kind of punishment to drink from this horn.

After the first feat has been performed the ruler accepts the outcome. He asks the challenger if he is willing to continue the challenge by asking: "Do you want to try more games?" (villtu freista um fleiri leika?). The challenger answers: "I want to try some more games ... But what game do you want to offer me?" (Freista má nú ek enn of nökkura leika ... En hvat leik vilit þér nú bióða mér?). As we see, the ruler and the challenger are communicating in a very courteous way. However, it is the ruler who decides if the challenge continues.

As we have seen, the second feat begins with the ruler asking the challenger if the latter is willing to continue. After getting a positive answer the ruler declares the second feat and in the myth, it is a contest of strength, in this case lifting a heavy object from the ground. Please, note that the object to be lifted is a living creature and not a dead weight. As it has been mentioned before the myth uses a

cat which in fact is the enormous Midgard's serpent being the object to be lifted. In the text Utgard's Loki specifies that the object should be "lifted up from the earth" (hefia upp af iörðo). It is obvious that the heavy object is supposed to be lifted as high as possible by the challenger, because the myth says: "Thor raised his hands ... Thor had got them as high as ever he could" (Þórr rétti upp höndina ... Þórr seildiz svá langt upp sem hann mátti lengzt).

The outcome of the second feat is commented on in a mocking way by the ruler: "So it went with this game as I thought. The cat is very big and Thor is low and little in comparison with the impressive men that are here with us." (Svá fór þessi leikr sem mik varði. Köttrinn er heldr mikill, en Þórr er lágr ok lítill hjá stórmenni því, sem er hér er með oss.). Which make the challenger answer: "So little as you call me, let any one of you now come hither and wrestle with me! Now I am wrath!" (Svá lítinn sem þér kallið mik, þá gáangi nú til einhverr ok fáiz við mik! Nú em ek reiðr!). It now looks like the challenger is deciding the third feat as he has done in the first case. The difference is that the challenger issues a stronger challenge by letting everyone know that he is going to use his wrath on the person who dares to wrestle him.

The ruler accepts the challenge and declares that the third feat should be a contest of glíma, which is the same as "wrestling/grappling" (fang). The ruler also decides who will be the challenger's opponent in the fight and chooses an experienced wrestler who has proven her skills by having: "felled men who have seemed to me no less stronger than Thor is" (felld hefir hon þá menn er mér hafa sýnnz eigi ústerkligr en Þórr er). This wrestler is "old" (gömul) but still very able in the art of glíma because she knows how to "try to trip" or more exactly "how to find out the right tripping-techniques" (leita til bragða). These skills make her victorious in the bout.

The ruler orders the fighters to "stop the fight" (hætta fanginu) when the challenger has lost his balance and "fell down on one knee" (féll á kné öðrum fæti). After having made this order Utgard's Loki specifies: "that it was no use for Thor to ask anyone else in the hall to wrestle him" (at Þórr myndi eigi þurfa at bjóða fleirum mönnum fang í hans höll). These words make it clear for the challenger as well as for the audience that he has no right to continue the competition or make any more challenges to the distinguished people in the hall. The decision of the ruler can obviously not be overruled, and therefore we do not hear complaints from the challenger or the storyteller in the myth.

An interesting detail is that the ruler does not mock the challenger for his efforts when the third and last challenge is over. This may be a token of gratitude towards the challenger after earning the respect of the ruler by having had the courage in being put to the test in the hall of the warriors.

## 2. A structural presentation of the information given in Snorra Edda

### 2.1. The major players

The major players in the ritual are the ruler and the challenger, which communicate in a very polite and courteous way. It is also important to mention the distinguished warriors belonging to the ruler and sitting on the benches in the hall/arena, because they are the people which already have the recognition the challenger is striving for.

### 2.2. The ritual and its major points

It is the ruler who starts the ritual by asking the challenger if the latter knows any arts/feats/sports of impressive nature that he can perform. The challenger answers by naming a feat he thinks he is good at. Then the ruler gives his approval of the mentioned art and lets the challenger show his skills in this sport. However the ruler explains the terms to the challenger and what is expected in the feat he has chosen. The ruler comments on the challenger's efforts and does it in a mocking but courteous way. The ruler's comments always contain a polite question whether the challenger is willing or dares continue. The challenger decides the first and the third feat. The ruler decides the second feat. This means that the ritual contains three feats that the challenger is to perform. When the last feat has ended, the ruler announces that the contest is over and gives his conclusion of the

challenger's efforts. This is done with respect and does not include any mocking even if the outcome of the last feat is negative for the challenger.

### 2.3. The feats

As we have already stated the feats are three in number. They are quite different in their structure, but they are all performed in a competitive way. The first feat is a drinking contest where the challenger is supposed to empty a big drinking horn filled with an alcoholic beverage. The challenger is allowed three attempts to empty it, but the fewer draughts the better. The second feat is a contest of strength and is done by lifting a heavy object from the ground. The challenger is supposed to lift the object as high as possible with his hands, that indicates it should be lifted over the head. The heavy object is not a dead weight which makes it more difficult to control. The third feat is a wrestling match and is the final test of the challenger. In this feat both strength and skills are needed. The aim of the fight is to make the opponent lose his/her balance and the game is lost when one touches the ground with anything other than the feet.

## 3. Conclusion of the study

### 3.1. The aim of the ritual and its ceremonies

When studying a myth, it is of major importance to find out in what kind of cultural context the story seems to be told. In our case we are talking about a pagan myth of ancient Scandinavia that can be found in medieval manuscripts from the beginning of the 14th Century. We also know for sure that the original text of these manuscripts are at least one hundred years older because the collector of the myths wrote them in the first part of the 13th Century. It is not my purpose to discuss the age or the origin of the myths that can be found in the Snorra Edda, but I want to stress that these myths are the oldest mythological stories that have survived in the Old Norse language and they are told in a heathen context. As an important information regarding the age of the myth it should be mentioned that the Scandinavian countries were Christianised in the 10th and 11th Centuries. This indicates an origin which is much older than the era when the myths have been collected in Snorra Edda.

If we focus on the cultural context of the myth, it is clear that the stage, where the feats are performed, is a great hall of a chieftain or more exactly of a king. The warriors belonging to the king's bodyguard are the audience. This indicates that the feats, which are performed in the myth, are connected to the cultural context of a Scandinavian king and his armed bodyguard.

Like in all religions, the myths in Norse mythology are usually related to real life in some way. The myths were an oral tradition constructed to explain real life phenomenon's and teach morals and values. This makes it fairly probable that the three mentioned feats were of great importance to the warrior society of the North in heathen times. If we examine closely the contents of the myth, it seems to describe the ritual ceremonies which are performed in front of the king and his warriors by a person aiming to get acceptance of the group. In other words we are talking about some form of initiation.

The feats are very physical in their appearance. The ceremonial circumstances are enhanced by the fact that the challenger first of all is supposed to empty a drinking horn full of alcoholic beverage. As well as the ritualistic appearance of it, being a good drinker is obviously a thing that was held in high regard in the cultural context of the warrior society of the North. It is not difficult to understand that the second feat, where the challenger shows proof of his strength, was a respected quality of warriors. However it is the third and last feat that really puts the challenger to the test because in this test the challenger must prove his skills as a fighter and that is of course the most important quality of a warrior.

The third test is the only feat where the challenger must fight another person and therefore it demands more skills and efforts than the other feats. The art of combat chosen for the fight is called *glíma/fang* and is an Old Norse expression for describing wrestling. By choosing an unarmed fighting style, it indicates that the aim is not to kill the opponent. Knowing that the skilled warriors

are the audience, it is interesting to note that an unarmed fighting style is used to ascertain the skills of the challenger.

If we analyse the major components of the ritual ceremonies that surround the third and final test, we get a clear picture of what kind of skills the warrior society of the North approved of and thought to recognize a true fighter. The challenge made by the challenger before the last feat starts, is directed towards all the warriors and states that he has the courage to fight any one of them. The courage to take on all comers must be the most important mark of a warrior because the latter must be able to handle any opposition encountered on the field of battle. The ruler decides who will fight the challenger and the choice is made by estimating the challenger's powers and giving him an opponent who does not seem impressive in appearance but has proven to be victorious in many fights. This fighter is much older than the challenger and knows how to act in unarmed combat. The chosen opposition lets the challenger prove his skills at the beginning of the fight, but quickly repels the attacks with cunning and efficient moves that make the challenger lose his balance and the fight. The ruler interferes the moment he understands that the fight is over and announces the verdict which ends the ritual.

If the myth is related to the social context it describes, the analysis of the fight will most likely point out the virtues that the warrior society of the North held in high esteem in ancient times. A closer look at the fight tells us that a fighter must be able to stand strong when he/she is pressed hard and should take the opportunity to attack when a chance appears. These virtues are easy to understand and accept, but of course, is more difficult to perform in reality and in stressful situations.

The conclusion of the study is that the myth in Snorra Edda gives us a fairly good description of the ritual ceremonies that surrounded glíma fights in ancient times. The glíma fight and its preceding feats are used by the skilled warriors and their chieftain to find out if the aspiring warrior has what it takes to become a real warrior. By using an unarmed combat style to test the challenger's fighting skills, the chieftain and his warriors could analyse the aspiring warrior's talents without exposing him or the opponent to serious danger. This indicates that the warrior society of the North thought that the martial art called glíma contained all of the fighting aspects needed. It also means that the Scandinavian warriors held glíma in the highest regards and that it was a combat style known to all warriors.

I do not think that we are stretching the facts too far if we state that the three feats described in the myth, provide us with a clear picture of the deeds used in Scandinavia when a warrior is initiated as an accepted member of the warrior society by proving the virtues necessary to cope with in his new line of work. This means that a warrior was supposed to be a great drinker without getting drunk. He also was to be strong and to know how to fight. However, it is the ritualistic circumstance with courteous questions and answers surrounding the feats that give the appearance of a ceremonial initiation of a warrior. It is interesting to note that mocking was an important aspect in the course of initiation which unveils the good spirit of the ritual.

#### 4. Excursus – The result of the study observed in a wider perspective

##### 4.1. The warrior society of ancient Scandinavia

While discussing the subject it is important to give some more information about the ancient warrior society of the North which is closely related to the myth described in Snorra Edda. It so happens that the historical sources are very favourable with information concerning the Scandinavian warrior society and its laws.

The most important sources in this matter is the Danish Witherlogh or "the law of the king and his warriors" and the Norwegian Hirdskrá or "the scroll that tells about the king and his warriors". The Witherlogh is preserved in a Latin version from the late 12th Century written down by a Danish historian and warrior Sven Aggeson (ca 1130/1140–1190/1200). His text states that it can be traced back to the early 11th Century. The Hirdskrá is preserved in the Norse language from the late 13th Century and the actual text tells about an old and a new version of this law, in which the oldest is

from the early 11th Century or even older.

It is a well known fact that the best historical sources are found in law-books because it gives high quality information about the laws and customs which the society accepts or obeys. A study of the abovementioned law-books presents the interesting information that they were founded on the idea that the king and his warriors are equal before the law. This meant that any new person who desired to become the king's warrior, had to get an official acceptance from both the king and his warrior. It is clearly stated in chapter 25 (or chapter 30 in some vellums) of Hirdskrá that the aspiring warrior must get recognition from both the king and all his warriors before he will be given an official status of a warrior.

When looking at the skills and virtues thought highly of, it does not come as a shock that both the Witherlogh and the Hirdskrá state that practical knowledge of martial arts is the most important virtue of the warrior. However, it is interesting to note that the Hirdskrá also mentions that the warrior should never get drunk while drinking. This means that two of the three feats performed in the myth of Snorra Edda have direct references to the ancient laws of the Scandinavian warrior society. I further would like to stress that unanimous decision given by the king and his warriors was necessary for the aspiring warrior to get recognition and acceptance by the warrior society. The ancient warrior laws of Scandinavia do not say how the king and his warriors substantiated their decision, but it may be very close to the ritual ceremony described in Snorra Edda.

I hope this little excursus gives the reader a better chance to understand the underlined customs and culture which haven given birth to the myth of Thor's visit to Utgard's Loki.

#### 4.2. Closing words

This study has been focusing on a mythological text that is rich in information concerning the physical feats that were performed and respected by the warrior society of the North in ancient times. However, we should not forget to mention that the glíma fight is fought between a man and a woman in which the woman is victorious. The fact that the woman of age can beat a strong man in glíma by using experience and cunning moves is well known in the Scandinavian countries. The greatest evidence of this is that the expression of káringkrokar, which means "the old woman's hooks", was used in the Swedish language in older times for all the tripping-techniques of glíma. This expression was used up to the beginning of the 20th Century in Sweden and its meaning can be traced back to the pagan myth mentioned in Snorra Edda which was used in this study.

#### About the author

Lars Magnar Enoksen was born in 1960 in Sweden. He has Norwegian/Swedish ancestry and is a well known expert in ancient Scandinavian history. As an author he has written many critically acclaimed books about the Viking age culture of which mythology, runes and the martial arts are his favourite subjects. Besides being published in the major Nordic languages, his books can also be found in English and Japanese.

Lars Magnar Enoksen is internationally recognized to be an outstanding expert in Glíma both in the practical and theoretical sense of the art.