

# **Grappling with the Sagas: Embodied Knowledge and Reconstructing a Historical Martial Art**

by

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Lastly, I dedicate this dissertation to my late father: You were my greatest supporter and believer, and I only wish you were here to share in my pride. May I follow in your footsteps in living a long life to its fullest.

## Abstract

This thesis aims to show the extent to which the accurate identification and reconstruction of historical martial techniques is possible through the analysis of historical written texts. In doing so I will trace from its origins the process of achieving adequate embodied knowledge, from the acquiring of one's habitus to the various foundational factors that interact with one another in order to facilitate the creation of specific, accessible embodied knowledge. I further argue that an interdisciplinary expertise is needed to confidently identify such historical martial techniques: in order to maximize one's insights and the credibility of one's analysis one must have sufficient knowledge and understanding of the social, cultural, linguistic, and literary foundations within which the texts were written as well as an embodied, corporeal knowledge of the martial art or practice in question. I use as a case study for this research the sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*) and legendary sagas (*foraldarsögur*): two of the most celebrated genres of medieval Scandinavian literature. In conjunction with the sagas' particular historicity regarding the social norms and pastimes of medieval Iceland I argue that wrestling, in its broadest sense, is a primordial mode of combat that is universally found throughout human history and civilization.

Due to wrestling's ubiquitous and primordial nature, I argue that a modern scholar and grappler, with sufficient expertise in regard to both the literary/cultural aspects of the sagas as well as embodied knowledge in grappling, can accurately identify and recreate the wrestling techniques found in these and perhaps other historical texts. In evidencing my argument I critique contemporary claims about the wrestling style(s) found within the sagas and also argue that the frequent lack of relevant embodied knowledge in academia should be addressed as it manifests itself in poor or inaccurate translations of embodied techniques (such as grappling maneuvers) found within historical texts and an incomplete understanding of both the source culture's literature and society. Clarifying these issues will not only benefit scholarly understanding of previously misunderstood aspects of the sagas and the cultures they belonged to but will also shed light upon the potential values of integrating embodied knowledge into the toolset or references of the modern academic.

## Prefatory Notes

### On video links:

Before proceeding I would like to point out the inherent difficulty in describing through the medium of text any sport and the intricacies of its techniques; particularly a sport filled with as many minutiae as grappling. Due to their corporeal nature, embodied practices such as grappling have a greater affinity with multimedia documentation than with strictly textual media because the former captures more of the embodied knowledge that structures such practices than does the latter (Spatz 241).<sup>1</sup>The relevantly recent advent of Digital Humanities to academia has allowed for me to utilize and integrate into my thesis digital video links, which I have done so in an effort to more clearly portray some of the grappling techniques described in the *fornaldarsögur* and *Íslendingasögur*. I have supplemented many of the grappling techniques analysed throughout this thesis with an attached/linked video demonstration of the maneuver, footnoted at the bottom of the relevant page. Though a thorough written description may suffice in most instances, the addition of a visual aid supplements and in many ways clarifies the written depictions. As the former Icelandic *Glíma* champion Jóhannes Jósefsson stated about *glíma*: “volumes may be written in explanation of the numerous tricks, without conveying to the reader, however, a sufficiently clear idea as to how to perform them. It is necessary to study carefully the illustrations of the various positions”(5). Another explicit benefit of video explanations and demonstrations is that they allow the reader/viewer to absorb and analyse countless details, from foot placement and hand grips to subtleties of posture and other minutiae, that might not otherwise be clear, or even mentioned, in the text description.

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<sup>1</sup> For thorough discussion on representing embodied and epistemic techniques through various media see Spatz’s chapter “Embodied Research in the University” in *What a Body Can Do: Technique as Knowledge, Practice as Research*.

### **On Icelandic Names and saga titles:**

Due to Old Norse nouns having multiple declensions there are different academic conventions regarding how to integrate Old Norse names and personal names into an English text. To avoid confusion and because of this thesis' interdisciplinary nature I will be using the Anglicized version of Old Norse names except when quoting source material. Regarding the titles of sagas I will at first mention give both a saga's Old Norse and Anglicized title (if applicable) as the different authors and translators I reference throughout the thesis use the different titles. For subsequent mentions of the saga I will use the Old Norse title wherever contextually appropriate. Following the guidelines of the Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Study, and because of the frequency in which I reference Icelandic texts and authors throughout this thesis, I will also begin bibliographic entries and citations regarding Icelandic and Scandinavian authors with the author's first name.

### **On Translations and Primary Sources Used:**

All of the *Íslendingasögur* that are quoted or referred to in this thesis have their respective academic translations, which I reference. The *fornaldarsögur*, however, have received less academic attention and therefore there are several *fornaldarsögur*, some of which I use as sources in this thesis, that either do not have a properly academic translation or were never standardized. The Covid-19 pandemic has also had a minor impact on this thesis as it has greatly restricted library access for the last 10 months of my research. In light of this, there are certain *fornaldarsögur* versions and their translations that I would have liked to have referenced, but due to legal and logistical restraints was left with only what repositories were available online. In all cases I have used the best translations and standardized texts available to me and have gone through the translations personally to make sure that any used in this thesis accurately and grammatically reflect the source material, with the multiple exceptions of where I draw attention to problems

found within the translations as they pertain to the descriptions or understanding of grappling techniques.

### **On Format and Structure:**

In writing a book-length interdisciplinary specialist work I have found that one of the greatest difficulties can be in organizing the argument in a cohesive way that both follows a constant thread of logic while simultaneously presenting the necessary background knowledge of the different disciplines: to begin by applying an in-depth analysis to an Old Norse passage and then have to explain at length the various backgrounds necessary in order to allow one came to that conclusion lacks the sharpness and appeal of covering all of the necessary foundational and background information first and then putting forth your definitive argument. In an attempt to achieve the latter results I have chosen to organize this thesis in a particular fashion with the hopes of addressing all necessary foundational information regarding Old Norse studies and relevant Martial Arts Studies/embodied theory *before* delving into the specifics of analysis with respect to the source material and examples. In doing so my goal is that upon reaching the textual analyses towards the end of this thesis my reader will already have all the tools, definitions, and understanding necessary to fully follow and appreciate my final arguments and findings.

### **On Personal Embodied and Martial Experience:**

As I argue in this thesis, many of the conclusions I have drawn from my analyses of written historical grappling sequences necessarily stem from relevant personal embodied experience and knowledge. Unlike more academically “traditional” modes of information and knowledge acquisition, one’s accomplishments, merits, and level of experience in martial techniques (specifically in the case grappling) are somewhat

difficult to substantiate in an official manner. Although certain combat sports have identifiable honors and certifications, such as judo and (Brazilian) jiu jitsu's black belt, or boxing's various Golden Gloves awards and competitions, there is often no overarching governing body (either between different sports or even within a given sport). Further complicating the issue of portraying one's experience and/or proficiency in such a broad skill/sport as grappling is the fact that so many different styles of grappling exist, with many overlapping in techniques and required skills while others may require rather incompatible sets of skills.<sup>2</sup> With this ambiguity in mind, I still find it nonetheless important to at least cursorily describe my own grappling experience rather than to ask the reader to blindly respect the embodied knowledge-related conclusions I come to in my later technique analyses.

In 1999, at age fourteen, I began my first official training in wrestling during high school. After four years of wrestling in high school (and the blessing/misfortune<sup>3</sup> of having a multi-time State Champion as the only other wrestler in my weight class) I went off to college where my interest in Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) and jiu jitsu took off. Using my wrestling base as a springboard, I began training in various martial arts (such as boxing, kick boxing, Muay Thai), with a focus on no-gi<sup>4</sup> grappling. I soon began competing in both jiu jitsu and no-gi grappling tournaments, as well as in amateur MMA matches.<sup>5</sup> Although I only competed actively in MMA for a few years, I continued to

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<sup>2</sup> For example, despite both Greco-Roman and freestyle being types of wrestling, the former forbids all holds (and indeed contact) below the waist, while the latter allows one to use one's own legs both defensively and offensively. Similarly, while some wrestling styles have the goal of pinning one's opponent, pinning techniques are far less useful in grappling styles that remain standing, or require one's opponent to submit.

<sup>3</sup> This was a blessing due to the sheer amount of experience I garnered from my partner's high skill level and expertise. This same circumstance could also be seen as my misfortune, as, despite the skills I acquired from training with my partner, when it came to regional and state competitions I was always in his shadow).

<sup>4</sup> A gi is the traditional thick, white jacket worn while practicing and competing in judo and jiu jitsu. "No-gi" jiu jitsu is a form of grappling, akin to jiu jitsu, where one does not wear the additional gi outfit, and therefore is neither hindered by nor allowed access to the various techniques that utilize either one's own or one's opponent's gi.

<sup>5</sup> Amateur MMA matches in the United States had differing rulesets from professional MMA matches, and, depending on the state in which the competitions were held, differing rules from one another. For example, in some states amateur MMA fighters had to wear head gear and shin guards, while in other (often neighboring) states they did not. Similarly, kicks to the head and strikes to an opponent on the ground were legal in some states while illegal in others. Regardless, all amateur MMA fighters were officially unpaid for their participation in the matches.

consistently train in various forms of grappling (often depending on what was locally available to me) for the next decade until the present. As of the writing of this thesis, I am currently training no-gi grappling and jiu jitsu in Spain. Over the twenty-two years that I have actively engaged in grappling I have trained in dozens of gyms the world-over, fought in several MMA matches, and competed and medalled in dozens of tournaments.<sup>6</sup> I find it important to note, however, that such tournaments and accolades are very much *not* where one's embodied skills and knowledge come from, but rather serve as affirmations of and feedback toward the hours and hours of weekly practice and repetition that one puts themselves through. Indeed, many grappling practitioners never have the desire to compete, and pursue the skill for personal, recreational, and health purposes. For additional specifics regarding where I trained and with whom, see the Acknowledgements section at the beginning of this thesis.

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<sup>6</sup> These tournaments include wrestling, jiu jitsu, no-gi, and no time-limit submission-only tournaments.

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# Chapter I: Introduction, Definitions and the Origins of Grappling

## 1.1. Introduction

Our animal origins are constantly lurking behind, even if they are filtered through complicated social evolution.

–Richard Dawkins,  
quoted in *Paleo Perspective: The Plight of Prehistoric Man in Modern Times*

The current thesis builds upon and necessarily subsumes research done in my master’s thesis: *Grappling within the Sagas: The Techniques of the Heroes and the Knowledge of the Scribes Who Wrote about Them*. While my master’s thesis primarily argues that grappling passages in the sagas are under-researched and proceeds to identify and create a corpus of the detailed grappling passages and techniques found within the *fornaldarsögur* and *Íslendingasögur* (legendary and Icelandic sagas, respectively), my current work serves as a much broader contribution to Martial Arts Studies as a whole and assesses the plausibility of identifying and recreating martial techniques from written historical texts, using the detailed grappling passages from Icelandic sagas as a case study. The current dissertation furthermore aims to answer and expand upon *why* such grappling passages, and the body in general, have been largely overlooked in academia and traces the theories behind *how* we can confidently and accurately identify specific martial techniques. In doing so the current thesis will engage with foundational epistemological debates within academia regarding Cartesian dualism, habitus, embodied

knowledge, and how having practical knowledge in a martial art can confer unique insight into the martial techniques found in historical texts at the embodied level. Therefore, although the two works utilize and draw from largely the same corpus and share saga-related background information (such as referencing the sparse previous research done in this area), the present study extensively engages not only wholly new dimensions of the subject and related theories, but also frames them within the wider field of Martial Arts Studies and the Humanities. With this distinction made clear, I will now set out the manifold arguments of the current thesis, with a focus upon their interconnectivity.

The overarching objective of this thesis is to show how, why, and indeed that specific martial and grappling techniques can be inferred and accurately identified and recreated from texts from the past. As mentioned above, I will be using as a case study numerous, and for the most part still neglected, grappling passages from the legendary and Icelandic sagas. These sagas were prose narratives, written in Old Norse/Icelandic, and recorded in their surviving forms between roughly 1220 and 1400 AD on the basis of both oral and literary models (A. Jakobsson and S. Jakobsson 2). I argue that the ability to identify grappling techniques such as those described within the legendary and Icelandic sagas stems from a combination of factors including grappling's primordial and ubiquitous nature in conjunction with insights that I will argue are unique to an embodied practitioner of grappling.

I will further argue that the descriptions of grappling in the sagas were detailed, accurate, and necessarily reflect an inherent understanding of grappling by both the anonymous authors and their contemporary society at large. This will be done first by discussing at length various aspects of the sagas such as their backgrounds, genres, dating, and historicity, as well as through examining both traditional and modern grappling practices in Scandinavia. Through the lens of this "social familiarity" I shall show that instead of being glossed over as "mere entertainment", scholars and casual readers alike should rather interpret the wrestling sequences within the sagas as intentionally accurate, and acknowledge them for their detailed realism, as well as for the valuable cultural insights they give us into Iceland's medieval society, its culture, and the values it held. Not only do I argue this about the specific wrestling techniques found

throughout much of saga literature, but also about the very use and portrayal of wrestling in the saga narratives: the wrestling scenes themselves are frequently used to add depth of characterization to protagonists and antagonists alike, and further highlight the ancient sport's importance and centrality to the contemporary society. Such insights will be discussed when investigating the backgrounds and historicity of the sagas and then later revisited and exemplified when analysing specific passages from the sagas. In doing so I will show that many modern conceptions of what wrestling in medieval Iceland was like are only partially accurate and often biased, with specific reference to the idea that Iceland's modern folkstyle wrestling, *glíma*, is a direct descendent and unbroken form of the wrestling depicted in the sagas.

I will further posit that in order to properly analyse, identify, and gain unique insight(s) into the martial techniques described within the sagas (or any written historical text) it is essential to take into account the embodied experience of actual practitioners of the same or a related martial art, in this case wrestling/grappling. I will therefore be highlighting the importance of coupling practical knowledge (e.g., grappling and martial arts knowledge and physical experience) with academic knowledge in order to fruitfully analyse, identify, and discuss martial arts techniques and skills (grappling techniques, foundations, and concepts). Fully tracing how one's personal martial expertise can be effectively applied to the identification of maneuvers and techniques found within written historical texts necessitates an in-depth discussion regarding previous research on *glíma*, the body's place in modern academia, conceptions of habitus, embodied knowledge and its impact on understanding otherwise esoteric martial arts texts, and such knowledge's potential role in considering the plausibility of identifying and reconstructing other historical martial arts.

Accordingly, I must first tend to the needs and backgrounds (or lack thereof) of both Old Norse scholars *and* martial artists, specifically grappling practitioners, essentially traversing the academic gap between Old Norse literature and Martial Arts Studies. In doing so, it will be necessary to detail foundational information in both spheres of study so as not to leave any epistemological gaps or create problematic

translations.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, as mentioned above, it does not suffice to identify with confidence a specific written maneuver from a historical text and to simply defend one's conclusion by stating "It is accurate because I have related skills," or "It is accurate because I *know*". Consequently, a considerable portion of this thesis is therefore devoted to detailing the underlying epistemic value of embodied experience in identifying written martial techniques, discussing historical and modern understandings of the mind, the body, and their relationship to one another, and framing the practical application of embodied knowledge within broader sociological studies of the body. In doing so this thesis aims to provide a roadmap for other martial arts, in conjunction with and relation to their respective historical documents, to investigate the potential of accurately identifying pre-modern martial techniques in their own areas of (embodied) expertise and knowledge. Before any such interdisciplinary matters are attended to, however, there are some definitions and areas of terminology that must first be parsed. The following terms all play a crucial, if not foundational, role in the brickwork of my thesis. Although additional details will be addressed as necessary in the relevant sections of the thesis, having at least a rudimentary understanding of these key terms and their nuances from the outset is crucial for precision and clarity and will facilitate one's ability to follow the argument from its genesis.

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<sup>7</sup> This is to say that by no means will an exhaustive understanding of either Old Norse literature or wrestling be required in order to fruitfully digest or follow the argumentation of this thesis, but rather that some fundamental background knowledge in each sphere will necessarily have to be explained in order to facilitate understanding and make certain connections.

### 1.1.1. Saga

Although I will go into more detail about the cultural and social backgrounds surrounding various sagas, as well as different genres within the corpus, for a fundamental understating of what constitutes a saga the Cambridge Dictionary gives us a functional definition: a long story about Scandinavian history, written in the Old Norse language in the Middle Ages, mainly in Iceland (“Saga”, Dictionary.Cambridge.org). The Oxford English Dictionary goes on to add that the term “saga” refers to “Any of the narrative compositions in prose that were written in Iceland or Norway during the middle ages; in English use often applied [specifically] to those which embody the traditional history of Icelandic families or of the kings of Norway” (“Saga”, OED Online). Although the saga narratives often focused on historical events and real people and places, they were a medieval and primarily Icelandic form of novel or prose epic (Clover, “Icelandic Family Sagas” 239–315). It is this “medieval”, strictly Scandinavian definition that this thesis will solely refer to.

Saga scholarship in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was primarily of an empirical nature: it tried to establish the age of the sagas, their historicity, and what historical information could be derived from them. This is the basis for the classification of the corpus into groups such as: sagas dealing with the history of Iceland (*Íslendingasögur*); sagas concerned with and taking place within ancient Scandinavian history (*fornaldarsögur*); sagas with the more (contemporarily) recent history of Scandinavia (*konungasögur*), and with faraway or mythical countries (*riddarasögur*) (A. Jakobsson and S. Jakobsson 2). Although this thesis will primarily be dealing with the sagas in which wrestling and grappling play a significant role, namely the *Íslendingasögur*, also known as the sagas of Icelanders, and the *fornaldarsögur*, also known as the legendary sagas, a more complete list of different saga genres will be detailed in the “Genre” section (2.3.).

The sagas began to be written down in the twelfth century, having evolved and taken inspiration from oral narratives, and their production continued consistently throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; surviving into the fifteenth century

and beyond, where saga writing was essentially continued as modern age creative narrative genres (ibid. 4). This present thesis will be dealing with the traditional sagas of the twelfth through fourteenth century. Because of the sagas' (and their mostly anonymous authors) penchant for perceived historicity, I argue that they allow the modern scholar a keyhole through which we can view the contemporary society's culture, values, and pastimes— not the least apparent of which was wrestling. As the term “saga” and its usage are rarely contested, the above definition more than suffices for the purposes of this thesis and will be detailed and expounded upon where necessary.

### **1.1.2. Old Norse**

Old Norse was a North Germanic language primarily spoken from the 9<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries in Scandinavia and in Scandinavian settlements. It is the primary language that sagas were written in.<sup>10</sup> Modern Icelandic is derived from a subset of Old Norse; Old West Norse. All original quoted saga passages appearing in this thesis are in Old Norse.

### **1.1.3. Grappling**

“Grappling” is the present participle of “grapple”: to grasp with the hands (“Grapple”, Merriam-webster.com), or “to take a firm hold, as with a grapple, esp. in wrestling; to get a tight grip of another; to contend with another in close fight” (“Grapple”, OED Online). This term broadly encompasses any form of unarmed fighting in which techniques are utilized that involve grasping or seizing one's opponent (as opposed to primarily striking them). To a martial artist “grappling” sports such as (Greco–Roman) wrestling or judo simply fall under the paradigm set of “grappling styles”. Conversely, a more Westernized understanding may label any of the different styles of grappling as “a kind of wrestling”. Neither of the terms “grappling” nor “wrestling” are precise terms in an academic sense, and are therefore for the most part

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<sup>10</sup> For additional detail and historical background, see Sørensen8.

interchangeable. To avoid confusion, however, for the purposes of this thesis “sport wrestling” will refer to the dominant Western tradition of grappling (e.g., the sanctioned sport of “wrestling”) while “wrestling” without any further context is to be understood as “to strive with strength and skill to throw a person to the ground by grappling with him; to endeavour to overpower and lay down another, esp. in a contest governed by fixed rules, by embracing his body and limbs and tripping or overbalancing him”(“Wrestle”, OED Online). The term “grappling”, due to the term’s having less divisive cultural connotations, shall be used and understood henceforth as a broad “umbrella-term” referring to all of the techniques and skills within which “wrestling” and all other subsets and styles of grappling fall.

#### **1.1.4. Wrestling**

The definition of wrestling to be used in this thesis is as follows: “a sport or contest in which two unarmed individuals struggle hand to hand with each attempting to subdue or unbalance the other” (“Wrestling”, Merriam-webster.com). Although there are numerous varieties of wrestling, virtually all styles have the objective of forcing a part of one’s opponent’s body, other than their feet, to touch the ground. Wherever possible, I will use the over-arching term “grappling” to denote any unarmed, non-striking (e.g., kicks, punches) physical altercation between two persons engaged. Unless otherwise noted, the term “wrestling” is to be understood as synonymous with “grappling”, unless demarcated as “sport wrestling” or otherwise contextualized. It is important to clarify that all wrestling techniques fall under the umbrella of “grappling”, but all grappling techniques are not necessarily wrestling techniques.<sup>15</sup> It is also important to keep in mind that to “wrestle”, in both contemporary and historical senses, can mean either to compete in sport under a unified set of rules, or simply to grapple, fight, or “wrestle around” without any uniform or agreed upon regulations: this latter,

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<sup>15</sup> The common “pin-fall” (the pressing of one’s opponent’s shoulders against the ground) aspect of wrestling is featured neither in this study nor in any of the source literature.

casual usage may be seen in English translations of Old Norse passages that I will be working with.

### 1.1.5. *Glíma*

The Old Norse term “*glíma*” covers various styles of Nordic folk wrestling and is currently practiced as a sport. Geir T. Zoëga defines it simply as either a verb meaning “to wrestle” or as a noun meaning “wrestling” (167). In the most common form of modern *glíma*, participants grip their opponent by the waist or by thigh-grips (usually with the aid of a specially fashioned harness/belt) and attempt to throw them to the ground using both technique and force, with an emphasis on the former. Much like our modern use of the term “wrestling”, “*glíma*” is also a broad blanket-term used in Old Norse and by medieval Scandinavians to describe any form of grappling or “wrestling about” (Cleasby and Vigfusson 205). In the saga passages used in this thesis (both the original Old Norse and English translations) “*glíma*”, “wrestling”, and “grappling” are for the most part used interchangeably in varying contexts; I will make note of exceptions and broach potential terminological issues as needed. Importantly, modern *glíma* is strictly a grappling sport that utilizes easily-gripped harnesses around the waist and thighs, whereas variants of the traditional term “*glíma*” (as it appears in saga literature) almost exclusively refer to grappling in a broader and un-unified sense unless noted otherwise.<sup>16</sup>

Modern sport *glíma* (as opposed to the traditional Old Norse usage of the word corresponding analogously to “grappling” or “wrestling”) has developed and taken its inspiration from the wrestling style that was prevalent in medieval Scandinavia and Iceland, also called *glíma*, or traditional *glíma* (here more analogous to “wrestling” or “folk wrestling”). Traditional *glíma* was practiced without weapons and most closely

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<sup>16</sup> An accurate analogy could be drawn here to Mark Singleton’s argument about the modern Western world’s view of yoga: The form of modern *glíma* that we see proliferated today often only has peripheral similarities to the *glíma* described in the medieval sagas. For further discussion on this issue regarding yoga see: Singleton 13–25.

resembles styles of modern folk wrestling, although there are several variations and differences between the two styles and their offshoots.

Unlike judo, wrestling, and jiu-jitsu, however, a contest of (modern) *glíma* does not officially begin until the two combatants have “gripped” one another, usually around the waist or at the thighs. This modern form of *glíma* is frequently claimed to be directly descended and virtually unchanged from the *glíma* of the sagas. I will later in this thesis assert that this is not the case and that there is no direct line of continuity between the *glíma* of then and now, and that the grappling that appears in the sagas is instead a generic form of grappling/wrestling that differed in many fundamental ways from modern *glíma*.

### 1.1.6. Embodied Knowledge/Practice

Embodied knowledge is a type of knowledge and understanding in which one’s body naturally and/or subconsciously knows how to perform appropriately (e.g., how to ride a bicycle, how to type on a keyboard, how to play an instrument, etc.). Regarding embodied knowledge, it is not the mind but specifically the body that is the knowing subject. When performing an action utilizing/requiring embodied knowledge, one does not (need to) verbalize or represent in one’s mind all of the various procedures required; the “knowledge” has already been “imprinted” in one’s body.<sup>17</sup> In analysing and deciphering a grappling technique from a written text, I will argue that having an adequate amount of embodied knowledge in regard to grappling is crucial. When one “understands” grappling, this understanding is not simply an intellectual synthesis of successive mechanical bodily acts by a discerning consciousness: rather, a grappler’s understanding is very much a *bodily* intentionality. In this way a seasoned grappler can effectively align particular techniques (and/or smaller successive parts of techniques)

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<sup>17</sup> For further details and explanation see the “Embodied Knowledge and Reconstruction” section (3.5.) . For a concise description see also: Tanaka, “The notion of embodied knowledge”. See Toadvine for a brief philosophical background of embodied knowledge and its origins..

with the whole intended end through bodily intentionality, i.e., to achieve a desired result/maneuver a seasoned grappler may subconsciously or “automatically” initiate the proper and most effective combination of micro–movements in order to achieve the desired effect/technique without having to consciously premeditate which movements, and in what order, they must execute. With this innate level of understanding of both the human body and grappling, the educated grappler may then use their embodied knowledge to “reverse–engineer” a grappling maneuver described in a text: Given enough circumstantial details, such as how a particular throw was initiated or in what manner the recipient of a throw lands, a grappler can use their inherent embodied knowledge to “fill in the blanks” and deductively reason which technique(s) would and would not be feasible given the available information in a way and to an extent that a non–grappler could not.

Regarding such phenomenon the influential phenomenological philosopher Merleau–Ponty states that “to understand is to experience the harmony between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the performance – and the body is our anchorage in a world” (*The Phenomenology of Perception* 144). Discussing how such a bodily and acquired harmony is inherent to becoming a proficient and skilled glassblower, ethnographer Erin O’Connor states:

Proficient practical knowledge is this ability to anticipate the regularities of a system, the rules of glassblowing, and enact schemata to manage irregularities in virtue of having already incorporated the dispositions of that system, glassblowing. Yes, it is a corporeal knowledge, but proficiency is defined by the interrelatedness of habitus and field and the body’s consequent ability to anticipate: ‘[the body] is inclined and able to anticipate [regularities] practically in behaviours which engage a corporeal knowledge that provides a practical comprehension of the world’ (Bourdieu, 2000: 135). This anticipation is possible only when the practitioner understands the world’s imminence in which she operates and is therefore able to act immediately: the novice, though able to adapt, is not able to anticipate. Anticipation carries practice beyond the moment of

action and is the faculty through which an envisioned piece can be realized.  
(200)

We need only insert “grappling”, or any other highly skilled physical practice, in place of “glassblowing” to have a succinct insight into where embodied knowledge’s inherent “knowing” comes from: the ability to accurately anticipate. Just as the skilled grappler is able to anticipate his/her opponent’s next move, defences, and counter–moves, it is also possible that the skilled grappler, given the appropriate circumstantial details of a written grappling technique, is able to accurately anticipate or intuit which techniques the written text is plausibly referring to. O’Connor goes on to add that “it is only corporeal anticipation that can directly bring forth the envisioned object of the practice. The anticipation that marks proficient practical knowledge is not a reflective forward–looking gesture. It is a non–reflective corporeal forward–going movement beyond adaptation: this is the imperative of proficient practice” (201). It is only through the laborious process of repeated physical practice and refining one’s corporeal “sight” that allows the seasoned grappler to become proficient in both body and mind to the extent that they are able to anticipate the necessary and most accurate reading of a given situation (e.g., the ability to determine *de facto* what a maneuver must be from a written description). These subjects will all be addressed in detail in the “Embodied Knowledge and Reconstruction” section (3.5.) of this thesis.

## 1.2. Grappling: Origins, Play, and Fundamentals

This thesis should not move forward cohesively, nor should it begin, without first briefly discussing the origins and history of grappling, what I argue to be its universality in the history of humankind and civilization, and its basic principles: all these factors are threads that will be woven into the greater argument at hand. If one wishes to extract any meaning from and accurately interpret written/historic documentation regarding grappling and its various techniques one must first become, at least on a fundamental level, familiar with both grappling's general rules and principles, as well as its origins. For most varieties of martial artists, these fundamentals may seem familiar or obvious, but to the martial arts or combat layman some explanation is in order. This is therefore a practical area within which to begin.

To truly understand the reasons behind the seeming omnipresence of grappling, and to buttress my argument that grappling is primordially connected with human culture, it is fitting to begin this investigation by looking to Johan Huizinga's watershed work on the necessity of the "play element" in the generation of culture: *Homo Ludens*.<sup>18</sup> Straightforwardly, Huizinga begins his book with:

Play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing. [...] Animals play just like men. We have only to watch young dogs to see that all the essentials of human play are present in their merry gambols.

(1)

For the purposes of this thesis, simply replacing the terms "play" and "playing" with the respective forms of "grappling" serves as a practical starting point from which I will lay the foundations of my arguments. For just as play-wrestling and "sword fighting" with

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<sup>18</sup> Huizinga was not only an established historian but is considered one of the founders of modern cultural history. For more information on Huizinga and his contributions to modern cultural history see: Geyl, "Huizinga as Accuser of His Age." 231-262; Geyl, *Encounters in History*.

sticks and branches are children's games, so too have they been practiced for a more dangerous, potentially lethal form of competition.<sup>19</sup> In his foreword to Kendall Blanchard's *The Anthropology of Sport: An Introduction*, Brian Sutton-Smith reinforces this idea that the line between play and seriousness is rather undefined:

Although we moderns tend to think of play as typically voluntary, nonserious, nonwork, there are multiple examples from other cultures in this present book of play shown to be obligatory, very serious, and embedded in the working life. [...] What anthropology so clearly demonstrates is how our own attempts to define them separately, in what we call some "objective" way, are themselves evidences of our cultural value system.

(Blanchard xi)

Continuing to view the subject in hindsight, this understanding perhaps makes evolutionary and adaptive sense as well. In his article "What Modern Sports Competitions Can Tell Us About Human Nature" Furley states that, from an evolutionary perspective:

Sports probably originated as a cultural activity invented to develop and practice war- and hunting-relevant skills. [...] Therefore, it seems feasible that humans might have evolved an adaptive urge to engage in sports when they do not feel the pressure to strive to fulfill basic human needs such as foraging and hunting [...] The tendency of humans, and especially children, to play and engage in sports might be considered an adaptive strategy for developing stable, fitness-related skills.

(140)

Following this hypothesis, grappling can be seen as simultaneously a game one could play to hone one's hunting, foraging, and combat skills as well as a means to the end goal

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<sup>19</sup> For further discussion of this issue and of play's evolution see: Smith and Jaipaul. 9-122.

of many such activities: the dominance of (or defence from) another body. The difference, then, between grappling that is merely play or practice and grappling that is a literal matter of survival can be seen in terms of degree.<sup>20</sup> On a similar albeit grander scale, while discussing naturalistic epistemology Nietzsche writes:

In order for a particular species to maintain itself and increase its power, its conception of reality must comprehend enough of the calculable and constant for it to base a scheme of behaviour on it. The utility of preservations – not some theoretical need not to be deceived – stands as the motive behind the development of the organs of knowledge – they develop in such a way that their observations suffice for our preservation. In other words [...] a species grasps a certain amount of reality in order to become master of it, in order to press it into service.

(480)

This statement holds true on both a micro and macro level: just as a species or society needs to understand enough about its reality, surroundings and environment, and how to interact with them in order to create a foundation upon which to base a scheme of behaviour to ensure their survival and attain/maintain dominance, so too must an individual understand his/her environment, surrounding, and very own body (as well as those of others) in order to ensure their personal, social, and physical survival. As Nietzsche suggests, the “utility of preservation” is a primary motivating factor behind both a society trying to ensure its own dominance and survival and the individual trying to survive within such a society. At this individual level, one of the most universal and historically fundamental forms of survival and integration is ensuring one’s ability to protect oneself from physical harm and threat of being overpowered by another individual and forced into their service. This harkens back to Huizinga’s description of young dogs wrestling about at play: although clearly (at this stage) not intending mortal damage upon one another, the crux of their play is to not only begin establishing a social

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<sup>20</sup> For more on the differentiation between play types and between play and practice for survival see: Hart and Tannock 200–221.

hierarchy based on physical dominance, but to practice and hone the very practical, physical skills that will allow them to enforce such dominance when it is no longer simply “play” at stake. At its core, it cannot be debated that this is the origin of grappling: to display physical dominance over or in comparison to another individual, whether for play or in seriousness. This is also to some degree, and not coincidentally, the primary goal of virtually every physical game and sport.

Although admitting that definitions can and do vary according to context, Furley argues that the definition of “sport” is “often described to include all forms of competitive physical activity or games that, through casual or organized participation, aim to use, maintain, or improve physical ability and skills, providing enjoyment to participants and sometimes entertainment for spectator” (138). All manner of grappling, and certainly Iceland’s *glíma*, fall nicely into this definition that is at the same time both broad and inclusive while still setting solid parameters. Just as virtually all other forms of grappling, *glíma* is certainly a physical activity, can be (and was) played as a game, involves varying levels of interpersonal and social participation, improves one’s physical skills and abilities, and certainly provided enjoyment to both its participants and spectators.<sup>21</sup> With the above definition of “sport” in mind, and hearkening back to Nietzsche’s statement on the gaining and maintenance of power, Furley goes on to state that:

Similar to most other animals, humans have to solve problems of self protection from predators and human rivals, the avoidance of diseases, mate attraction and retention, and the rearing of offspring. In addition, like other social animals, humans have to solve problems related to group life: coalition formation, cooperation, the exchange of resources, competition, status seeking, and navigating hierarchies.

(139)

Here I would posit that grappling, equally or more so than most other forms of sport due to its physical demands and competitive nature, serves to aid in the solving of the above–

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<sup>21</sup> Various examples of *glíma*’s social and spectatorship aspects will be addressed in the “Fornaldarsögur Grappling Examples” and “Íslendingasögur Grappling Examples” sections (4.1. and 4.2.)s.

mentioned universal problems: it fundamentally helps with self-protection, the fitness and potential social status it can yield keep one in healthy physical shape while simultaneously making one more attractive to potential mates, and by its social nature grappling can aid in social cohesion and the creation of hierarchies.<sup>22</sup> These varied reasons were not, however, the sole reasons why grappling and wrestling became widespread, but rather the natural results of grappling's even more primordial purpose: its usefulness in self-defence. As Furley goes on to say, "Because the most popular sports mostly depend on war-and hunting-relevant skills such as running, tackling, throwing, kicking and dodging, [...] it seems likely that sports originally served as arenas for practicing and developing these skills" (141). Once again, grappling fits the bill more closely in terms of its practical "war- and hunting-relevant skills" than most other sports, modern or otherwise. And as Furley argues, sport, including and particularly grappling, was used by cultures throughout the world and history to dominate, endure and survive on a fundamental level. As a result of grappling's universal practicality, societies the world over began to integrate it into their cultures and societal systems thus resulting in grappling's (and sport in general's) multi-tiered physical, social, survival, and status benefits listed above. In a somewhat converse fashion, Furley later states that "Because much of human behavior has been overwritten by culture and society, sports competitions strip away many of the cultural layers and therefore have the potential to reveal more rudimentary aspects of human behavior" (144). Looking through the lens from this perspective I would argue that, once again, grappling preceded much of modern human development, and therefore allows us a relatively unadorned window through which to view both the past and human nature.

The blurry line between fight and play, struggle and game, is neatly demonstrated in the traditional form of Korean belt wrestling known as ssireum: a sport in which, beginning from a kneeling position, wrestlers grab hold of their opponent's belt, stand up, and attempt to trip or throw their opponent to the sand below.<sup>23</sup> Although clearly a

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<sup>22</sup> For detailed information on these issues see Furley 140-141 and refs.

For further information on play's evolutionary functions see also: Gray 84-102..

<sup>23</sup> The sport of ssireum mirrors *glíma* in many respects. This will be discussed in further detail in the "Invented Tradition and Previous Research on Glíma" section (3.2.).

competitive sport and form of grappling, in which the explicit goal is to show physical domination over one's opponent, the Korean Ssireum Association describes the sport in the following manner:

Ssireum is connected with Korean history as a traditional sport. The way we *play* Ssireum is by kneeling, grabbing belts, standing and *playing* until someone's body from the knee up touches the ground. Men, women, and children can all freely enjoy Ssireum. Historically, Ssireum was a key part of consecration rites, festivals, public function, and any major social or national event. Whenever Korean people have gathered to celebrate something they have *played* Ssireum as a way to build and strengthen community ties.”

(Korea Ssireum Association: v; emphasis added)<sup>24</sup>

From this brief synopsis we can see that ssireum was not only a sport akin to wrestling, but that is also held significant social and cultural importance. Nonetheless, it is still clearly considered a game that one *plays*. This is also not merely a modern construct or view of wrestling, as Icelandic sagas written seven to eight hundred years ago often referred to wrestling as “play”, and even used the term “leikur” to refer to specific grappling tricks and techniques.<sup>25</sup> In a similar regard, Furley postulates that “play and sports are assumed to show considerable overlap, and engagement in these activities might have facilitated learning adaptive skills”(140), and goes as far as to say that “it is plausible that humans are innately predisposed to enjoy engaging in play and in sports because this has proven a beneficial context for skill acquisition and development”(141). As Huizinga argues above, frolicking pups, just as children and adults engaging in grappling, often enjoy the activity regardless of the fact that it is regularly (and frequently knowingly) an imitation of and preparation for future potential deadly encounters; and there are few “adaptive skills” more historically or evolutionarily practical than the fundamental ability to either physically defend oneself or impose one's will on another.

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<sup>24</sup> I would also note that under “Competition Rules” competitors are referred to almost exclusively as “players”.

<sup>25</sup> See following Huizinga quote and later section (4.1.3.) on “Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnssonar”.

Similarly, whether in man or mammal, the very rush of excitement and sense of fulfilment that comes from intense play–fighting is mirrored, and often magnified, during and after a real competition, or even a life–and–death combat scenario. That is to say, grappling and its varied benefits are not unique to man, nor were its fundamentals by him.<sup>26</sup> Man has simply advanced and nearly perfected the “game” and commodified its fruits. And a game it certainly is, as Huizinga goes on to state, with specific reference to an Old Norse myth involving a grappling contest:

At the Olympic games there were duels fought to the death. The mighty tours de force accomplished by Thor and his companions in their contest with the Man of Utgardaloki are called leika, "play". For all these reasons it would not seem overbold to consider the terminological disparity between contest and play in Greek as the more or less accidental failure to abstract a general concept that would have embraced both. In short, the question as to whether we are entitled to include the contest in the play–category can be answered unhesitatingly in the affirmative.<sup>27</sup>

(49)

As Huizinga alludes, grappling can indeed be a sport, play, a game, and a pastime, but its martial potential is always lurking just beneath the shallow surface of “play”. As I will show in examples from primary sources, this can be seen throughout the sagas as friendly wrestling matches often turn into martial grappling matches where one’s life is on the line. Regardless of the variant (different folkstyles, rulesets, regulations, etc.), all forms of grappling are self–gratifying and most often serve a social or physically practical purpose (e.g., self–defence). As Huizinga argues with “play”, so too is the essence of wrestling contained in the phrase “there is something at stake”; from one’s own life to one’s pride or social status. What is at stake in a grappling match often has very little to

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<sup>26</sup> Wrestling fundamentals such as defensively maintaining a lower center of gravity than your opponent, striving for leverage and pressure against a downed opponent, and maintaining a position of dominance can all constantly be seen in the playing and “wrestling about” of puppies and various other primates and mammals.

<sup>27</sup> It is worth noting that the final contest that Thor and his companions must face in the aforementioned games is a wrestling match against the old crone Elli: a personification of old age.

do with the material world. Injury and pain are most often not what is truly on the line; they are a risk of involvement. Rather, the “something” in question refers to an ideal that the match has been successfully concluded, i.e., a winner has been determined.<sup>28</sup> As Barry Allen succinctly puts it in his work *Striking Beauty: A philosophical look at the Asian Martial Arts*, “Every major Bronze Age cultural group in the world seems to have enjoyed some form of physical entertainment, such as fights, feats, contests, or military dancing. The earliest of these usually suggested a royal audience” (62). Allen goes on to distinguish an important particularity that developed seemingly universally and which underlies our modern conception of both grappling and sport: victory. Allen states that it was first in the post–Mycenaean culture of Greece that:

Such physical entertainments evolved into the distinctive character of *sport*, distinguished by the law of victory. The prize went to the winner, not to the one who most impressed a royal patron. The terms of competition, not the sentiment of the sponsor, determined the victor. The Greek innovation was to make a sport of athletics under the law of competitive victory.

(62)

This “law of competitive victory” so profoundly altered the trajectory of wrestling and sport that it is indeed the *de facto* frame within which we conceptualize virtually all modern–day sporting competitions.<sup>29</sup> Then as now, a “winner” only materializes when the match or contest has been successfully concluded according to the rules, be they official or tacit. Furthermore, depending upon the manner in which one wins a match, the pleasure of victory lasts a shorter or longer time. For example, to win a grappling or wrestling match by successfully throwing, pinning, or submitting your opponent generally elicits a greater and longer sense of elation than if you win the grappling match

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<sup>28</sup> One’s level of competitiveness is also on display and a badge of honor to be worn, even in defeat: If one were to lose to the local/regional/national wrestling champion, yet put up a courageous, skilful, and valiant display in doing so, there would still be a (perceived) sense of social status and respect to be gained. Alternatively, there would be little social gain in being defeated in a one–sided and non–competitive fashion, unless the very act of competing against an adversary whose skill far surpasses your own was considered a praise–worthy feat.

<sup>29</sup> Even modern sports that utilize judging virtually all depend upon a framework of rules and regulations that must be followed in order to decide the victor.

via a breaking of the rules, an opponent's withdrawal, through an uneventful and drawn-out ordeal, or through a "fluke" injury. So too does one elicit a greater sense of elation and social prestige by defeating a skilled or famous opponent as opposed to an unskilled or unknown opponent.

In extreme cases, though not uncommon in the sagas, a grappling match is only over when one of the combatants lies dead. It is important to note that the degree of a grappling contest, i.e., what is at stake, does not play a huge role in determining the particular maneuvers utilized: the techniques and maneuvers you would utilize to win an exhibition match and those that one would use in a struggle for one's life would overlap greatly and differ primarily in degree and intensity, not in kind. Huizinga goes on to add that "[t]he pleasurable feeling of satisfaction mounts with the presence of spectators, though these are not essential to it. [...] In all games it is very important that the player should be able to boast of his success to others" (49–50). This point is critical. In any form of contest, winning can be understood as proving oneself superior to one's opponent(s) through the outcome of the competition. It is in this way that the winner, through the evidence of his/her superiority, acquires pride, honour, and esteem: "He has won esteem, obtained honour, and this honour and esteem at once accrue to the benefit of the group to which the victor belongs" (Huizinga 50).

These notions of honour and esteem also serve as particular forms of what Bourdieu refers to as "capital",<sup>30</sup> which can be broadly defined as the resources, attributes, or advantages possessed by an individual which can increase their life chances (Fulton 29). In the case of grappling, especially as it relates to medieval Icelandic society, one's level of ability was often directly proportional to one's level of both *social* and *body* capital: with social capital referring to the network of relations and support an individual has in society and body capital referring to the development and assets of the body through and for physical competition (Fulton33). Loïc Wacquant adds in his

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<sup>30</sup> For a more detailed explanation of Bourdieu's conception of the various capitals, see: Bourdieu, Pierre. "The Forms of Capital." In J. Richardson (Ed.) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. New York, Greenwood, 1986; 241–258.

seminal work *Pugs at Work: Bodily Capital and Bodily Labour Among Professional Boxers* that:

The fighter's body is simultaneously his means of production, the raw materials he and his handlers (trainer and manager) have to work with and on, and, for a good part, the somatized product of his past training and extant mode of living. *Bodily capital and bodily labor are thus linked by a recursive relation.*  
(67)

Due to this recursive nature between bodily capital and bodily labour, the more a grappler trains, the more skills and techniques they know and the greater their bodily capital is honed; likewise and simultaneously, the more they compete and the more opponents they defeat, the more prestige and social capital they gain. Therefore the more success in grappling that a medieval Icelander might achieve, the greater his<sup>31</sup> social status would likely rise, and the greater his (perceived) physical prowess. In response to Wacquant, and in reference to Bourdieu's later works, Atkinson posits that "the elemental human urge is [...] to find justification for one's existence in the form of recognition in the eyes of others as worthy in some way" (106). As I will show in later grappling passages taken from saga literature, these senses of personal honour and social esteem play a crucial role in not only the majority of grappling confrontations, but also as driving structural and narrative forces within the sagas as a genre.

Grappling (in one form or another) is, by its aforementioned fundamental nature, one of the oldest and most widely distributed of all competitive sports, alongside other such primordial and natural activities such as running, swimming, or feats of strength. Grappling has featured in human society (and amongst various other mammals) since time immemorial, and is widely recognized as humanity's oldest and most basic form of combat, both in a recreational and martial sense (Gardiner, *Athletics of the Ancient World* 181). With works of art from 3000 BCE depicting belt-wrestling in Babylonia and Egypt, to the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh's description of wrestling, to the 2,000 BCE burial

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<sup>31</sup> Nowhere in any saga sources has there been found evidence of women competing in any form of grappling match.

chamber of Baqet III at the Ancient Egyptian burial site Beni Hassan,<sup>32</sup> to its appearance at the eighteenth Olympiad in 704 BCE, grappling has been interwoven with the human story since prehistory.<sup>33</sup>

As well as being ancient, grappling is also culturally and socially ubiquitous: it can be documented in virtually all cultures throughout the world, throughout history. With styles having been developed regionally all over the world, there are hundreds of varieties of wrestling, most of which fall under the category of “folk wrestling”.<sup>34</sup> Yet, if these differing styles have roots in a shared ancestry, any traces of those roots have long since been eroded away by the sands of time. That is not to say that the styles are different: to the contrary, virtually all styles share the same or similar foundational principles and goals. Rather, no “common ancestor” from which these different styles developed can be found, due in part to the fact that grappling was (and is) so basic to human nature that different isolated cultures still share(d) common wrestling techniques (Simonton 1603–12). As Simonton illustrates eloquently, “because technique is made up of discoveries about the relative reliabilities of the material world, the same channels or pathways may be uncovered by people working in parallel, without contact or communication” (1604). An example of this is evidenced by the styles of wrestling, very similar to their various contemporary European folkstyles of wrestling, that were popular amongst the differing Native American tribes when Europeans first encountered them (Salamone 123).

Some of the more popular international grappling disciplines today are Greco–Roman wrestling (a current Olympic sport), Freestyle wrestling (also an Olympic sport), Pankration (which involves strikes as well as grappling), and beach wrestling, which

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<sup>32</sup> For further discussion of ancient wrestling see: Gardiner, E. Norman. “Wrestling. I.” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, vol. 25, Nov. 1905, pp. 14–31. For discussion and visual depictions of various wrestling techniques see also: Gardiner, E. Norman. “Wrestling. II.” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, vol. 25, no. Vol. 25, Nov. 1905, pp. 263–293. For discussion of wrestling in Classical and Late Antiquity Greece and Ancient Egypt and Nubia, see: Azize1–26; Kim 35–46; Carroll1988. For photographic depictions and explanations of the painted scenes of Beni Hasan see: Robins 1997.

<sup>33</sup> For a comprehensive summary of wrestling’s history and differing styles as well as a broad tracing of wrestling’s development throughout history see: <https://www.britannica.com/sports/wrestling>

<sup>34</sup> For a broad visualization of wrestling’s multi–cultural background and variety, see <https://wrestlingiseverywhere.wordpress.com/>. This site is necessarily outside of the sphere of academia as it is a cooperative effort between FILA and journalist T.R. Foley and serves as a visual repository for several virtually undocumented folk and cultural forms of wrestling.

takes place on sand. These forms of wrestling are all officially recognized by UWW (United World Wrestling), which is the world's foremost international governing body for amateur wrestling.<sup>35</sup> Alongside these internationally governed styles are an almost countless number of folkstyle disciplines, including Scottish Backhold wrestling (named after the starting–position of the style), England's Cumberland wrestling, Siberia's *khuresh*, Uzbekistan's *kurash*, Iran's *koshti pahlavani* (to name only one of Iran's several styles), Italy's *Lotta Campidanese*, Myanmar's *naban*, Switzerland's *schwingen*, Korea's *ssireum*, India's *pahlwani*, Japan's sumo, Jiu–jitsu, and judo, the formerly Soviet Sambo, Turkey's oil wrestling (also called grease wrestling, or *yağlı güreş*), Indonesia's *penjang gulat*, Ethiopia's *tigel*, China's *shuai jiao*, Iceland/Scandinavia's *glíma* (which covers the folkstyles *Lausatök*, *Hryggspenna*, and *Brokartök*), and many more varieties. This list is neither exhaustive nor does it take into account the various forms of entertainment–oriented professional wrestling that use many of the same grips and maneuvers as the aforementioned traditional styles.

Grappling, in the most basic sense, is a combat sport between two contestants<sup>36</sup> and involves techniques such as throws, takedowns, joint locks, pins, trips and various other grappling holds.<sup>37</sup> Although wrestling and grappling are most often discussed in a sporting context, it is once again worth emphasizing that the techniques used for sport, just as with punches in boxing, elbows and knees in Muay Thai, or kicks in taekwondo, are virtually the same as techniques that a practiced wrestler (boxer, kickboxer, Muay Thai competitor, etc.,) would use for self–defence or in a mortal struggle. Grappling can be performed for purely theatrical and aesthetic purposes or can be genuinely competitive and violent. The fundamental goal of grappling is to gain and maintain a position of relative dominance over your opponent, be that through a throw, a positional advantage, or forcing them “out–of–bounds” (outside of the agreed upon competition area). With this solid grounding in grappling fundamentals in place we are now prepared to go into

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<sup>35</sup> The UWW's website supplies additional information on all of the above styles of wrestling: <https://unitedworldwrestling.org/governance/regulations–olympic–wrestling>

<sup>36</sup> Virtually all forms of wrestling, codified and otherwise, are between two competitors, with exceptions being anomalous, aside from professional wrestling's “tag–team” matches.

<sup>37</sup> A fuller list of traditional Greco–Roman and Freestyle wrestling techniques can be found here: [https://unitedworldwrestling.org/sites/default/files/2018–12/wrestling\\_rules.pdf](https://unitedworldwrestling.org/sites/default/files/2018–12/wrestling_rules.pdf)

significant further detail regarding different grappling positions, techniques, and maneuvers in the appropriate later sections of this thesis. Before doing so, however, multiple other background aspects of both the sagas and embodied theory must be gone over first. It will therefore be necessary to next lay a foundation for understanding the multiple facets of my argument pertaining to Old Norse sagas and the importance of cultural familiarity with the saga's contemporary society.

## Chapter II: Old Norse Background

### 2.1. Old Norse

With regard to this thesis and the reading and interpretation of historical texts, an at least fundamental understanding of the language in which the source texts were written is essential. As will be seen in the later sections (2.4., 4.1. and 4.2.) of this thesis dealing with translation issues and specific saga passages, one without a firm grasp of the source text's language would be at a great disadvantage in terms of being able to translate, understand, and identify with confidence complicated descriptions of grappling techniques, many of which utilize esoteric terminology and terms (and conjunctions of terms) with multiple possible interpretations. Old Norse, the language in which all saga passages used in this thesis were originally written, was a North Germanic language that was spoken, along with its varying dialects, primarily during the 9<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries by inhabitants of Scandinavia and its outlying settlements, including Iceland. This language was closely related to the southwest Norwegian dialects of Hordaland and Rogaland; areas that frequently served as the land of origin for Icelandic settlers (Sørensen 8). Sørensen goes into further detail and gives a succinct account of the spread and historical usage of Old Norse:

During the settlement of Iceland, and before Norway was united into a single kingdom, the Norse language was also spoken for two or three generations in those parts of the British Isles where people from the western part of the Scandinavian peninsula had settled. The conventional term for this common language is *Old Norse*. After the introduction of Christianity it developed as a written language, more or less simultaneously in Iceland and Norway and in all probability also in the Orkneys, even though an original literature from the latter has not been preserved. It is common in a national context to speak of *Old Norwegian* and *Old Icelandic*, but the differences between the two written languages are small and without any literary significance. From a linguistic

perspective it is therefore natural to speak of *Old Norse literature* as an entity that encompasses both Icelandic and Norwegian literature from before about 1400. (8

As a result of this linguistic diaspora, Old Norse became the primary written and spoken language in Iceland, and therefore the language in which most extent literature from the region and period was written. For utility's sake I will not differentiate between Old Norse or Old Icelandic, and will henceforth simply refer to the language of the sagas' writing as Old Norse unless otherwise specified. For a well-rounded understanding of Old Norse, Gordon's classic *An Introduction to Old Norse* is a standard place to begin (1978). For a more modern, detailed, and intuitive look at Old Norse, I would, however, suggest Faulkes and Barnes' three-volume *A New Introduction to Old Norse* series.<sup>39</sup> As all of the primary sources that are used in this thesis were written in Old Norse, an understanding of and familiarity with the language was therefore necessary for the accurate interpretation and analysis of said texts. An understanding of Old Norse has been further essential in this thesis with regard to identifying and expounding upon translation issues found with these grappling passages. Such translation issues will be discussed further throughout this chapter and regarding the various passage-specific discussions throughout the thesis. As a reader of this thesis, however, no such knowledge or familiarity is required as I have given translations for all Old Norse passages and specific terminology used.

## **2.2. Sagas and Saga Background**

The sagas will serve as a case study and the sole primary sources for this thesis. In a general sense they are stories written primarily in Old Norse that recount ancient Germanic and Nordic history, often focusing on Scandinavian kings and Viking heroes, their battles and their voyages. The migration to Iceland from continental Scandinavia and the feuds that arose between Icelandic families are also frequent themes in the sagas, although sagas' plots vary according to loosely defined genres. The majority of saga

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<sup>39</sup> This series is neatly divided into a book on grammar, a reader, and a glossary and index of names.

writing was carried out in Iceland, where scribes were hard at work writing down, copying, and recopying various histories of Norse rulers and heroes. Yet, as Turville-Petre classically claimed, “Iceland was not merely the storehouse of northern tradition” (1). Rather, he continues, “Its poets and prose authors did not only preserve and develop literary forms of their forefathers; they also devised new forms, and the literature of Iceland thus became the richest and most varied of medieval Europe” (1). Clunies Ross expands upon this broad definition of the saga and states that the Icelanders developed several new literary genres, including the various types of saga, that can be viewed as:

A new written form with oral roots, as its name suggest – and one that incorporates Norse poetic traditions within a prose base to create a prosimetric medium able to express that combination of the traditional and the exotic, the oral and the written, and the pagan and the Christian, that forged such a distinctive and copious medieval vernacular literature in Iceland.

(Clunies Ross, “Old Icelandic Literature and Society” 2)

This distinctive and copious vernacular, as represented by various genres of saga, has been preserved and passed down to us in hundreds of manuscripts, on both vellum and paper, and has been studied from a diverse variety of angles. “From the 13<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century [the sagas] have been copied and studied by people from all walks of life: self-educated farmers, clergymen, government officials and others motivated only by their passion and admiration for good literature” (Hreinsson 1; xiii). Going into further detail as to the content of the sagas, it is important to emphasize that Icelandic literature did not suddenly appear as a multi-faceted and varied genre, but rather was written in many phases and changed throughout several differing ideological contexts.

Many of the genres of saga, such as the renowned *Íslendingasögur* (the sagas of Icelanders) were composed in their surviving forms between c 1220–30 and c. 1400, although they often narrated events that had taken place centuries earlier, such as the conversion of Iceland to Christianity in the year 999/1000 (Glauser, “Sagas of the Icelanders” 203). It should come as no surprise, then, that a form of literature written over such an extent of time and throughout such historical religious and cultural changes was constantly morphing and branching off into different genres; an issue I will touch upon

again in the upcoming “Genre” section (2.3.). Broadly looking at the sagas, however, Sørensen summarizes: “[Icelandic literature] is a textual recreation of times past. A self-conscious and well-educated class of farmers wrote narratives, which they considered to be true, about themselves, their ancestors, and their achievements, and about the history of other countries, because they regarded it as part of their own” (28). To further muddle an already murky situation, we must also take into account the fact that many of the sagas were recorded in their extant form centuries after the events that they claim to recount. As Jurgen Glauser argues:

Only a few histories seem to see a problem in the fact that there usually is a great span of time between the postulated age of a certain saga and the oldest extant manuscripts. In other words, as a rule, historiographers of Old Norse-Icelandic literature are dating something that is mere conjecture. What actually is extant and can still be studied (in the form of manuscripts from a much later period) is only used to a very small extent in the dating of sagas and thereby for tracing the development of saga literature.

(“What is Dated and Why?” 26)

In a similar vein Carl Phelpstead points out that most Icelandic sagas are narratives from the past, recounting an even more distant past, therefore forcing the modern reader to engage (consciously or not) with various different historical moments, “each of which informs and determines the reading experience: there is the period in which the events are supposed to have taken place, the time when the text was written, the time when the surviving manuscript(s) were copied, the historical moment when the edition (or translation) being read was produced, and the present moment of reading”( 188). This thesis adds an additional layer of textual engagement in that in order to identify a particular grappling technique from a historically distant text, we must bear in mind the relative understanding of such techniques by the original scribe, or later transcribers and translators. If, for example, a specific technique was described in a non-extant version of a text (or orally), it is possible that a later scribe or translator, ignorant of the minutia of wrestling and grappling, could inaccurately describe/transcribe the said technique, thus creating a “domino-effect” of inaccuracy for all following versions of the text. A similar

and demonstrably more problematic situation can arise when dealing with translated texts: the description and/or understanding of a technique (or anything else) in one language can be greatly altered through the process of (multiple) translation(s), particularly when, in the context of describing/translating a grappling technique, the translator may not possess the embodied knowledge needed to accurately translate/understand the technique.<sup>40</sup> Compound this phenomenon with differing cultural and social attitudes towards and understanding of grappling over time and it becomes apparent that *depictions* and understandings of a particular technique have the potential to vary greatly over time.

It is therefore important, specifically with regard to describing a particular grappling technique, to accurately maintain as much as possible of the original text's meaning during translation. In doing so, so as not to lose the ability to understand or identify a technique to translation, the translator must also attempt to keep the original target audience's cultural understandings and conventions in mind: in the case of the current study this would require an understanding of and familiarity with wrestling/grappling, its techniques, and even specific technique names in Old Norse. In discussing translation issues regarding the Icelandic sagas Martina Ceolin echoes these sentiments in concluding that:

In order to produce a text that is both readable and appealing to the modern reader, the target–audience and culture should be considered as an overall strategy before and during the translation process itself. Yet the specificities of the source–text in question should not be levelled to fulfil this aim. On the contrary, they should be preserved as far as possible, or at least signaled, for example with explicative footnotes. Therefore, the translator of a medieval text should strike a

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<sup>40</sup> Various examples of such translation issues are discussed in detail in the following *Gríms Saga loðinkinna*, *Göngu–Hrólf's Saga*, *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinsonar*, *Sörla saga Sterka*, *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, *Bárðar Saga Snæfellsáss*, *Hávarðar Saga Ísfirðings*, and *Grettis saga* sections (4.1 and 4.2) of the thesis. See also the following discussions of the term “*fangabrekku*” from *Víga–Glúms saga* and the terms “*sniðglímu*” and “*lausamjöðm*” from *Jökuls þáttur Búasonar* in the “Historicity” section (2.4.). Also see discussion on the term “*hleypur/hleypa*” in the “Invented Tradition and Previous Research on Glíma” section (3.2.).

good balance between the ‘acceptability’ of the target–text on the part of the target–culture and the ‘adequacy’ in preserving the cultural and historical specificities, thus the alterity, of the source–text (Toury 1995, 56–7).

(126)

It is precisely multi-tiered and complicated situations such as preserving the “specificities of the source text” while relating them to a modern audience (perhaps wholly unfamiliar with the primary source) that require the marriage of specific embodied knowledge and understanding of wrestling to the appropriate socio–cultural (and linguistic) knowledge to unravel. Although the temporal issues of extant/lost texts, translators, and transcribing extend in many ways beyond the parameters of this thesis, I find their acknowledgement nonetheless helpful in painting (with a broad brush) the historical setting and background of the sagas for those less familiar with them. As mentioned above, however, specific translation issues will be elucidated and exemplified when analysing grappling several passages from the primary texts.

### 2.3. Genre

As mentioned in the introduction, this thesis will be working primarily with the two grappling–rich genres of saga: the legendary sagas (*fornaldarsögur*) and the sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*). These are, however, only two genres out of a broader and somewhat ill–defined corpus of sagas. Regardless of the sagas’ varied and obscured origins, many attempts have been made to categorize and organize the sagas into more manageable groupings. As Ralph O’Connor has stated, “Modern scholars agree that the Norse–Icelandic saga emerged as a form of historiography, that its authors mixed

historical with fictional or imaginative material, and that fictional tendencies become more frequent and sustained in later sagas as the genre developed” (88).

Although there is undoubtably subtle variation in where exactly different scholars choose to draw the line between “historical” and “fictional” sagas, the conventional modern saga–groupings can be broadly arranged on a historical/fictional spectrum in a way few would seriously disagree with, granting that each group or genre has its own exceptions (Ibid.). Massimiliano Bampi has recently summarized dozens of twentieth century works on saga taxonomy and put forth a modern and agreeable division of the saga corpus, albeit utilizing largely modern genre labels. For the current purposes of this thesis, Bampi’s recent categorizations offer a succinct and practical division:

<p><i>Konungasögur</i> (kings’ sagas): Narratives about Scandinavian kings and dynasties. They began being written already in the second half of the twelfth century and continued to be written throughout the thirteenth century.</p>
<p><i>Íslendingasögur</i> (sagas of Icelanders): The events narrated in these texts are set in the time between the colonization of Iceland, which began in the 870s, and the conversion to Christianity around 1000, or shortly after that.</p> <p><i>Íslendingasögur</i>, the most popular of the saga genres, are generally held to be marked by a certain degree of realism, although supernatural and fantastic elements (which abound in other genres, e.g., the <i>foraldarsögur</i> (legendary sagas) and the <i>riddarasögur</i> (chivalric sagas) are also present.</p>
<p><i>Samtíðarsögur</i> (contemporary sagas): These texts recount events that took place between 1117 and 1291. The protagonists are, on one hand, major chieftains who belonged to the Icelandic oligarchic families and, on the other, bishops who played a major role in the political struggles of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.</p>
<p><i>Fornaldarsögur</i> (legendary sagas): This is a heterogeneous genre which encompasses a variety of texts marked by different styles. However, what binds them together as a</p>

<p>genre is that these sagas recount events which took place before the colonization of Iceland and its later conversion to Christianity. The actions are thus set in the North (excluding Iceland) and in territories known to Scandinavians. On the grounds of their heterogeneity, the mythic–heroic sagas have sometimes been further divided into three subgenres: <i>Heldensagas</i> (heroic sagas), <i>Wikingersagas</i> (Viking sagas), and <i>Abenteuersagas</i> (adventure sagas).</p>
<p><i>Pýddar riddarasögur</i> (translated chivalric sagas): These comprise translations of chivalric works, mostly from Old French and Anglo–Norman sources, into Old Norse. Most translations were done at the instigation of King Hákon IV Hákonarson, who reigned over Norway from 1217 to 1263. The translated <i>riddarasögur</i> were largely circulated in Iceland at a later stage. Most extant copies of these originally Norwegian translations come from Iceland, where they were produced, especially in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.</p>
<p><i>Frumсамdar riddarasögur</i> (indigenous (or Icelandic) chivalric sagas): These texts were crafted in Iceland, partly following the model of the translated sagas of knights and the more adventurous of the <i>fornaldarsaga</i> texts (i.e., the <i>Abenteuersagas</i>). The settings are for the most part exotic and fantastic. The sagas enjoyed great popularity during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.</p>
<p><i>Heilagra manna sögur</i> (hagiographic sagas): These sagas are both original and translated hagiographies. This is in all likelihood the oldest genre, as it is supposed to have begun to develop before the middle of the twelfth century.</p>

(4-6)

As Bampi points out, the major two criteria utilized to configure the above taxonomy are the subject matter of the saga and the saga’s internal chronology (Ibid. 5). Bampi goes on to argue that the most significant scholarly opinions about genre classification fall broadly into two major categories; on one side are those scholars who accept the current taxonomy as a modern categorical convenience, and on the other side are those who argue that our classification system is too rigid, providing a fundamentally misleading

basis for the understanding of the highly various forms and structures of saga literature (Ibid.). Regardless of which side of the fence scholars consider themselves, Bampi's above scheme of classification is the *de facto* mode of classification used in saga scholarship, and is therefore the categorization that I will refer to throughout this thesis.<sup>41</sup>

As mentioned above, this thesis will concentrate solely on grappling techniques and sequences found in the sagas of Icelanders and the legendary sagas. These two genres of saga contain the vast majority of both references to wrestling or grappling as well as detailed passages describing particular grappling techniques. Indeed, wrestling matches often plays a central role in many of the narratives of these sagas, while virtually all other genres either do not discuss wrestling at all, or mention grappling or wrestling in passing as an attribute a hero might possess. By contrast, the sagas of Icelanders and legendary sagas are rife with complete, detailed grappling scenes and frequently portray wrestling as an important social activity and plot function.

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<sup>30</sup>For a concise historical overview of the genre debate within Old Norse Studies see: Lönnroth 419–426.

## 2.4. Historicity

The sagas' historicity is yet another area of knowledge that has perpetually been contested in academia. Although not directly concerned with most aspects of the sagas' historicity, this thesis does benefit from an overview of the sagas' historical veracity, particularly as it relates to potentially accurate depictions of social activities and pastimes such as wrestling/*glíma*. As with other aspects of the sagas, due to the age, manuscript variance, and lack of extant texts (as well as the numerous temporal issues mentioned above), modern researchers are left with only a partial picture as to the historical accuracies and inaccuracies of the individual sagas.<sup>42</sup> As Carol Clover has put bluntly: “It is obvious that the sagas are rooted in a reality in a way that contemporary European literature is not” (“Icelandic Family Sagas” 253). Clover goes on to state that the “sagas may lie closer than other medieval literature to people’s lives, but we do not know whether the “reality” they reflect is the reality of the settlement period, or the writing period, or some period in between, or all of the periods in a syncretic combination” (“Icelandic Family Sagas” 253). Add to this the agency and personal particularities of the individual sagas’ anonymous authors, and there is a strong rationale against taking these stories and their content at face-value. Further complicating matters is the issue of discerning not only the historical truth from fabricated or fanciful imaginings, but also the issue of sorting out which aspects regarding which particular topics are historically accurate. In other words, it is reasonable to assume that some aspects of what is being recounted are true, while others are not. The difficulty lies in separating the historical from the fantasy, and the probable from the impossible.<sup>43</sup>

This thesis’ primary area of concern is the authenticity and plausibility of the grappling techniques described throughout the sagas; the majority of the heated historicity argument is therefore only of peripheral interest to my argument. Nowhere in

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<sup>42</sup> Due to access and institutional restraints as well as a lack of extant texts I have not been able to thoroughly compare manuscript variance between various passages. This is an area that may be fruitful to pursue in future research. For discussion and examples of manuscript variance within the sagas see: Arthur 44–68; McDonald 303–318.

<sup>43</sup> For a modern overview of the state-of-affairs of saga historicity, see: Callow 15-34.

the sagas is it explicitly stated that the grappling techniques being performed are real, practical techniques. However, underlining the relevant sagas' overall level of historicity and identifying the underlying reasons why certain social and cultural attributes and activities were recorded not only serves to better understand the sagas as a whole, but also lends evidence and reason as to why the grappling and wrestling techniques can be argued to be both historical and realistic, and why they feature so prominently in the stories. Certainly, many areas of the sagas' historicity will be forever impossible to accurately gauge due to the passage of time and sparsity of extent texts. Regardless, several different aspects of the sagas of Icelanders, and to a lesser extent the legendary sagas, lend a historical keyhole to the past through which the modern interpreter can surmise certain facets of the contemporary culture and society with reasonable surety. Broadly speaking, the sagas of Icelanders often portray in their details the mundane or everyday aspects of medieval Icelandic social, cultural, and family life.<sup>44</sup>

Taking a step back, it is important to view this dilemma through the proper lens. When inquiring as to the historicity of a text, one important aspect to take into consideration is intent. While it is impossible to accurately guess the anonymous authors' individual intents, looking at the corpus of sagas we can detect certain recurring themes, settings, scenarios, and cultural and social cues. In this vein Diana Whaley begs the question:

What texts, then, can be counted historical? [...] Criteria adopted will be debatable [...] and under each criterion the texts present a spectrum, not discrete categories. However, as a pragmatic starting point, one might look among other things for evidence of a primary intent to preserve information and ideas about the

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<sup>44</sup> Whether these portrayals reflect the contemporary society of the saga author or the historical society about which they were writing is a wholly separate debate that I will touch upon shortly. As regards grappling techniques, at least, it can be assumed that the saga author was pandering to his contemporary audience and their social/cultural knowledge of and familiarity with grappling. As discussed in the "Grappling: Origins, Play, and Fundamentals" section (1.2.), while different rulesets may have been adopted or fancied from one century to another, there is little reason to believe (nor evidence) that the specific, practical techniques utilized would differ greatly, if at all. As will be discussed in later sections, it was not until relatively recently (i.e., the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) that radically new grappling styles and equipment were implemented.

past, rather than, for instance, merely to entertain.

(166)

Although no doubt entertaining, many sagas, and the sagas of Icelanders in particular, give the readers frequent and richly detailed descriptions of contemporary daily life. Portrayals of farm work, feuding, travel, and household chores feature in virtually every saga, and these vivid yet commonplace descriptions have been used by scholars and historians to piece together an image of traditional Icelandic life in the Middle Ages. John Martin buttresses this claim in saying that the “general treatments of medieval Scandinavian social life affirm that the sagas, in general, present an accurate picture of the types of games and the importance of sports and games in medieval Scandinavia”, adding that “As far as the available evidence is concerned, the sagas seem to offer an accurate picture of the kinds of sports and games played in the Middle Ages telling modern readers and scholars what was played and how” (Martin 41). Whaley goes on to suggest that in a text written with an eye towards historical veracity, one would also “expect the matter of the work to have importance beyond the local and immediate, either because it is concerned with persons, groups, and happenings which have significant effect on society, during their lifetime and beyond, or because persons and events insignificant in themselves, by accumulation or representativeness, point to more general phenomena or trends” (166). Such findings lend credence to the argument that the grappling passages found within the sagas are accurate depictions of real, perhaps favoured or popular contemporary techniques.

Similar to the frequent if sometimes auxiliary depictions of farming, herding, and horse-fighting in the sagas, the accumulation and representativeness of wrestling within the legendary sagas and sagas of Icelanders certainly points to wrestling’s being a staple in medieval Icelandic society. Whaley further contends that such potentially historical works such as the sagas would attempt to recognize differences with the past and show some level of concern for reconstructing or representing the past in a historically accurate way, concluding that “On the basis of criteria such as these, the *Íslendingasögur*, *konungasögur* (king’s sagas), *samtíðarsögur* (contemporary sagas) and *biskupasögur* (bishops’ sagas) all claim serious attention as windows on the early Nordic world” (166–

7). I would add to this list the *fornaldarsögur*, at least insofar as they accurately represent various and contemporary grappling techniques amongst their other more flourished and fantasy-oriented depictions. The sagas and their descriptions of everyday social life fit Whaley's criteria quite well, but it is regarding the pervasiveness of grappling sequences and wrestling feats that this line of thought rings particularly true and relevant.

Echoing these ideas is Ralph O'Connor's stance that "modern scholars agree that the Norse-Icelandic saga emerged as a form of historiography, that its authors mixed historical with fictional or imaginative material" (88). This veritable mix of historical fact with fictional material can be seen throughout many of the saga genres, and amongst the many grappling sequences as well. As I will expand upon later in this thesis, there are recorded grappling techniques that I will argue are real, practical maneuvers, while at the same time, and often within the same saga, there are techniques that are purely fantastical and solely for entertainment purposes. It is with this in mind that I draw attention to Preben Sørensen's resounding of Else Mundal, where he asserts that "[Mundal] has correctly noted that 'realism which mirrored a society where the belief in the supernatural was important would have to include the supernatural in some way'" (Sørensen 8, Mundal "The Treatment of the Supernatural"). In other words, it should come as no surprise, and should perhaps be expected, that a society that truly believed in the supernatural may record alongside their factual histories and social practices at least some supernatural occurrences. This can clearly be seen in many of the sagas' grappling scenes, such as when the infamous anti-hero Grettir the Strong wrestles with the supernatural and monstrous Glámr.<sup>45</sup> This scene, along with many other grappling sequences, particularly in the *fornaldarsögur* /legendary sagas, depicts an otherwise realistic, plausible, and detailed wrestling sequence between a man and a monstrous foe.

Despite the somewhat fantastical attributes of the antagonist (e.g., size, strength, precocity), the wrestling techniques used to slay the monster are often realistic, popular and broadly utilized maneuvers. Here it is important to consider that, as opposed to the average modern reader, the medieval and later contemporary audiences would have had a

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<sup>45</sup> This prolonged grappling sequence can be found in: Scudder160.

much fuller understanding of the back-and-forth of the grappling matches being described, in conjunction with far less incredulity towards supernatural phenomena. Furthermore, as the following passages seem to imply, the intended audiences, just as the society of the sagas, would also have participated in and understood the contextual intricacies and terminology of the various maneuvers being performed. Passages such as the following, taken from the sagas of Icelanders' *Grettis saga/The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, further attest to the popularity of and implied social familiarity with wrestling/*glíma* in medieval Iceland:

Þá töluðu til sumir menn ungir að veður væri gott og fagurt og sé gott ungum mönnum að hafa glímur og skemmtan. Þeir kváðu það allráðlegt. Fóru menn þá og settust niður fram frá búðunum.[Some young men said that the weather was fine and pleasant, and that it would do them good to arrange wrestling matches and entertainment. Everyone agreed that this was a good idea and went to sit down near the booths.]

(GuðniCh:72; Scudder 16)

Through examples such as this a seeming cultural familiarity with grappling can be seen in the facets of contemporary society that are reflected in the literature: wrestling appears to have been a regular activity for the youth to participate in when the weather was accommodating. Another example, taken from *Víga-Glúms saga/ Killer Glum's Saga*, lends further insight into the cultural familiarity of wrestling to medieval Icelanders:

Það gerist eitt sumar á alþingi að í Fangabrekku gengust menn að sveitum, Norðlendingar og Vestfirðingar. Gekk Norðlendingum þyngra. Var fyrir sveit þeirra Már sonur Glúms.” [It happened one summer at the Althing that teams of men were competing at wrestling at Fangabrekka, the Northerners against the men of the West Fjords, and the Northerners were getting the worst of it. Mar the son of Glum was captain of their team.]

(Halldórsson 1923; McKinnell 286)

From this passage we are once again shown that wrestling was seen as a social activity, and one to be held where and when many people could attend. Furthermore, we can see

that competitors were divided into teams (sometimes based on size/age/skill, sometimes, as above, based on regional/geographical location), although specifics about how the teams were chosen and implemented remain vague.<sup>47</sup> The Althing, where these wrestling matches were said to have taken place, was an annual gathering consisting of people, almost exclusively men, from all around the island.<sup>48</sup> The fact that wrestling is portrayed as an activity that was popular and would draw multiple teams of competitors at the Althing further cements wrestling's status as a socially popular activity in medieval Icelandic culture.

The use of the arcane term "*fangabrekku*" is also revealing: Despite most English translations (such as McKinnell's above) leaving the term untranslated or Anglicized, Cleasby and Vigfusson defined the term as "a wrestling ground" (141). With this definition in mind, it is clear that Icelandic society must have held wrestling in high regard for there to have been a "wrestling ground" at the country's largest and most important gathering. Additional aspects and evidence of wrestling's social popularity will be addressed later during more in-depth analyses of grappling passages from specific sagas in order to further underline the society's familiarity with wrestling. These passages will also serve to bolster the argument that, through descriptions of real detailed techniques, specifically referring to techniques by name, and by depicting grappling competitions as popular and highly social events, there is an implied understanding of grappling and grappling techniques and that the intended audiences of the sagas were presumably knowledgeable about these techniques.

Regarding such competitions and games in general, including wrestling, Martin states that "The society of the sagas, at least in terms of the role that athletic competition plays, bears a considerable resemblance to well-documented, thoroughly studied, real-

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<sup>47</sup> The frequent omission of such practical details perhaps underlines the familiarity of the intended audience with such events, i.e., that it was expected that those hearing/reading such descriptions already knew from experience many of the trivial and practical details regarding how such common and popular activities were organized.

<sup>48</sup> The Althing [alþingi] served as Iceland's national parliament and as a national gathering ground. It was founded in 930, approximately 60 years after settlers arrived in Iceland, and is located at Þingvellir, roughly 45 kilometers east of Reykjavik. Its primary purpose was to serve as a meeting ground for the country's leaders, where they could discuss social issues, implement laws, and enforce judgements. It was held virtually annually and was the most popular, in terms of numbers of attendees and prestige, gathering of the island.

world societies” (Martin 43). Regardless of the extent to which various other aspects of the sagas reflect a historical reality, there seems to be general agreement that many of the social and cultural facets of medieval Scandinavian life, particularly sport, are accurately portrayed and represented within the sagas.

Closely related to the issue of saga historicity are medieval Iceland’s social makeup and demographics. As touched upon above, Iceland, where the bulk of sagas were created and first written down, was a remote and sparsely populated island. In Iceland there were none of the royal courts found throughout its mainland Scandinavian counterparts, and therefore it lacked both local royal patronage and the high literary and courtly societies that often played a major role in medieval cultural life. In addition to this, Iceland also lacked cities and towns, and hence had no urban educated elite. Social and cultural life revolved around the farmstead, “and it is presumably in the farm’s decidedly mixed company that the sagas had their origins and audience” (Clover, “Icelandic Family Sagas” 271). Because of this lack of a direct royal (and therefore social and cultural) authority, much of what is recorded in the sagas can and is interpreted as a reflection of the contemporary social and cultural values of the inhabitants of the island. This sentiment is reflected by Sørensen when he states:

Icelandic literature was written in many phases and in changing ideological contexts. Seen as a whole, it is a textual recreation of times past. A self-conscious and well-educated class of farmers wrote narratives, which they considered to be true, about themselves, their ancestors and their achievements, and about the history of other countries, because they regarded it as part of their own.

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Viewing the sagas through this lens helps explain why grappling has such a proportionally significant role in the sagas of Icelanders and legendary sagas: grappling/*glíma* played a significant role in the society in which the sagas were first formulated and written. It is also for this reason that, unlike much of continental Europe’s popular literature of the time, the plots, themes, and settings of many of the sagas (specifically the sagas of Icelanders) were rustic and grounded in an “everyday” reality. Once again, many of the grappling sequences reflected this neatly: grappling matches

(whether for pleasure or martial purposes) often took place in the fields of a farm or out in the countryside during a festive gathering of rural families and farmers, alongside (or after<sup>49</sup>) other sportive events. In conjunction with this the grappling techniques displayed, even when portrayed in a flamboyant or exaggerated manner, were generally grounded in fundamental, practical techniques that members of a society passionate about grappling would have little difficulty understanding.<sup>50</sup>

Due to the aforementioned demographic makeup of medieval Icelandic society, and to the reflection of this society in their recorded literature, it is clear that regardless of the degree of the sagas' overall historical accuracy, the general pastimes and cultural interests of the society to which the anonymous saga authors belonged were in many ways mirrored in their stories. Many of the sagas were thought to have been primarily handed down in the form of oral stories, and it is from this rich oral tradition that many of the sagas in their extant form arose.<sup>51</sup> Mundal summarizes in her introduction to *Dating the Sagas—Reviews and Revisions*: “To a greater or lesser extent, the sagas about early Icelanders build on oral tradition and the stories they tell may have existed, perhaps in a less artistic form prior to being written down” (1). This oral tradition frequently manifested itself in the public reading of sagas around the farmstead. As Sørensen affirms:

The practice of reading aloud on the farms also contributed to the formation of the sagas' oral rhetoric and objective style. [...] The oral narrative situation, of which the written sagas formed part, gave them their stamp of seeming to be true stories. The reader was the narrator and he would have to have answered for his

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<sup>49</sup> Grappling matches frequently take place immediately after and/or as a result of mounting tensions created during other sporting events. See the later example in the “*Grettis saga*” section (4.2.4.).

<sup>50</sup> Much like modern day American Professional Wrestling, such as World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), where the maneuvers being performed are exaggerated for theatrical purposes, yet still easily identifiable by any fan with wrestling knowledge because of the very fact that they are often based on practical, fundamental wrestling techniques and plausible kinesiology.

<sup>51</sup> As referenced above, Clover covers this topic in-depth in: Clover, “Icelandic Family Sagas (Íslendingasögur).”, as well as in: Clover, *The Medieval Saga*.

For a more recent iteration of the theory see: Callow 15-34. Clunies Ross also covers this issue extensively in the introduction to her work: Clunies Ross, Margaret, *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*..

narrative's credibility and ethical value.

(26)

The oral reading, or performance, of a saga to a congregated and socially diverse group of listeners therefore bolsters the notion that much of what was depicted in the sagas, and in particular those areas dealing with social and farm life, was indeed an accurate reflection of the contemporary society and their preferred as well as mundane pastimes. Following this line of thought Sørensen goes on to contend that:

A large proportion of manuscript codices were written at the initiative of private individuals and were the product of the large farms, where they were read aloud to the members of the household, which included men, women and children, the head of the household and his wife, servants and guests, the learned and the laity. This mixed group of listeners had an influence on the subject matter and point of view of the literature and contributed to the formation of its style.

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From here we can infer that not only did the topic matter of many of the sagas reflect the desires and knowledge of the laity, but to lie, misrepresent, or proclaim ignorance of something as societally commonplace as, for example, wrestling and its basic techniques, would reflect poorly on the author/saga producer and detract from the sagas' overall sense of veracity in other areas. Conversely, if one were trying to impress upon their audience the historical or genealogical accuracy of their story, adding real, relatable details such as accurate descriptions of contemporary ballgames, wrestling matches, and social customs and attire would serve to bolster their claim (and perhaps the enjoyment of the audience).

In conjunction with the above factors, it is also worth noting that the very grappling terminology used in the sagas gives us reason to believe that their authors assumed a certain level of familiarity with grappling techniques amongst their readership or audience.<sup>52</sup> As Sixt Wetzler astutely observes, "The terminology used in the sagas

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<sup>52</sup> I will go into more detail regarding several such terms when later discussing specific maneuvers and passages.

indicates that single techniques were understood, applied, and most likely practiced as such. [...] The *glíma* scenes of saga literature are one of the foremost proofs for the existence of martial arts in medieval Iceland” (235). One such passage that Wetzler refers to is found in the *þáttr* (a short story often found within a saga) *Jokul Buason’s Tale*:

Sá Jökull, at eigi mátti svá lengi fram fara, ok sló til sniðglímu við Gnípu, en er hana varði minnst, brá hann henni lausamjöðm, ok kom fyrst niðr höfuðit ok síðan búkrinn.[He saw that he could not carry on like that for long, and began to try some hip throws. When she was least expecting it, he made a hip throw and she came down first on her head, then on her trunk.]

(Halldórsson 1461; Porter 329)

This passage reveals to us that, through the terminology used, the anonymous authors of the sagas must have expected their intended audience to have a thorough understanding of wrestling/*glíma* and its many different techniques. Of particular note is that, despite the English translation simply saying that Jokul tried “some hip throws” and then later succeeded with a “hip throw”, as we can see from the Old Norse primary text two different maneuvers with two very different terms were actually used: *sniðglímu*<sup>53</sup> and *lausamjöðm*.<sup>54</sup> Although correct in that both techniques are a variant of a hip throw, one technique, “sniðglímu”, is a trip in which you use one of your legs to *trip* your opponent over your own hip, while the other technique, “lausamjöðm”, is more of a traditional hip throw where, rather than tripping one’s opponent, one instead uses the lower center of gravity of one’s own hips to actually lift and *throw* one’s opponent over one’s hip and onto the floor. These technical differences are critical, and were likely not overlooked by the author: just as in a modern judo, grappling, or folkstyle wrestling match, one often initiates a hip throw by first trying to repeatedly and without warning pull and trip their opponent over one’s own leg or hip (*sniðglímu*), before suddenly pulling them in more deeply and applying a proper hip throw (*lausamjöðm*).<sup>55</sup> As if the terminological choices

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<sup>53</sup> “Sniðglímu”: a wrestler’s term, *a hip-trip*. Cleasby and Vigfusson 574.

<sup>54</sup> “Lausamjöðm”: *a trick with the hip in wrestling*. Cleasby and Vigfusson 375.

<sup>55</sup> Such repeated and partial attempts to trip or throw one’s opponent are often referred to as “feints”. A feint is often used as an intentional attempt at misdirection, or it can be a genuine attempt at a technique that is then quickly cancelled or retracted due to the defences of one’s opponent.

and ordering of the maneuvers weren't convincing enough, the reader is also treated with a final important detail: after receiving the final hip throw, "she came down first on her head, then on her trunk". As opposed to most trips (including the aforementioned *sniðglímu*) where one usually falls forward, to either side, or onto one's back or braced arms, when a hip throw is executed with force or ill-intent the recipient can easily be made to first hit their head on the ground before the momentum of the throw causes their body to follow shortly thereafter. This tactic can be clearly observed in the above passage. From the author's choice in terminology to the ordering of the techniques being executed to the physical description of how the body falls in the aftermath of receiving the throw, this brief passage strongly evidences the argument that the medieval saga author (if not also their intended audience) often had a robust, detailed knowledge of grappling and its techniques.

As with the techniques mentioned in the preceding passage, many of the grappling techniques in the sagas have their analogues in modern sport *glíma*, and this stasis is reflected in the terminology of the maneuvers, many of which have kept the same name for almost a millennia.<sup>56</sup> Jóhannes Jósefsson, a former Icelandic *glíma* champion and official international ambassador for the sport, stated that "All the manoeuvres bear the same name [as they did in the past], and very little change has been made as a whole since the eleventh century" (3). Although I will argue that many of the grappling techniques described within the sagas are *not* found in modern *glíma*, I agree with Jóhannes that many of the more sporting techniques and their terminology remain similar if not the same. Regardless, this cultural familiarity with grappling is not only reflected by the many precise, realistic descriptions of grappling techniques found throughout the sagas, but can also be glimpsed through the many seemingly "bare" descriptions of techniques as well.

As Paul Connerton rightfully argues in *How Societies Remember*: "One of the limitations of documentary evidence is that few people bother to write down what they take for granted" (18). With regard to the sagas, it is made clear from various passages

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<sup>56</sup> Thorsteinn Einarsson discusses the terminology of both traditional and modern *glíma* techniques in his book: *Þróun glímu í íslensku þjóðlífi*.

(such as those mentioned previously in this section regarding the social popularity of grappling) that certain contemporarily familiar aspects of grappling could be hidden in such lacunas.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, in light of this phenomenon the saga authors' use of specific terms for particular grappling maneuvers would be lost on a society not thoroughly familiar with the sport, while at the same time utilizing such familiar terminology would be a good way to ingratiate yourself and your saga with the knowing audience.<sup>58</sup> Having gone over such historicity-related issues of the sagas I will now shift focus to the dating of the sagas and bring to light certain temporal issues that must be kept in mind before the analysing of passages from such texts should take place.

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<sup>57</sup> Lorge cites a similar issue with regard to the lack of Chinese texts on wrestling and other popular martial arts: "In pre-modern China, a truly educated person, as opposed to one who was merely literate, would have found it difficult culturally to justify writing about martial arts. In literary terms, there was no tradition of writing about martial arts. No famous scholar wrote about martial arts, and the Wrestling Record was not part of nor did it initiate a tradition of writing about martial arts. This should not seem strange to us given the lack of such a tradition in modern scholarship" (907).

<sup>58</sup> Jan Orkisz discusses these and several related issues in his study of pole-weapons in the sagas. See: Orkisz 177-212.

## 2.5. Dating

The dating of the sagas has been an area of heated academic debate for over a century. A traditional aspect of saga scholarship, which is mainly represented in the works of Peter Erasmus Muller, Finnur Jonsson, Andreas Heusler, Jon Helgason and Jan de Vries, was primarily interested in the dating of the subject matter, the contents of the sagas. By contrast, other scholars such as Sigurdur Nordal, Einar Olafur Sveinsson and Jonas Kristjansson have focused on the forms of the sagas as the subject of dating (Glauser, “What is Dated and Why?” 24–5). The former group aimed to take into account non-extant ancestral forms for the dating of the sagas while the latter group chose to completely ignore these “older versions” in their form of dating.

For the purposes of this thesis, however, only a cursory outline of saga dating need be visited. Although there is currently considerable scholarly consensus regarding most aspects of dating, many uncertainties remain. The precise dates when the sagas were written may at first seem to be a rather peripheral concern to my thesis, but it is an area that nonetheless will help shed some light on many of the underlying contextual questions that beg answering. As Guðrún Nordal makes clear:

The dating of the sagas of Icelanders is not an idle pursuit. A date, however vague or loosely argued, places a saga in a historical context, and therefore has repercussions for our conclusions about its social relevance and cultural significance at a given time, ultimately influencing the way a saga is presented in a modern edition and interpreted by the scholar and the general reader.

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In the case of (re)interpreting wrestling techniques from medieval Icelandic texts, a robust understanding of the societal, literary, and cultural context of the sagas, as well as the times in which they were written, is of great importance. Being familiar with such societal backdrops allows the scholar to see the fuller context of how the contemporary society viewed wrestling, and knowing the exact, or even approximate, dating of any given saga is a valuable piece to the puzzle in that it allows the researcher to analyse and

draw comparisons between different texts and historical records from a similar period. Broadly speaking, the accurate dating of a saga can lend the modern reader some insight into the saga's respective audience. In combination with this, as wrestling was an inherently social phenomenon throughout Scandinavia and Iceland, such insights can prove truly useful in deciphering the contemporary society's attitude towards and knowledge of wrestling.

Regarding the sagas referenced in this thesis, virtually all were conceived (in extent, written form) between roughly 1220–1400. This window is important to note not because physical, practical changes could or did appear in the grappling techniques used during this time, but rather because it coincides with other literary and societal changes that can be detected in the sagas: mainly that the discussion and depiction of grappling techniques quickly lost favour within the sagas shortly after this window. It is worth noting, however, that there does seem to be an overarching pattern of a decreasing frequency and/or loss of interest in grappling sequences within saga literature as time progressed. This phenomenon is exemplified in the *Þýddar riddarasögur* (translated chivalric sagas), *Frumsamdar riddarasögur* (indigenous/Icelandic chivalric sagas), and *Samtíðarsögur*'s (contemporary sagas) noticeable dearth of specific or detailed wrestling passages. I attribute this to a combination of Iceland's modernization in terms of their class–structure (the powerful elites “mingled” less with the commoners and were less interested in or influenced by their pastimes) and Iceland's attempt to adopt (and frequently imitate) mainland Europe's literary forms, genres, and interests.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> These genres, particularly the translated and indigenous chivalric sagas, either never depict wrestling, or simply mention it in passing as one attribute amongst many that a hero or warrior may possess. As stated above, I posit that as a result of wishing to emulate the cultural and social fancies of their continental counterparts, Icelandic scribes and upper society became less and less interested in representing pastimes (such as ball games and wrestling) that would perhaps be frowned upon as “lower class” by European courtiers and nobles. The contemporary sagas do mention wrestling, but far less frequently and in far less detail than the legendary sagas and the sagas of Icelanders, and perhaps for the same or similar reasons that the chivalric sagas neglect grappling's mention. Interestingly, the king's sagas (*Konungasögur*), which were written relatively early and primarily between 1190 and 1320, also mention wrestling only in passing or as an attribute amongst many that a hero may possess. This could perhaps also be for the same above societal reasons. In short, it appears that the more continental or aristocratic the target–audience of the sagas was, the less there would appear to be accounts of common folk pastimes such as wrestling. The *fornaldarsögur* find themselves in somewhat of a “grey area” regarding this matter in that they are often composed contemporarily with some of the later saga genres, yet they still pay deference to wrestling, both by its frequent inclusion in the sagas and the frequency with which it is mentioned, in ways that their other later contemporaries do not.

Returning to the broader dating issues at hand, an important point in the debate has taken center stage in recent academia: that of defining a saga's "original text". Else Mundal articulates on this point:

Today, most scholars are inclined to attach importance both to the oral tradition behind the written sagas and to the process of the movement of narratives into a written medium. In addition, an interest in the individual manuscripts and the alteration of the written text during textual transmission grew with the development of so-called New Philology. When discussing saga dating, or the dating of the original written text, it is a fact that this text does not exist. ("Dating the Sagas" 2)

This last point is vital in conceptually understanding how the dating of the sagas is approached. It is important to acknowledge that the extent to which we know that sagas were based off oral tales will never be accurately known, and, relatedly, that the "dates" that are given to different sagas are often not referring to an extant version of the text, but rather to a lost or presumptive earlier version. What is often used as the basis for dating are later manuscripts that vary to an unknown degree from the original; knowing the exact extent of these changes is virtually impossible. Regardless of these differences, these various forms are recognized as being versions of the same saga (Ibid.).

Although I will revisit dating as necessary and relevant for individual sagas, it suffices at this point in the thesis to state that saga literature, in its broadest sense, spans approximately three centuries, 1100–1400. These dates are those of the actual writing of the sagas, which should not be confused with the dates of the events which the sagas narrate. Thus, as Glauser summarizes, "the dating of a saga, on whatever basis it is made, can never represent more than a small section of the text's development. It is [...] a photographical recording, or perhaps rather a still of a film, which otherwise is largely lost" (Glauser "What is Dated and Why" 28). Although debates on the dating of the sagas carry on, their implications have little impact on my argument. Being concerned foremostly with the veracity and plausibility of the sagas' grappling sequences and recorded techniques, this thesis necessarily focuses on *how* and *why* particular techniques were recorded.

Considering grappling's long and esteemed international history and primordial roots, as well as its long-term cultural significance throughout Scandinavia and in particular Iceland, a saga's "composition date" (if such a date can be said to exist for texts seemingly stemming from an oral history), even if shifted either forward or backward by a century, would have little impact on the accuracy or plausibility of the techniques detailed therein. Keeping this in mind, I will still touch upon when exactly recounted events took place, or when they were recorded, as necessary and in the relevant later sections of this thesis.

## 2.6. Legendary Sagas and the Sagas of Icelanders

The *fornaldarsögur* (“sagas of ancient time”, often known in English and referred to in this thesis as “the legendary sagas”) and *Íslendingasögur* (sagas of Icelanders, also known as ‘The Family Sagas’) are two genres of medieval Old Norse sagas that have captivated audiences and scholars alike for centuries with their tales of heroism, battle, adventure, poetry, drama, blood–feuds, and vengeance. Often included in these stories is a pastime, sport, and martial art far more ancient than the tales in which it is contained: wrestling. Yet, despite the plethora of Old Norse–related scholarship available on many of the aforementioned topics, relatively little has been written about the expansive wrestling and grappling scenes contained within the sagas, wrestling’s social status and importance in medieval Iceland and Scandinavia, or even its literary usage and purpose in the overall plot structure of the sagas. In part, I suspect that there is a rather straight–forward reason for this paucity: It is not so much that no one has cared to research the topic, so much as it is that no serious scholar has had the interest *and* ability to successfully merge the two worlds of physical and academic knowledge in this context. In other words, regardless of the level of understanding of wrestling and grappling technique (or lack thereof) to be found within the relatively small circle of Old Norse scholars, perhaps it is the very structure of modern academia that further (and almost pre–emptively) dissuades any investigation of this bountiful topic. This latter point is one of immanent importance for many fields of study, and is an issue that Marital Arts Studies has been grappling with since its conception.

Of all the different varieties of saga literature (see “Genre” section (2.3.)above) it is the legendary sagas and the sagas of Icelanders that lend the most prominence, both in terms of narrative space and detail, to grappling techniques. Grappling scenes and techniques are so unevenly distributed between the saga genres that they are virtually non–existent to any meaningful extent outside of the legendary sagas and sagas of Icelanders. What little attention is paid to wrestling in the other saga genres amounts to little more than mentioning–in–passing or describing a hero as being able–bodied in all ways, including wrestling.

Before delving into the specifics of grappling’s importance in the sagas of Icelanders and legendary sagas, as well as its suspicious absence in academic and literary conversations about the sagas, I would first like to give a brief and separate overview of the two primary saga “genres” that will be dealt with during my exploration of the topic.<sup>60</sup> Contained between these two genres are the vast majority of grappling-rich passages and detailed grappling techniques that can be found throughout the whole of medieval Scandinavian literature.

### 2.6.1. The Legendary Sagas

The *fornaldarsögur norðurlanda*, also known as the legendary sagas, or literally “sagas of ancient time of the northern lands”, are customarily regarded as one of the youngest saga groups. They were primarily written during the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries, although they are often based on older traditional poetry.<sup>61</sup> Some of the older *fornaldarsögur* may have been written contemporarily with the *Íslendingasögur* and other classical sagas (Lassen, Ney, and Jakobsson 9). The actual term “*fornaldarsögur*” is a fairly modern invention, however, and was first used by Carl Christian Rafn as the title of his genre-defining edition of the corpus, published in 1829–30.<sup>62</sup> This three-volume book brought together the majority of narratives preserved in Old Icelandic/Old Norse dealing with the early history of mainland Scandinavia before the unification of Norway under *Haraldr Hárfagri* (Harold Fairhair) and the settlement of Iceland.<sup>63</sup> While many of these younger sagas have been denounced by scholars as being too fanciful, written in

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<sup>60</sup> Considering the plethora of academic discussion surrounding both the popular and esoteric aspects of saga literature, it does indeed seem that grappling scenes and sequences, particularly considering their frequency and importance to the narratives, have received a disproportionately small amount of academic investigation and scrutiny. This issue will be broached in more detail later in the “Embodied Knowledge” section (3.5.) of the thesis.

<sup>61</sup> For example, see: Byock.

<sup>62</sup> Rafn, *Fornaldar Sögur Norðurlanda*.

<sup>63</sup> For a more expansive look at the history of the legendary sagas see: *Stories for All Time: The Icelandic Fornaldarsögur*. *Stories for all time* is a research project based at The Arnarnagæan Institute, a research centre within the Department of Nordic Studies and Linguistics at the University of Copenhagen. The project's primary aim is to survey the entire transmission history of the *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*.

bad taste, and containing little of historical value, the large number of preserved manuscripts containing them is a testament to at least their past contemporary popularity: roughly thirty–six sagas and their variants spanning over 1,500 individual texts in nearly 800 manuscripts (Lassen, Ney, and Jakobsson 9–10). These sagas are also defined by their story location, where the majority of action takes place not only in Scandinavia (modern–day Denmark, Norway, and Sweden), but also in far–away mythical lands in which the heroes encounter magic and adventure, and do battle with fantastical monsters and creatures.

Despite the aforementioned hallmark traits of the *fornaldarsögur*, one cannot give an overview of the corpus<sup>64</sup> and simultaneously ignore the fact that wrestling and *glíma* play an integral role in the sagas’ entertainment value, if not also in their plot. With a prevalent stereotype of many sagas, and particularly the *fornaldarsögur*, being that they have a “fondness for the fabulous, stock characters” and “have often been dismissed as historically unreliable and of scant artistic merit” (*Stories for All Time*), it would be easy to dismiss many of the depictions of grappling in the sagas as merely fanciful fiction, unfounded in any sort of reality. Unfortunately the common trope that many of the heroes and champions in the legendary sagas can jump as far forward as backward, are the most handsome men in the land, kill swaths of berserkers, giants and trolls, and are the best in their kingdoms and countries at all forms of sport and competition does little to help frame the practical wrestling techniques found within these sagas in a serious or realistic context. I would like to posit, however, that regarding realistic and accurate depictions of grappling, and the display of scribal knowledge about specific wrestling techniques and *glíma*, this stereotype unfairly undermines the rich cultural and social history of wrestling in medieval Scandinavia. Contrary to such stereotypes, whereas the modern reader or scholar may gloss over the sagas’ depictions of grappling and compartmentalize them in the realm of tasteless fantasy and fictional–filler, the descriptions of individual techniques are often extremely accurate, detailed, and realistic. While such criticisms of the *fornaldarsögur* as “fabulous” never directly reference grappling (and therefore unfortunately do not mention any techniques or specific passages), some commonplace

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<sup>64</sup> For a concise list and debate over which of the sagas make up the *fornaldarsögur* see: Driscoll 71–84.

examples of such “fabulous ” or “historically unreliable” grappling can be seen in passages drawn from *Gríms Saga loðinkinna* (section 4.1.1.), where the protagonist grapples a troll, or in *Hálfðanar Saga Eysteinssonar* (section 4.1.3.), where a man is squeezed so hard that blood pours forth from his eyes and nose, and where a troll woman is torn asunder by having her legs pulled apart, or in *Sörla saga Sterka* (section 4.1.4.), where a rather mundane wrestling technique results in an exploding skull. Despite these depictions certainly being fanciful, as I discuss in the later relevant sections, they are most often exaggerations of or resulting from real techniques, much like modern-day professional wrestling uses exaggerated versions of real wrestling techniques in order to further entertain the audience.

I find it prudent to mention here the *riddarasögur* (the “chivalric sagas”), as they are frequently compared to or conflated with the legendary sagas. These sagas share many surface similarities with the *fornaldarsögur*, and in many themes and motifs the two genres overlap. The *riddarasögur* were primarily written in Norway and Iceland in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and like their kin the *fornaldarsögur* they have received relatively little scholarly attention until recently. The *riddarasögur* are mostly either Norse translations of French *chansons de geste* and other Latin histories, or indigenous creations modelled after them (Kalinke and Mitchell 75). Kalinke further states that “the designation *riddarasögur* for one group and *fornaldarsögur* for another group of sagas suggests not only the existence of two distinct genres but also an essential homogeneity for the works subsumed under the respective categories. Such a homogeneity exists for neither *riddarasögur* nor *fornaldarsögur*”(Kalinke and Mitchell 75).<sup>65</sup> Although I agree with Kalinke and Mitchell’s assessment on most points, one stark difference, as regards this thesis, between the two saga genres is that while the *fornaldarsögur* are replete with both realistic and fantastical wrestling maneuvers and

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<sup>65</sup> For a thorough overview of the *riddarasögur* see: Barnes, *The Bookish Riddarasögur: Writing Romance in Late Medieval Iceland*. The Viking Collection; Barnes “Romance in Iceland” 266–286. For further discussion on the *riddarasögur* see also: Glauser “Romance (Translated *riddarasögur*)” *A Companion to Old Norse–Icelandic Literature and Culture, Second Edition*. 372–387; Hughes 114–140; Driscoll, “Late Prose Fiction (*lygisögur*)” 190–204; and Driscoll, *The Unwashed Children of Eve: The Production, Dissemination and Reception of Popular Literature in Post–Reformation Iceland*; Kennedy 1990.

sequences, the *riddarasögur* are virtually devoid of any such mention or description of grappling.

As discussed previously in the “Genre” section (2.3.), for all the similarities and overlap in theme and motif between the two genres, it would seem that the interests of the authors, their patrons, and/or their audiences either differed from those of authors of other genres, or shifted over time: regardless, as a result wrestling (or at least writing about it) fell out of literary (and perhaps cultural) fancy. As alluded to above, I posit that medieval Scandinavia, and Iceland in particular, chose to more and more closely imitate the genres and styles of mainland contemporary European literature. In doing so, I argue that the younger genres of saga phased-out such nativist and culturally specific pastimes such as wrestling and traditional sports such as the ballgames occasionally depicted in the sagas<sup>66</sup>. These localized and regional pastimes seem to have been replaced instead with the chivalric themes and motifs (such as efficiency with various arms and horseback riding) more in line with the fashions of contemporary continental European literature.

## 2.6.2. The Sagas of Icelanders

Unlike the *fornaldarsögur norðurlanda*, the *Íslendingasögur*, also known as the sagas of Icelanders or as family sagas, take place primarily in Iceland, and, although the protagonists often travel abroad, they tend to avoid the fantastical lands, realms, and monsters that the heroes of the *fornaldarsögur* so frequently adventured in and battled with. In a similar fashion, despite generally being older works of literature than the *fornaldarsögur*, the *Íslendingasögur*'s protagonists are most often Icelandic farmers and chieftains as opposed to princes and heroes of legendary descent, and as a result many of the over-the-top fantastical elements associated with the legendary sagas are found to be

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<sup>66</sup> Similarly to wrestling, these ballgames are mentioned with some frequency in the sagas of Icelanders, but are virtually nonexistent in the other saga genres. For more information of these ballgames and related sports see: Thurber 167–188.

quite scaled-back in the *Íslendingasögur*.<sup>67</sup> This more “grounded reality” in the family sagas is also reflected in their critical literary reception where they have been touted as “the crowning achievement of medieval narrative art in Scandinavia”(Kellog xxx): a stark contrast to the *fornaldarsögur*’s “scant artistic merit”(Stories for All Time). This penchant for stoic realism can be seen not only in the heroes’ travels, battles, and adventures, but also in the sagas’ less embellished and often less deadly (i.e., as a pastime or for social entertainment) grappling sequences.

As with the *fornaldarsögur*, there are scenes replete with examples of specific grappling scenarios, sequences, techniques, and maneuvers found within and throughout the *Íslendingasögur*. Yet, in contrast these scenes are often more realistic and plausible in their descriptions, and, following the general localized character of the family sagas as a whole, more customarily depicted than their legendary counterparts. These differences will be further evidenced and expanded upon in later sections (4.1. and 4.2.) dealing with specific grappling passages. As mentioned in the “Historicity” section (2.4.) above, one possible reason for this perceived realism is that, as with the family saga literature as a whole, the anonymous author’s credibility was based on his/her ability to relate (or convince his/her audience that he/she was relating) events exactly as they happened. Kellogg similarly argues that “[the sagas of Icelander’s author] derives his authorial authority not from the originality of his style or story but from its fidelity to the events themselves, or to others’ accounts of them and their judgements on those who were involved” (xxxiv). I argue that this desire for and preference of verifiable detail and credibility bled-over into the accounts of grappling, which, as opposed to the legendary sagas, often play more central roles in the plots of the sagas, and frequently play out in the *Íslendingasögur* more like complete scenes rather than brief anecdotes. One effect this pursuit of veracity has had on the sagas is that the grappling sequences are generally

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<sup>67</sup> Wetzler echoes this opinion in his assessment of the saga corpus: “In Old Icelandic literature, a combat scene is not just a side note. The descriptions of interpersonal violence and weapon fighting are dense, most of the times exciting moments, and various, different layers of meaning are attached to them. These layers of meaning – e. g., the atmosphere of a fight, the qualities of a protagonist, the relations between the characters – are dependent on the overall tone of the saga to which the combat scene belongs, and at the same time help to define this tone. Just as tone, setting and atmosphere of the classic *Íslendingasögur* are different from a *riddarasaga*, so are their depictions of combat” (25).

more realistically described and can therefore be better envisioned, with greater ease, by the readers and audience.<sup>68</sup>

A further result of this apparent historicity is that *glíma* proponents and experts such as Thorsteinn Einarsson and M. Bennett Nichols have focused their gaze somewhat predominantly upon the family sagas, as opposed to the *fornaldarsögur*. They do so in great part because these sagas are not only more prone, as they would argue, to having examples of “proper” *glíma* technique and maneuvers (as one would see in modern-day Icelandic sport *glíma*), but also more prone to having grappling and wrestling encounters that are depicted in traditional grappling locations with rules that more closely emulate traditional *glíma* rules (as opposed to the combatants fighting/grappling one another to the death). It is also somewhat easier to argue a grappling style’s historical veracity when the grappling sequences in question are between two humans, and not a man and a troll, giant, or the undead. These facts, along with the often pro-Icelandic sentiments generally reflected in the sagas of Icelanders, have made the *Íslendingasögur* prime source material not only for those who wish to research medieval Scandinavian grappling, but also for those who wish to compare and contrast detailed grappling techniques of the past to modern maneuvers.

As is evident from the previous sections regarding the sagas’ genre (2.3.), historicity (2.4.), and dating (2.5.), volumes have been written about the *fornaldarsögur* and *Íslendingasögur* and their minutiae have been scoured by both impassioned enthusiasts and scholars alike for their historical and social insights.<sup>69</sup> Yet, despite the varying levels of attention given to the interpretations and content of this saga corpus over the last several centuries, the celebrated sport of wrestling and its techniques, which are described and referenced with frequency and detail throughout the sagas, have been virtually ignored. As I mentioned above, I find this dearth of academic attention towards

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<sup>68</sup> On this topic Weztler makes another interesting and agreeable surmise: “We may assume that the telling of an imagined past always found it easy to exaggerate, to include the extraordinary and even supernatural. But at the same time, such storytelling had to remain within the frame of the reality that the audience knew first-hand, from their daily life. It had to mediate the narrative desire for exaggeration with the need for plausibility. Where it failed to do so, it would have been perceived as a *skróksaga*, a tale of made-up lies” (98).

<sup>69</sup> See above “Genre”, “Historicity” and “Dating” sections (2.3., 2.4., and 2.5.) and refs. See also: Ármann Jakobsson and Sverrir Jakobsson; Craigie; McTurk; Price, Neil, and Brink; Andersson, Theodore M; Tucker; and Miller.

such an obviously popular aspect of the literature somewhat perplexing: Why has more scholarly attention, and indeed any meaningful form of attention, not been directed towards such a literarily and socially celebrated pastime, of which the source materials are replete? If more scholarly attention would have been paid to the numerous grappling examples found within the sagas, as well as to their social and narrative importance, then perhaps there would already be established academic footholds in regard to various facets of their study.<sup>70</sup> In discussing the difficulties of studying the martial arts within academia (both historically and contemporarily), Peter Lorge lends a practical assessment:

The difficulties of studying martial arts in the academy are mostly academic. Like any area of research, particularly a new one, it requires justification in order to obtain resources. Those resources include not only people with the interest and skills to study martial arts, but also academic positions, research money and places to publish. From a disciplinary perspective, the critical issue is deciding where to locate, that is to say, in what academic department, the study of martial arts. Martial arts as a subject spans disciplines, making it intellectually inviting but institutionally unsupportable. Universities as institutions are bureaucratically as well as culturally inclined towards disciplinarity.

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In conjunction with this, and adding to my previous argument that the wrestling passages within the sagas may have been overlooked by scholars due to the lack of multidisciplinary study between the fields of Old Norse Studies and Martial Arts Studies, I would add that, despite wrestling's relatively universal popularity, it is perhaps seen within modern and twentieth century academic circles as a somewhat boorish or "unscholarly" pastime; one that is enjoyed by the violence-craving masses and performed only by the athletically inclined and muscle-bound (much like the push-back that mixed martial arts, or "cage fighting" has received over the last two decades in the United States, comparing it to "human cock fighting").<sup>71</sup> Whereas much has been written

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<sup>70</sup> See the upcoming "Invented Tradition and Previous Research on *Glíma*" section (3.2.) for a discussion of the limited existing research in this area.

<sup>71</sup>For more insight into MMA's rocky relationship with U.S. media, see: Smith, Jordan T.

about the reasons behind and repercussion of various acts and forms of violence in the sagas, little of this research has actually touched upon, in any meaningful way, the practical *acts* of violence, their specific identification, and how they were performed.<sup>72</sup> Perhaps wrestling and grappling scenes, which often end in great violence and bloodshed, have been historically viewed as scenes of action, meant to please the audience, and as less culturally or historically relevant to the understanding of Scandinavian history than other common aspects of the sagas such as the blood feud or large-scale warfare. Or perhaps, as I suspect, scenes of wrestling and detailed descriptions of close melee combat are too far removed from most scholar's areas of expertise and understanding for him or her to meaningfully assess or interpret them with any confidence or interest.<sup>73</sup> This, in conjunction with a lack of personal embodied knowledge or familiarity with fundamentals of grappling could dissuade a scholar from seeing merit in an activity which they regard as highly sensationalized or fictionalized within the literature.

Regardless of the root-causes of this paucity of critical discussion and analysis, the fact remains that Iceland, Scandinavia, medieval Europe, and much of the medieval world were all to varying extents cultures inculcated with a warrior class-centric social ethos. At the core of these ethos resided combat, and at the core of (historical) combat lies melee and unarmed combat; the most universal, widely attested and basic form of unarmed combat being wrestling. Whereas the erudite classes of the modern world are often far-removed from the necessity of excelling in armed or unarmed combat, this was certainly not the case for medieval Iceland and Scandinavia. As Wetzler argues:

The medieval outlook on the nature of human society defined the *ordo* of noblemen as *bellatores*, 'those who fight'. The ability to exert violence was thus not only acknowledged as a necessary evil, but affirmed as the foremost quality of the worldly ruling class. In such a context, it is not enough to ask for the victims

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<sup>72</sup> See, for example: Clark; Falk; and Miller.

Sixt Wetzler's thesis, *Combat in Saga Literature: Traces of Martial Arts in Medieval Iceland*, which will be discussed shortly and during the "Invented Tradition and Previous Research on Glíma", is an exception.

<sup>73</sup>This is a thought that Sixt Wetzler reflects: "Or maybe the act of physical violence was both too far away from the scholars' life experiences, and too much at odds with their vision of human society as it should be. Or maybe, as a combination of both, dealing with what they deemed a voyeuristic look on bloodshed carried an odour of the vulgar, the cheap thrill not worthy of proper academic research" (5).

of violence, the factors that lead to the institutionalization and outbreaks of violence, or the attempts to restrict it. We must look at the practitioners of violence, at their training and actual doing, and at their affirmation or even praise of violence.

(6)

Due in part to Iceland's somewhat unique geographical and societal attributes, violence and therefore wrestling were not solely pastimes of the rich and powerful ruling class. Quite the contrary: virtually all the wrestling contests and sequences contained within the sagas of Icelanders contain at least one "farmer-class" contestant, and more often than not the contest is between two members of the farming class. Rarely are chieftains or members of the ruling class involved in such contests. By contrast, in the legendary sagas it is with near surety that at least one of the contestants in a wrestling contest (most often the protagonist) is a powerful hero or noble, while his opponent is frequently a monster, foreign warrior, or villainous commoner.<sup>74</sup>

Regardless as to why, the instances of *glima* and grappling within the sagas have been under-researched, and this is doubly true in academic (as opposed to hobbyist or athletic) circles. Very little scholarly work has been done to identify the plausibility, realism, and narrative importance of the numerous grappling sequences that appear throughout the sagas. As mentioned above, this could be attributed to the fact that wrestling simply falls outside of scholars' areas of interest and/or understanding. More puzzling still, however, is the question of why, regardless of one's personal feelings towards physical violence and wrestling, have more scholars not looked into the social and literary merits of such wrestling scenes within the sagas? The depictions of wrestling techniques within the sagas aren't isolated and randomly scattered sentences: they are often long passages detailing back and forth grappling struggles. Furthermore, these scenes of wrestling combat (or play/competition) are rarely unique within a saga: many sagas contain several such sequences. Additionally, the grappling sequences also often

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<sup>74</sup> This phenomenon within the sagas can perhaps be seen as a reflection of the frequently displayed relationship between the formation of warriors' bodies and the construction of strong images of the other in an attempt to facilitate pleasurable experiences of community. See: Shapiro 107–123. For discussion of this and related topics within the sagas see: Hermann 1; and Jungmann; and Merkelbach et al.

play an important narrative role not only in defining the characteristics of the protagonist and/or antagonist's strength of body and will, but they also frequently lend shape and direction to the overall narrative of the saga. One does not need to be a medieval law expert to recognize the social and historical significance of Icelandic medieval law and the role it plays within the sagas, so in the same vein it seems peculiar that the prominent and varied wrestling sequences have not at least been highlighted for further research, if not already analysed in great detail.

I find it similarly peculiar that even less effort has been put into showing the modern reader and scholar how they are to interpret and visualize these varied and detailed grappling sequences that are so frequently celebrated within the sagas: there is scarcely any literature on our understanding of what the contemporary scribes and audiences of the sagas thought and understood about wrestling. These scholarly oversights would perhaps not be quite as blatant if the sagas were not replete with celebrations involving (or even centring around) wrestling, passages describing entire wrestling matches, heralded wrestlers and saga protagonists such as Grettir the Strong and Finnbogi the Mighty, detailed descriptions of individual wrestling techniques and maneuvers, wrestling contests between men and monsters, wrestling melees involving three or more individuals, and any number of other clear implications that wrestling was a popular and celebrated aspect of medieval Icelandic and Scandinavian societies.<sup>75</sup> I will suggest further reasons as to Old Norse scholarship's avoidance and ignorance on the topic of grappling in the sagas in the later "Mind–Body Dualism: The Body in Academia" section (3.3.).

Of the 35 sagas that are generally agreed to make up the *fornaldarsögur* corpus, roughly two-thirds of them contain explicit and detailed scenes of wrestling, or at very least descriptions (with varying amounts of detail) of grappling and wrestling contests and manoeuvres. Similarly, in the *Íslendingasögur* roughly 20 of the corpus' 40 sagas (and many additional *þættir*<sup>76</sup>) directly describe scenes of grappling. These scenes,

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<sup>75</sup> See previous "Historicity" and upcoming "Fornaldarsögur Grappling Passages" and "Íslendingasögur Grappling Passages" sections (2.4., 4.1., and 4.2.).

<sup>76</sup> *Þættir* are short stories written mostly in Iceland during the 13th and 14th centuries.

described in varying amounts of detail and realism, not only detail the exciting and gruesome exploits of legendary heroes and villains of times long past, but also possess the ability to give the modern reader a unique insight into the social value and esteem that grappling and *glíma* had in old Scandinavian society. A closer analysis of the descriptions of these grappling contests allows us to have a better understanding of the various anonymous scribes' knowledge of the sport: if the anonymous scribes from their presumably varied backgrounds, taken as a whole, can be seen to be knowledgeable about the details and techniques of grappling, it can be inferred that the same could be said about their contemporary society at-large. This, in turn, will help us to glean a better understanding of wrestling's value and purpose to the intended audience of these sagas, and to broader medieval Scandinavian society.

Despite the aforementioned reputation of the *fornaldarsögur* for being fantastical and far-fetched in many regards, I will argue that a large number of the descriptions of specific grappling maneuvers are anything but fantasy. Indeed, after close analysis of several of the more detailed scenes of grappling combat, I have identified several of the specific techniques, tricks, and throws used by our heroes; many of which are still used to this day in combat sports such as judo, jiu-jitsu, wrestling, and modern folkstyles of wrestling such as *glíma*. In fact, as is apparent to any who are familiar with the history of wrestling, many of the techniques found in the sagas were used a millennia and more earlier by the Greeks and various other ancient cultures.<sup>77</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, the scenes of grappling in the *Íslendingasögur* are, generally speaking, somewhat more reserved in their violence and fantastical elements. This is in large part due to the fact that the heroes and protagonists of these *Íslendingasögur* find themselves more often (but not exclusively) grappling other men (often for sport), as opposed to the trolls, monsters, and giants so common in the *fornaldarsögur* (in competitions that are often to the death or in self-defence).

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<sup>77</sup> E. Norman Gardiner outlines in great detail many of the fundamental wrestling moves, positions, and techniques as described in Greek antiquity, drawing from both written sources and archaeological findings such as vases and murals. He also argues that all of the described manoeuvres that he found in his research have their parallels in modern wrestling, *without exception*. For more information regarding these techniques see: Gardiner, *Athletics of the Ancient World* 181–197.

It is also of interest to point out that the techniques, maneuvers and sources that I analyse fall chronologically roughly equidistantly between the time of Greek Antiquity and our contemporary age.

Many of the intricate moves and finer details of certain grappling maneuvers described in these sagas, however, have been somewhat “lost in translation”, sometimes quite literally. As I will show when later analysing various grappling passages taken from the sagas, there are several instances where a translator, presumably not well versed in grappling or its techniques (or perhaps in its grappling’s Old Norse terminology), mistranslates or misinterprets certain words and scenes. This results in the reader being left on several occasions with vague, nonsensical, or even contradictory grappling scenes instead of an explicit and probable description of a well–documented and contemporarily well–known maneuver.

Relatedly, as time has passed and the audience for these sagas has become more and more removed from the original contemporary audience (both temporally and geographically), much of what was once considered common knowledge about grappling may have been lost to the reader. Whereas I argue that original Scandinavians and Icelanders for whom these stories were composed celebrated grappling and *glíma* societally and on a national level, the modern audience for these sagas, perhaps particularly in academia, have in general a far weaker understanding of grappling, if indeed they have any technical understanding at all.<sup>78</sup> As a result of the modern audiences’ general unfamiliarity with grappling, I find it particularly important to enlighten the present–day reader, and indeed, scholar, about the precise physical maneuvers and movements that are described in sagas whose other various facets have been so cherished, dissected, studied, analysed, and celebrated for centuries.<sup>79</sup> Just as it

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<sup>78</sup> This “temporal removal” that has caused much of our understanding of the grappling sequences’ to fade is a microcosm of a larger issue in saga scholarship and dispersal. As historian and literary scholar Viðar Hreinsson argues: “Saga literature has been a national treasure in Iceland for centuries, although it remained unknown elsewhere until it began to be printed in the 17th century. Only then did Scandinavian scholars begin to realize that these accounts, which had been preserved on calfskin manuscripts on an island half–way across the Atlantic, had particular value for their own cultural heritage. Since then, the sagas have been acknowledged as one of world literature’s most remarkable achievements, although appreciation of their merits and importance has perhaps been limited by the smallness of the Icelandic–speaking community and the inconsistent quality and availability of translations” (xiii).

<sup>79</sup> Indeed, it would appear that Robert Kellogg agrees with this notion (albeit in a fashion broadly related to the society of the sagas as opposed to specifically their wrestling techniques) when he states: “The Íslendingasögur describe a world so particular, interesting and consistent from saga to saga that it has not been in the least absurd to apply the point of view and methods of the social sciences – of history, anthropology, sociology – to an understanding of this fictional world, and in the course of doing so to imply an identity between an actual time in the past and the settings of the sagas”(xli).

was in the seventeenth century<sup>80</sup>, there are aspects of the sagas that need to be analysed and studied by an appropriate expert. In the realm of grappling and *glíma*, unfortunately, very few experts have delved into the sagas in a scholarly fashion. Furthermore, as I will argue shortly, a researcher's embodied knowledge is valuable, or perhaps even necessary, in order to fully understand and properly recognize many of the tacit and arcane details one encounters while working on such a corporeal subject area such as wrestling or performance. For these reasons I intend not only to describe exactly which grappling maneuvers were being performed by the protagonists of the sagas, but also attempt to explain *how* these grapplers would or could have performed these moves, and, importantly, what is needed in order for a researcher to arrive at such conclusions with confidence. In doing so I wish to show that the maneuvers and techniques utilized in the sagas were, for the most part, both practical and realistic. Critically analysing the wrestling passages found within the sagas will also allow me to shed further light on the extent to which the original scribes and their contemporary audiences necessarily must have understood these maneuvers. As with other aspects of saga research and scholarship, I hope to allow the modern reader and researcher (regardless of their level of grappling knowledge) to visualize not only the technical aspects of these wrestling maneuvers, but also to understand their social and literary significance within the larger corpus of Old Norse literature.

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<sup>80</sup> “The sheer number and variety of manuscripts and the need for continuing interpretation of the unique saga world have called for extensive research by modern philologists. When the old literature of Iceland began to attract scholarly attention at home and abroad in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. . . the bishops needed the aid of experts” (Viðar xiii).

# Chapter III: Glíma, Invented Tradition, and Embodied Knowledge

## 3.1. Glíma

Before proceeding to review previous research on grappling within the sagas I would like to go over some distinct points regarding *glíma* in both its medieval and modern iterations. More precisely, and in light of many of the arguments that appear in the following “Invented Tradition and Previous Research on Glíma” section (3.2.) of this thesis, I would like to emphasize that, despite sharing several similar techniques and the namesake of “*glíma*”, the wrestling and grappling techniques described in the legendary and Icelandic sagas are for the most part *not* the same techniques found and practiced in today’s modern sport *glíma*. That is not to say that there is no overlap between the techniques of then and now, but rather that the majority of grappling techniques displayed in medieval Icelandic sagas are of a more combative as opposed to sporting nature, and are therefore more similar to a broader, less sporting or regulated variety of wrestling. I will also include in this chapter some brief descriptions of *actual* sporting *glíma* found within the primary texts. In doing so I hope to provide the reader with convincing examples of passages where something close to the modern *glíma* of today is being described. In part I hope these examples may serve as a stark contrast to the less regulated and more violent wrestling passages that I will be analysing in–depth during the final chapter (sections 4.1. and 4.2) of this thesis.

As discussed in the above “Definitions” section (1.1.5.), the term “*glíma*” was a verb used in medieval Iceland to refer *both* to a structured folk wrestling style and to grappling and wrestling more broadly, much as our modern usage of “wrestling” can refer to either specific and regulated styles of wrestling (e.g., Greco–Roman or Olympic wrestling) or simply unstructured “wrestling around”. *Glíma* as a form of Scandinavian folk wrestling has a long history and has been practiced in some form or another since the

Middle Ages. Because of this Folkstyle’s long history, I argue that many modern *glíma* historians, practitioners, and enthusiasts conflate (intentionally or not) the “traditional” *glíma* of the sagas with the “new” Glímusamband Íslands (Icelandic Glíma Wrestling) that has been officially practiced in Iceland for the last one hundred years.<sup>81</sup> This conflation becomes problematic, however, when we begin to analyse and identify the techniques described in the medieval source material and find that many of the techniques being described have little–to–nothing to do with *glíma* in either its traditional or modern iterations; often the descriptions of the techniques don’t mention any grips, the encounters described are of a combative nature, the techniques lack details that would link them to *glíma*, or, most frequently, the technique performed is simply not one allowed or utilized in *glíma*. Therefore, in order to properly address other scholars and authors’ work on this subject, I would first like to give a preliminary overview of modern *glíma* so as to be better able to compare and contrast it with the grappling techniques found within the source materials.

With this in mind it is firstly important to note that *glíma* is still an active sport, and is currently the official national sport of Iceland. There is therefore little conjecture or mystery involved when describing or discussing the modern sport of *glíma*. Modern *glíma* closely resembles various forms of folk wrestling, and indeed may have developed from earlier Celtic styles of folk wrestling. Jaouen and Beon argue in *Gouren, Breton and Celtic Wrestling: the Basic Throws of Breton Wrestling* that Scandinavian *glíma* is in fact an off–shoot of an older form of traditional Celtic wrestling:

Brittany is the land where British tribes migrated under the pressure of the Saxon conquerors, in the Vth Century. Glíma, the modern Icelandic style of wrestling also stems from the same root. It is said to have been taken there by Irish slaves, deported by the Vikings in the IXth and Xth centuries. Like all the Celtic styles, Glíma is a courteous type of wrestling performed in a standing position with the opponents shaking hands before each bout. It is still held in great favour by the Icelandic audiences who watch the most important contests on the national

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<sup>81</sup> For more information on *glíma* and *glíma* tournaments in modern–day Iceland see: <https://glima.is/page/english/116> (English) and <https://glima.is/> (Icelandic).

television programmes.

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Indeed, many of the maneuvers depicted in their work are virtually identical to both the allegedly medieval *glíma* techniques depicted in Þorsteinn Einarsson's *Þróun glímu í íslensku þjóðlífi* and modern *glíma* techniques depicted by Jóhannes Jósefsson in his book *Icelandic Wrestling*. Although we can't be exactly sure in which geographical direction and when these styles migrated, it is clear from these folkstyles' geographic and temporal ubiquity that the vast majority of their basic techniques were not unique to any one style. Even within *glíma* there are several different forms each complete with its own variations and differences. Regardless of variance, however, the essential guiding principle behind *glíma* (particularly modern sport *glíma*) is similar to that of fellow-grappling arts judo and jiu-jitsu: to enable a smaller, weaker opponent to get the upper-hand on a stronger and heavier opponent by means of skill, technique, and grappling knowledge. As M. Bennett Nichols states:

Proper *glíma* emphasizes technique over power, stressing superior balance and nimbleness over brute strength and force. It is a sport not of who is strongest, but rather of who is the most quick, most clever, and most skilled in the wrestling techniques and their respective defences.

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Unlike other grappling martial arts such as judo, wrestling, and jiu-jitsu, however, a contest of modern *glíma*, as with most styles of folk wrestling, does not officially begin until the two combatants have "gripped" one another. One aspect of modern *glíma* that differentiates it from many other traditional styles of folk wrestling is the use of a belt-harness worn around the waist and thighs to assist in taking and maintaining the proper legal grips. Whereas *glíma* using only the allowed trouser or harness-grips is referred to as *brókartök* ("trouser grip"), or "proper" *glíma*, a laxer and more versatile version of *glíma*, called *lausatökm* or "loose-grip", is a freestyle version of *glíma* that allows for any of roughly twenty-seven different grips. Contrasting with these two varieties of *glíma* is *hryggspenna* (literally "to clasp the arms around another's back"), a variety of

*glíma* similar to many back–hold folkstyles of wrestling such as Scottish Backhold and Cumberland and Westmorland wrestling (more commonly known as Cumberland Wrestling). While *brókartök* and *lausatökm* styles of *glíma* rely heavily on one’s skill, agility, and the knowledge of an arsenal of techniques, *hryggspenna* relies much more on brute strength and size, and is therefore considered the least sporting of the varieties.

As we can see from these three styles alone, the term “*glíma*” covers a rather broad range of grappling activities. Taking this in conjunction with the facts that *glíma* has developed and changed over time and that the term “*glíma*” in medieval Scandinavia was used to describe grappling in general, we can already see the problem in labelling with any sort of confidence a “grip–less” wrestling technique described in a saga eight hundred years ago as uniquely “*glíma*” as opposed to simply a “wrestling”, “grappling”, or even borrowed “folk wrestling” technique.

I would here like to introduce some of the traditional rules of modern *glíma*, as detailed by former Icelandic *Glíma* Champion (1907–1908) Jóhannes Jósefsson in order to further detail certain characteristics of the wrestling style.<sup>82</sup> Jóhannes was one of the first *glíma* practitioners to actively try to increase the international appeal and relevance of the sport. He travelled the world widely showcasing both *glíma* techniques and feats of strength, and in 1908 published in English, in an attempt to lend further international accessibility to the sport, his short book *Icelandic Wrestling*. In his book Jóhannes gives the readers a cursory history of *glíma*, goes over the official ruleset, and details nineteen different throws and various counters and defences to said throws. The *glíma* rules he covers in his book strictly follow the *brókartök*/trouser–grip style of *glíma* and are intended to give an overarching description of the structure of *modern glíma*. Regarding this style of *glíma* Jóhannes states that “Some few new [*glíma*] maneuvers have been added, and two or three have been discarded, owing to their calling for more brute force than gymnastic ability” (Jóhannes 4). Despite being published in 1908, this source is particularly useful not only because it is still applicable to the *glíma* of today, but also because Jóhannes himself had a high level of embodied knowledge regarding the sport

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<sup>82</sup> Through no coincidence, the championship belt which Jóhannes Jósefsson was presented with is called the *Grettisbeltið*, or “Grettir Belt”, named after the famous saga hero Grettir the Strong who was infamous for his wrestling ability and strength.

and was a full century closer to the *glíma* that had been practiced in the Middle Ages. Indeed, from the rules to the various allowed techniques, very little has changed in modern sport *glíma* in the over one hundred years since the book's publication.

Although I will highlight, as others in the following “Invented Tradition and Previous Research on Glíma” section (3.2.) do, some similarities between certain grappling maneuvers found in the sagas and those found in modern sport *glíma*, I will also use these modern descriptions of *glíma* to argue that much of the grappling found within the sagas is inherently *dissimilar* to the *glíma* of today. Specifically, I argue that many of the grappling maneuvers detailed within saga passages, rather than being a unique brand of “Viking” or “Scandinavian” martial art, are instead far more similar to universal and “generic” grappling and wrestling techniques with only peripheral relation to the modern sport *glíma* still practiced in Iceland and Scandinavia. Reviewing modern *glíma*'s ruleset will provide us with a rubric against which we can measure the various depictions of wrestling found within the legendary sagas and the sagas of Icelanders. Jóhannes lists the essential rules of modern, or *brókartök*, *glíma* as follows:

- 1) Before any trick<sup>83</sup> is commenced, the lawful wrestling grip must be taken.
- 2) The grips may be slipped for the purpose of relieving oneself, or preventing oneself from falling and of using “Hand touch”.
- 3) Seizing the opponent's clothing or body apart from the above named lawful grips is prohibited. Certain tricks, however, may be laid with the palm of the hand, both as independent and auxiliary tricks.
- 4) It is not permissible to beat or smite with the hands, feet, or head. Each trick must be *laid*.
- 5) It is not permissible to foul in any shape or form, or to stand prepared for a grip with the back bent, feet apart, and the seat out.
- 6) A fall is counted when any part of the body above the knee or elbow touches the ground.

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83 The term “trick” is used somewhat loosely and can be used to describe various grappling techniques, from throws and trips to sweeps.

- 7) Brotherfall (Breaðrabylta), that is, when both fall at once, does not count.
  - 8) The judge's decision in doubtful points is final.
- (5)

Regarding rule number one (“Before any trick is commenced, the lawful wrestling grip must be taken”), many of the grappling encounters in the *fornaldarsögur*, as I will later demonstrate, are instigated by each of the two combatants embracing each other in a nondescript grappling clinch. This is most often described vaguely through descriptions such as “Gestur og Gljúfra–Geir gengust fast að [Gest and Gljúfra–Geir went at it at once]” (Þórhallur and Brjarni, *Barðar saga* 157/ Anderson 259) or “Tókust þeir þá á fangbrögðum og glímdu [Then they grappled with each other and started wrestling]” (Guðni43/ Scudder 68). To imply that particular grips could be gleaned from such descriptions would be disingenuous. Rarely is a specific grip, a grip location, or even the act of “gripping” mentioned. Rather, as the previous examples show, opponents more often simply “begin wrestling”, or “grab one another”. As I will later argue, one with the appropriate embodied knowledge may be able to put forth a practical argument as to which maneuver is being done regarding a particular description of a technique, but to assume that there were entire apparatuses in use (by either or both grapplers) that the author simply denied mention is dubious at best. Another related difference between the grappling of the sagas and that of modernized *glíma* that should be noted is that only rarely in the sagas is there any mention of specific *glíma* attire (such as the belt and harness that modern practitioners wear and grab hold of for the duration of a match). In the sagas most “grips” are taken either in vague terms, as described above, or by expressly having the grapplers grab one another around the chest or waist. Considering the fundamental nature of grips in modern *glíma*, I find it difficult to directly correlate many of the sagas’ grappling sequences to modern *glíma* in large part because of the sagas’ lack of mentioning grips, grip names or locations, or any form of harness–grip. Even where grips are alluded to, they often fail to impress upon the reader that the maneuver being performed is in any way explicitly “*glíma*”, as opposed to a generic folkstyle wrestling technique such as those found in Scottish Backhold or Cumberland Wrestling. Take the following passage, which will be

discussed in further detail later in the “Íslendingasögur Grappling Examples” section (4.2.)

Grettir stóð fyrir réttur en hinn hljóp að honum sem snarast og gekk Grettir hvergi úr sporum. Grettir seildist aftur yfir bak Þórði og tók svo í brækurnar og kippti upp fótunum og kastaði honum aftur yfir höfuð sér svo að hann kom að herðum niður og varð það allmikið fall. [Grettir stood there firmly, and Thord took a swift run at him, but he did not budge. Then Grettir reached over Thord’s back, took hold of his breeches and lifted him off his feet, and threw him backwards over his head so that he landed on his shoulders, suffering a considerable fall.]  
(Guðni235; Scudder 163)

In this passage we can see that Grettir “took hold of his breeches/ tók svo í brækurnar” before casting Thord over his head. Although this could be argued to be a specific “trouser grip”, or to evidence *brókartök*/trouser–grip style *glíma*, even a cursory analysis of the passage and its context would argue otherwise. Indeed, it appears that Thord is cast over Grettir’s head by the waist of his pants, but the two grapplers were not mentioned to have engaged in any kind of mutual grip–taking at the commencement of or during their match. Considering that grip–taking is the fundamental cornerstone of any of the various kinds of *glíma*, that would seem to be quite an oversight by the author. Not only were no grips taken, but it would appear that Thord either ran or shot–in<sup>84</sup> at Grettir to commence the grappling sequence, which would also fly in the face of modern *glíma* tradition.

Furthermore, the move itself, which I will later argue is an overhead belly–to–belly suplex, is an illegal maneuver in modern *glíma* and considered unsportsmanlike as it relies greatly on one’s strength rather than their skill. Regardless of the technique’s legality, the maneuver’s nature is such that it can only be performed with the ill–intention of injuring your opponent as there is no way to perform it gently or slowly. To argue that such a technique must be a strictly Icelandic form of grappling (i.e., *glíma*) would be to cherry–pick only the facets of the passage that suit one’s preconceived narrative that the wrestling in the sagas is in fact a mostly unaltered ancestor of modern *glíma* while

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<sup>84</sup> See “Shooting–in” description and link (section 4.2.3.1.) for a visual demonstration of this technique.

simultaneously ignoring the multiple points of evidence to the contrary. Despite there being several attested grappling encounters that are described explicitly as “*glíma*” (again denoting the broader medieval definition of the term), there are still others that far more resemble traditional, less explicitly “Scandinavian” wrestling and grappling matches.

In regard to rule number five (“It is not permissible to beat or smite with the hands, feet, or head. Each trick must be *laid*”), virtually nowhere in the legendary sagas or sagas of Icelanders are there examples of either the hero or the vile creature he’s battling engaging in punching, biting, head-butting, eye-gouging etc. *during* any form of grappling match.<sup>85</sup> Despite the often over-the-top violence depicted in the sagas, there seems to be a certain sanctity and adherence to sportsmanship while grappling. Some of the easiest and often most effective means of offense while in close quarters (especially when embracing someone or being in their embrace) are the head-butt and groin strikes, yet none of our saga heroes ever seem to display these maneuver *while* partaking in any form of wrestling. This is a testament to the popularity not only of the notion of sportsmanship, but also to the widespread understanding of and adherence to the principals of grappling and *glíma* throughout Scandinavia. The hero can dispatch his foe in the most gruesome of manners, but he does so “legally” whenever in the midst of a grappling encounter. It is clear that this sense of sportsmanship, at least, can be seen as a holdover from medieval Icelandic *glíma*. A good example of this phenomenon can be seen in the *Saga of Finnbogi the Mighty*:

They then commenced a long wrestling bout. [...] Raud attacked vigorously until he grew tired, whereupon Gunnbjorn attacked with all his strength until Raud fell. Gunnbjorn had round his neck a knife which his foster-mother had given him, and because he had no other weapon he took this little knife and cut off Raud’s head with it.

(Kennedy 266)

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<sup>85</sup> Somewhat frequently, however, we read in the sagas that the hero will bite or tear out his opponent’s throat, break their spine asunder, or decapitate them. These actions are explicitly done *after* the hero’s opponent has been felled with a throw, trip, sweep, or takedown. As with modern *glíma*, the wrestling struggles in the sagas were always considered over once an opponent was felled, although on occasion, and only in recreational or non-life-and-death confrontations, a certain number of falls, usually two or three, could be agreed upon.

It is important to understand the context of such a passage. Gunnbjorn is battling a man named Raud who is difficult to deal with and has proposed to marry Gunnbjorn's foster-mother, Dalla: a proposition that Gunnbjorn, who is only twelve at the time, is strongly opposed to. Within this context Gunnbjorn challenges Raud to a wrestling match and defeats him causing him to fall. As the rules above would indicate, this fall has concluded the "match" of wrestling. Importantly, it is only now that the wrestling match is "officially" over that Gunnbjorn uses the knife to kill his opponent: it would appear that out-wrestling his foster-mother's suitor was a matter of pride and fulfilled with sportsmanship. Once the wrestling has been completed in a "sanctioned" fashion, Gunnbjorn (and perhaps the tacit approval of the anonymous author) apparently feels that it is no longer shameful or unsportsmanlike to decapitate his opponent.

Regarding rule number six ("A fall is counted when any part of the body above the knee or elbow touches the ground"), numerous sagas display two contestants grappling (often with great enmity), but when either one of their knees touch the ground, the contest, or at least round, is immediately understood to be over. This can be clearly seen in *Hrómundar saga Gripssonar* (The Saga of Hromund Gripsson)<sup>86</sup>, *Finnboga saga ramma*<sup>87</sup> (The Saga of Finbogi the Mighty) and even in the mythological confrontation between Thor and *Elli* in the hall of *Útgarða-Loki*.<sup>88</sup> One of the most detailed descriptions of a complete wrestling "match" in any of the sagas is from the above-mentioned *Finnboga saga ramma*, where the reader is treated to some rare and insightful contextual details. The passage reads as follows:

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<sup>86</sup> "Hann gekk þá til glímu við Hrómund, en kastaði niðr katli sínum. Neytti þá Hrómundr afls, ok svá gengust þeir hart at, at grjót ok steinar gengu upp. Þá datt draugrinn á annat kné ok mælti: "Þú stjakar mér, ok víst ertu hraustr maðr" [Then the drow went to wrestle with Hromund, but he cast down his cauldron. Hromund had the advantage of strength, and so they went hard at it, so that rocks and stones sprang up. Then the drow fell to his left knee and said: "You knock me down, and certainly you are a brave man](Chappell ch.40).

<sup>87</sup> Kennedy, John 259.

<sup>88</sup> "Then the old woman started to try tricks. Þórr began to lose his footing, and there were hard wrenchings, and Þórr fell onto the knee of one leg, and then Útgarða-Lokitold them to stop and said there was no need for him to challenge more people to a wrestling match" (Faulkes and Heimir 73). Note: while not a saga, the Prose Edda, in which this myth is contained, was written in Iceland during the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century and is therefore both a culturally contemporary and relevant depiction of grappling in medieval Scandinavia. Interestingly, the Prose Edda contains virtually no other depictions or mention of wrestling.

Það var einn dag er Gunnbjörn reið vestan til Hvamms til leiks og fjórir húskarlar með honum. Komu þeir í Hvamm og var kominn fjöldi leikmanna. Þar var kominn Jökull frá Hofi og hans menn og var talað mart um glímur. Spurði Jökull ef Gunnbjörn vildi *glíma* "muntu vera sterkur maður sem faðir þinn." [...] Var Gunnbirni skipað í mót Jökli. Gengust þeir að fast og gerðu langa lotu og féll Jökull á kné. Þá var um rætt að þeir mundu hætta og kalla jafni. Jökull vill það eigi og gerðu þeir lotu aðra og féll þá Gunnbjörn á kné. Þá gengu menn að og báðu þá hætta. Jökull kvað ekki reynt vera. Eftir það taka þeir til hið þriðja sinn. Gunnbjörn leysir þá til og hleypur undir Jökul og þrífur hann upp á bringu sér og setur niður innar við pallinn mikið fall. Þeir Jökull og Bersi hljópu til vopna og voru haldnir. [One day Gunnbjorn rode west to games at Hvamm with four farmhands. They arrived at Hvamm after many contestants had already arrived. Jokul from Hof was there with his men, and there was much talk about wrestling. Jokul asked if Gunnbjorn wanted to wrestle. "You'll be a strong man like your father"[...] Gunnbjorn was matched against Jokul. They fought a long and hard bout before Jokul fell to his knee. It was suggested that they stop and call it even, but Jokul did not want that and they fought another bout, in which Gunnbjorn fell to his knee. People then came up and asked them to stop, but Jokul said it had not been resolved. They then set to a third time. Gunnbjorn broke free, ran under Jokul's guard, lifted him up onto his chest and made him fall hard further inside at the *cross-bench*. Jokul and Bersi ran for their weapons but were held back.] (Gering 73–4; Kennedy 259)

The first thing made apparent by this passage is that, once again, we are shown that wrestling played a particularly central and social role in medieval Scandinavian life. Statements such as "many contestants had already arrived" and "there was much talk about wrestling" further evidence that wrestling was very much a social and popular pastime for many medieval Icelanders. Within this context of a well-attended and social wrestling event we are shown some rare insight into the actual proceedings of such wrestling gatherings. The first thing I would like to point out is that in three "bouts" of wrestling, there is never a grip mentioned, nor the act of "taking grips", which is how all

modern *glíma* matches must begin, as well as how many modern practitioners and historians claim that the “traditional” *glíma* evidenced in the sagas was performed. I will return to this point in further detail in the next section (3.2.). From the above passage we can further see that, as the modern rules still attest, matches, or at least “bouts” within a larger match, were stopped when one competitor or the other’s knee (or any part of their body other than their feet) touched the ground. It is unclear why it would be suggested that the bout be “called even” after Jokul, and he alone, was forced to a knee. Regardless, the bout continues until Gunnbjorn is also forced to a knee. It would appear that (if only for dramatic literary purposes) once this hotly contested match resulted in each man being forced to a knee that the enthusiastic crowd thought it best to diffuse the situation by separating the men and asking them to stop. Undeterred, Jokul insists that the match had not been resolved.

Considering each man had been brought to a knee once by this point, it is not far-fetched to assume that a third bout would prove definitive, and that the “winner-takes-all”. Interestingly, for this third and decisive match the two wrestlers do not appear to follow proper/traditional *glíma* protocol: Instead of assuming a particular grip, or even simply “engaging in wrestling”, we are told that Gunnbjorn “broke free, ran under Jokul’s guard, lifted him up onto his chest and made him fall hard further inside at the *cross-bench*.” It is unclear what exact circumstance Gunnbjorn breaks free from: either the two men had already gripped each other and he broke free of Jokul’s grips, or there were no grips taken at all and Gunnbjorn broke free from a nondescript grappling entanglement with Jokul. Regardless, what Gunnbjorn does next, running under Jokul’s “guard”, lifting him up, and slamming him violently to the floor, does not seem to follow any extent guidelines of *glíma*. Rather, it is clear that Gunnbjorn either never took grips in the first place or broke free from any grips that were initiated (explicitly illegal in modern *glíma*, although common place in many non-folkstyles of wrestling), and proceeded, I would argue, to establish a lower center of gravity than Jokul and shoot-in<sup>89</sup> on him.

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<sup>89</sup> For video explanation of shooting-in see: <https://youtu.be/khuXEnD8yQs>

While the above translator translates “*hleypur undir Jökul*” to “ran under Jokul’s guard”, I would argue that such a translation is missing an integral aspect of what necessarily had to have happened both in order to execute a maneuver such as the following slam and in order for the author’s description to make sense to an audience assumedly familiar with wrestling. Rather than “running under a guard”, assuming “guard” refers to the defensive position of Jokul’s hands, I would argue instead that “*hleypur/hleypa*”, a causal form of “*hlaupa*”/“to leap” is meant to be understood as “to make one rush or burst forth, to start or put into motion”.<sup>90</sup> Taking this into account, I don’t believe that we are to understand Gunnbjorn as suddenly disengaging from a grappling exchange and then “running” or “leaping” at/under Jokul. Rather, I argue that a less common usage of the term was utilized, and that Gunnbjorn is described as having “burst forth”, or “shot-in” at Jokul, lowering his center of gravity in doing so, which allows him to get underneath and then lift Jokul for the final slam. Taking this translation issue into account, the passage, or at least this specific technique, suddenly makes far more sense from both a situational and a technical wrestling standpoint. It contradicts, however, an argument that the grappling techniques found in the sagas were the same that are currently used in modern *glima*.

The above passage ends with: “Jokul and Bersi ran for their weapons but were held back”. This last sentence can be understood in a couple of different cultural ways. The author may have intended for the audience to feel that Jokul felt that he was disrespected by the younger grappler blatantly breaking the rules of civil sport and humiliating him, and therefore he goes to get his weapons in an attempt to right the perceived wrong that had publicly humiliated him. This approach would make sense considering the fair, back-and-forth nature of their wrestling bouts before the sudden, violent, and apparently rule-breaking escalation in their third bout. In the broader context of the story, however, we are repeatedly shown and told that Jokul is a very problematic, quarrelsome, and petty man. In this light, the above passage could be viewed as a literary tool being used to emphasize Jokul’s short temper and poor sportsmanship: Jokul instigates the wrestling bout(s) against a younger opponent (whose father Jokul has an

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<sup>90</sup> “*Hlaupur*”: to make one rush or burst forth, to start or put into motion. Cleasby and Vigfusson 270.

ongoing personal feud with), he defeats his younger opponent by bringing him to a knee, but is not satisfied with this victory so he forces the wrestling to continue. Jokul ends up losing the second round, which we can assume he wanted to win to definitively show his superiority, and still he, not his younger opponent, demands another, third bout. In the third bout Jokul, whether legally or not, is decisively beaten and publicly humiliated, and so the author emphasizes his poor sportsmanship and villainous ways by describing him and a follower committing the ultimate sign of poor sportsmanship: grabbing their weapons in an act of meditated aggression. As is often seen in the sagas, the “masses” of regular people are often considered to be the voice of peace and reason, so it is not surprising to read that the antagonist Jokul is forcibly restrained by the moral majority.<sup>91</sup>

Returning to Jóhannes’ list of modern *glíma* rules, rule number seven (“Brotherfall”/Breaðrabylda), that is, when both fall at once, does not count”) is evidenced frequently throughout the *fornaldarsögur* and even more so throughout the *Íslendingasögur*. Although not usually mentioned by name, there is never a winner declared or presumed among the grappling combatants if both participants fall simultaneously. Evidence of this rule can be found in many sagas including *The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent–Tongue*, where, after the protagonist Gunnlaug and a wrestler named Thord have wrestled a long time, both contestants end up falling due to Gunnlaug’s twisting his ankle while performing a throw. Rather than being declared the victor, as he was the active thrower, Gunnlaug is instead told by Thord that “Maybe your next fight won’t go any better” (Attwood 323). Either the contest continues on the ground or, far more frequently, one or the other combatant gets up and finishes his opponent in a manner that is outside the bounds of what could be considered wrestling, often with a weapon.<sup>92</sup>

Upon reviewing the rules most modern grapplers or participants in combat sports would immediately notice the omission of any rule relating to weight–classes or size disparities between the competitors. Indeed, in modern grappling and combat sports the

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<sup>91</sup> For further discussion on reflections of contemporary society within the sagas: Sørensen; Clover, *The Medieval Saga*; and Gíslí . Also see later “*Grettis Saga*” section (4.2.4.) for another example of social interference in a wrestling match gone awry.

<sup>92</sup> As seen in the previous example from *Saga of Finnbogi the Mighty* where, after outwrestling his opponent, Raud removes his opponent’s head with a knife.

“levelling of the playing field” by dividing competitors into similar weight categories is something to be taken for granted. Addressing this issue, Jóhannes Jósefsson states that historically there were not weight-classes<sup>93</sup> like there are in other traditional and modern martial arts such as Greco-Roman wrestling, boxing, and jiu-jitsu, and judo. Jóhannes reasoned that “the light-weight man has equally as good a chance of winning as the heavily built one, the secret lying in keeping one’s balance, not so much in strength or weight (3).<sup>94</sup> This crucial principle, that the stronger opponent does not *necessarily* have the advantage, is adhered to and attested time and time again in the *Íslendingasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*.<sup>95</sup> This aspect is certainly not unique to *glíma*, and indeed wrestling-at-large can be described as a game of balance and timing rather than force, in that the principal techniques are designed to disrupt one’s opponent’s balance (MacClancy 25).

Despite some of the inherent similarities between modern *glíma* and grappling sequences and maneuvers found in the medieval sagas, I would like to stress that the term “*glíma*” is not interchangeable when discussing these varieties of grappling. Although seemingly similar on the surface, the techniques described and performed in the sagas consistently vary to some significant degree from their modernized Icelandic sport forms.<sup>96</sup> I do not deny, nor should anyone, that modern *glíma* has its origins in medieval Scandinavia. Furthermore, modern *glíma* can indeed be utilized as a helpful tool in interpreting and identifying particular maneuvers and techniques in the sagas, but not nearly to the extent in which the likes of several authors in the following “Invented Tradition and Previous Research on Glíma” section (3.2.) would assert. Nonetheless,

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<sup>93</sup> Even today most modern sports *glíma* competitions have only three weight classes: Those competitors below 90 kilos, those above, and an open weight class where anyone of any weight may compete.

<sup>94</sup> I and much of the rest of the grappling world strongly disagree, however, with Jósefsson’s claim that the lighter-weighting contestant has no disadvantage against a larger opponent. Like every other combat-sport, skill can often overtake strength, but when two combatants of equal skill compete against one another, the significantly larger and stronger one will almost always have the advantage. This is a universal truth in all competitive grappling sports, and *glíma* is no exception. Perhaps Jósefsson was making this exaggerated claim as some sort of publicity stunt, or perhaps, as a former strongman, he had never experienced what it was like being the equally skilled, yet physically weaker contestant.

<sup>95</sup> The grappling/*glíma* belief that “size isn’t all that matters” is frequently attested in various sagas between competing men, but is never more clearly demonstrated than in the numerous matches that involve a man out-wrestling his trollish, monstrous, or giant rival. See various examples in later “Fornaldarsögur Grappling Passages” and “Íslendingasögur Grappling Passages” sections (4.1. and 4.2.).

<sup>96</sup> This will be further evidenced and contrasted in the “Íslendingasögur Grappling Examples” and “Fornaldarsögur Grappling Examples” sections (4.1. and 4.2.) while analyzing passages from primary texts.

having gone over the fundamentals of *glima* we are prepared to fruitfully discuss its similarities and differences to the grappling found within the sagas in the final chapter of this thesis (4.1.).

### 3.2. Invented Tradition and Previous Research on Glíma

When it comes to the martial arts, myths and fictions can be far more influential and orientating than truth.

– Stephen Chan,

“The Construction and Export of Culture as Artefact: The Case of Japanese Martial Arts”

As mentioned previously, there is a paucity of literature “bridging the gap” between serious academia and mediaeval Scandinavian martial arts, with even less academic research being directed towards the grappling sequences in the *fornaldarsögur* and *Íslendingasögur*. The specific scenes of grappling within these sagas have been read by scholars and laymen alike for hundreds of years, but what little research has been done on this topic has been done by only a few and is unfortunately predominantly undermined by non-scholarly motives. These attempts also generally lack the necessary academic and historical underpinnings and understanding needed in order to garner any scholarly integrity. It is therefore important for this thesis not only to identify previous and related works on *glíma* and the grappling that appears in the sagas, but to also be circumspect with regard to their findings and to offer possible explanations and motives as to the differences between their findings and those of the current thesis. Doing so not only bolsters my own stance but also better places these works within the larger framework of Martial Arts Studies.

Of those who have examined or attempted to examine the grappling sequences found in the sagas in a scholarly fashion, Þorsteinn Einarsson is by far the most established and prolific. He was a former master and instructor of *glíma*, a well-regarded Icelandic sports and *glíma* historian, and wrote with passion several articles, pamphlets, and books on the topic. His publications include the books *Þróun glímu í íslensku þjóðlífi* and *Glíma, Icelandic Wrestling*. In the former, Þorsteinn takes note of several grappling scenes and sequences that are found in the sagas, and correlates the maneuverers he finds to what he considers to be their modern Icelandic sport *glíma* analogues. In this book

Þorsteinn goes into great detail cataloguing and describing various wrestling techniques that he found within the sagas; unfortunately he apparently glosses over the fact that nowhere in the sagas can the various trouser-grips and grip-harnesses required in modern *glíma* be attested to. Þorsteinn's latter work is a book, or detailed pamphlet, written for the Olympic Committee of Iceland in an attempt to promote *glíma*'s being made into an Olympic sport. Although both of these works are scholarly in nature (more-so the former), and do indeed reference and analyse various aspects of *glíma* in the sagas, he does little to hide his agenda of advertising *glíma*, as it is represented in the sagas, as a pure, unadulterated form of unique Scandinavian wrestling that has been passed down in a virtually unaltered state through the generations to the few remaining modern *glíma* practitioners.

Þorsteinn scrupulously catalogues many of the wrestling maneuvers found within various sagas, and clearly has a genuine interest in their intricacies. However, rather than dissect the grappling scenes within the sagas objectively, Þorsteinn uses the sagas' celebration of *glíma*/grappling as a means to validate *modern glíma* as a legitimate sport, and repeatedly infers that the maneuvers being depicted in the sagas are the same or similar to modern *glíma* techniques, which is simply and frequently inaccurate. For example, Þorsteinn contends that:

In ancient legends [the sagas] there are accounts of epic wrestling matches fought by famous wrestling champions whose names are still household words in Iceland and they were ferocious when they fought blámenn<sup>97</sup> and berserkers. [...] In these accounts the participants dressed in wrestling tunics which their opponents could grasp. Although there were cases when they seized another by the torso.

(“Glima: the Icelandic Wrestling” 6)

There is simply no textual evidence that any sort of wrestling-specific tunic was in frequent use during these grappling encounters, either in the legendary sagas or the sagas of Icelanders, to which he seems to be alluding. To the contrary, within the entire corpus

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<sup>97</sup> From the Icelandic “blámaður”, literally: black man. This term was used to indiscriminately describe dark-skinned foreigners who were often depicted as behaving similar to berserkers: ecstatic and frenzied Scandinavian warriors.

of both the legendary sagas and the sags of Icelanders, only once is a wrestling “tunic” specifically mentioned:

Rauður mælti: "Mikla gæfu hefir þú borið til um þína för. En svo muntu eiga við að búast að eigi mun Haraldur konungur þessu einu við þig hlíta því að nú mun hann etja á þig því tröllo er eg veit mest í Noregi. En það er blámaður sá er mörgum manni hefir að bana orðið. Nú vil eg gefa þér fangastakk þann er þú skalt þá hafa. Vænti eg þá að þú munir eigi allmjög kenna hvar sem hann leggur að þér krummur sínar því að hann brýtur bein í flestum ef hann deyðir eigi." [Raud said, “You’ve had great good fortune on your mission, but you must not expect that King Harald will let you off with just that. He will turn loose against you the greatest troll in the whole of Norway. It’s a black creature which has killed many men. I’m going to give you a wrestling jacket which you are to wear when you fight him, and then I don’t think you will feel the grip of his paws too much; if he doesn’t kill his victims, he usually breaks their bones.]

(*Kjalnesinga saga* Ch: 15; Cook and Porter 322)

As you can see from the passage above, the saga describes a scene quite similar to that which Þorsteinn mentions previously: a wrestler is given a “wrestling jacket” to wear and even wrestles a *blámaður* “black man”/dark-skinned foreigner. The Old Norse term used in the saga to depict a wrestling jacket, “fangastakk”, can be translated as “wrestling jerkin” (Zoëga 125). Unlike other specific technique names that seemed to be used frequently and in a context that implied social familiarity, “fanga–stakkr” is by contrast rarely attested and somewhat obscure, leading me to believe that the word, and more importantly what it represented, was not in common usage.

When discussing wrestling scenes such as that from the saga above, Þorsteinn fails to notice or mention that this type of scene (with specific regard to a wrestling jacket/tunic) is a complete outlier as the above quoted passage is the only instance in a saga of Icelanders or legendary saga where such a scene unfolds. In addition to this, I suspect that Þorsteinn intentionally does *not* mention that the jacket is actually an enchanted jacket that magically protects its wearer from physical harm, as this could detract from the seriousness and validity of his argument. The only other mention of

similar “wrestling tunics” occurs in *Vilmundar saga viðutan* and *Sigrgarðs saga frækna*, both later 14<sup>th</sup> or early 15<sup>th</sup> century *chivalric* and *romance* sagas, respectively.<sup>99</sup> Although these sagas fall outside of the scope of my thesis in both date and genre, I would like to add that in both sagas the wrestling apparel in question is, again, a magical or enchanted vestment that causes the wearer to become impervious to physical harm. I would also note here that *Kjalnesinga saga* is one of the latest sagas of Icelanders (written mid-14<sup>th</sup> century) and has been argued to have “an abundance of interesting motifs, some of them probably of Celtic origin” (Cook and Porter 305). Taking these details into account, I would argue that the “wrestling jacket”, insofar as it appears in the sagas at all, is a literary motif appearing more in later chivalric and romantic saga genres rather than a historically and literarily evidenced practical jacket worn by actual wrestlers in medieval Scandinavia. I argue that these sparse glimpses of a “wrestling jacket” in the sagas serve not so much as a sign of *glíma*’s historically unwavering presence, as Þorsteinn suggests, but instead serve only to further evidence what Jaouen and Beon argued above; primarily that *glíma*, far from being a uniquely Scandinavian style of wrestling, actually borrowed much from migrating British/Celtic tribes who brought with them their unique style of folk wrestling: what eventually became collar-and-elbow wrestling (named so for where contestants would grip their opponent’s jacket) and various forms of belt or trouser-grip folk wrestling styles.

Collar-and-elbow wrestling is traditionally Irish, developed to utilize a wrestling jacket, and seems to far predate *glíma*; a version of its wrestling dates as far back as the second millennium BC at the Tailteann Games.<sup>100</sup> With familiarity of both the wrestling passages within the sagas and modern Icelandic *glíma* one can easily recognize that the *glíma* of the sagas, as I argue, much more resembles traditional grappling and wrestling techniques and is very unlike the modernized version of *glíma* with its harnesses, specific grips, regulations, and less violent ethos: the version Þorsteinn and others seem so adamant to promote.

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<sup>99</sup> These sagas, as noted in the “Dating” section (2.5.) above, mentioned far less frequently and lent far less importance to any form of grappling than the legendary sagas and sagas of Icelanders.

<sup>100</sup> For a detailed overview of the Tailteann Games see: Nally.

Continuing this argument, one of the most apparent staples of modern sport *glima* is the harness: a belt and connected thigh-grips that the majority of allowed modern maneuvers utilize. Þorsteinn seems to indiscriminately compare various grappling techniques found in the sagas to modern *glima* techniques, rarely if ever broaching the problem that the primary texts do not mention such harnesses nor do they specify or even mention proper *glima* grips in any way that could be considered either detailed or specific.<sup>101</sup> Þorsteinn's desire to promote and spread a uniquely *Icelandic* form of wrestling, and to trace its unwavering roots back to medieval Iceland, is so persistent that it taints what is otherwise thorough and detailed work. As a result of this desire, Þorsteinn time and again misidentifies maneuvers and conveniently leaves out details from the sagas when they don't go hand-in-hand with his vision of what *glima* was supposed to be. To his credit, Þorsteinn has compiled a list of twelve throwing techniques of medieval *glima*, which he claims to have identified from many of the same source materials that I utilize in my current thesis (Þorsteinn, *Þróun Glimu Í Íslensku Þjóðlífi* 76). Unfortunately, as with his above quoted passage, the majority of the maneuvers Þorsteinn describes *could* be the same maneuvers that are still used by *glima* practitioners today, but he again seems to conveniently ignore any and all details in the source passages that refute his seemingly revisionist claims, just as in the example above.<sup>102</sup> Similarly, using Þorsteinn's own methodology and logic, I could equally argue that the maneuvers depicted in the sagas of Icelanders and legendary sagas are in fact the same maneuvers as seen in any of a number of different folk wrestling styles around the world, or even taken from judo or sumo wrestling. Despite these shortcomings, Þorsteinn is still one of the few researchers who has delved deeply into and concentrated on the sagas' specific grappling sequences in an attempt to identify and catalogue them, and I find his work to be both interesting

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<sup>101</sup> Not only did the saga authors fail to mention such harnesses or grips when men were grappling with other men, but the saga hero was frequently wrestling against giants, trolls, and other inhuman monsters. It seems quite a stretch to assume that these wrestlers and the monstrosities they faced, no matter how sudden or unexpected the encounter, were either already wearing their grappling harnesses or promptly, without the author's clarification, donning their wrestling gear before clashing with one another. Similarly, without an explicit description or any specific terminology from the saga's author I find it hard to believe that the intended audience was supposed to somehow naturally know or assume that certain, proper *glima* grips and regulations were being followed.

<sup>102</sup> Sixt Wetzler briefly describes Þorsteinn's twelve specific medieval *glima* techniques in his doctoral thesis (234–5).

and valuable if only for the groundwork they laid and attention they may have drawn to the otherwise esoteric subject. Despite my respect for the importance of the work he has done, I did not utilize any of Þorsteinn's identifications or descriptions of grappling techniques in my work: not only am I suspicious of potential ulterior motives as mentioned above, but I also technically analysed each passage objectively and in its own right, ignoring any previous conclusions that may have been drawn.

Following in Þorsteinn's footsteps, M. Bennett Nichols also studied *glíma* from a scholarly and anthropological standpoint, but seems to have erred in the same way and for the same reasons as his predecessor. He admits in his work *Glíma, Icelandic Wrestling* that he studied *glíma* and its representations in the sagas primarily under the tutelage of Þorsteinn Einarsson himself, so the similarity of their opinions and conclusions should perhaps come as no surprise (Nichols 3). Although Nichols identifies various forms of *glíma* in the sagas, and attempts to trace their lexicological origins, he does little to shed any further light on what specific maneuvers are being performed in the sagas or what societal or literary significance grappling may have held, and instead is more concerned with the origin of various grappling-related terms and the rules and tricks of modern (20<sup>th</sup> century) sports *glíma*. Like Jóhannes Jósefsson's *Icelandic Wrestling* and Þorsteinn's Olympic pamphlet mentioned above, Nichols' aim seems to be in legitimizing *glíma*'s heritage and further bolstering the idea that it has been passed down for almost a millennium in an unaltered form through an unbroken chain of masters. These "pseudo-histories" revolving around *glíma* and, indeed other such histories enshrouding many traditional martial arts in general, broadly target a popular audience and tug on various emotional strings ranging from the nationalist and patriotic to the intentionally esoteric (i.e., pandering toward those who seek gratification by feeling like part of an exclusive "in-group").

For these very reasons such "pseudo-histories" seem to be ever-present, and perhaps even gaining popularity despite the gradual growth of academic research into these areas. As Bowman states, behind these tailored histories often lie "interests, investments, institutions, types of desire and indeed types of authority, that are deep rooted" ("Making Martial Arts History Matter" 915). In the above-mentioned *glíma* authors' works, the personal and national interests and investments can be found both at

the forefront of their arguments and in the intentional absence of conflicting or contradictory historical and source information. Although I will now go on to discuss a problematic popular author and promoter of *glíma*, followed by what I consider to be more properly academic works, I would first like to highlight a last issue regarding actual historians and scholars, such as Þorsteinn, who on the one hand have a clear passion and understanding of their martial art and perhaps even its history, yet on the other hand seem oblivious (intentionally or otherwise) to the various historical realities and motives that necessarily change the martial art over time. Regarding this issue, Bowman states:

Unsurprisingly, for many [scholars, academics, and historians], the matter of history in martial arts remains freighted and weighted down by popular myths, so much so that even much that passes for scholarship seems to refuse to face up to some fairly glaring facts, which basically insist that, quite frequently, martial arts that present themselves as ancient are hardly even old, and that so many massive social mutations occurred through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that most ‘traditional’ martial arts effectively have at best little more than a century of continuous history to them, rather than the vast eons of allochronic time that we want them to have spanned.

(“Making Martial Arts History Matter” 917)

This is the situation that I find much of what (albeit little) scholarship there is on *glíma* in. I argue that *glíma* scholars and historians such as Þorsteinn, Nichols, and even practitioners such as Jósefsson were in some ways influenced, if not blinded by, ethno-national pride, historical longings, and the desire for *glíma*’s international growth and popularity. The open admittance that the modern sports *glíma* that they are advocating was in fact *not* how the Vikings fought, that it is often contradicted or refuted in the primary texts, or that it involves new rules and equipment that is not historically attested to would clearly create a direct conflict of interest. It should therefore perhaps come as no surprise that such contradictory and problematic historical realities are for such reasons overlooked in much of *glíma*’s current scholarship.

In the world of *glíma*–relevant *fornaldarsögur* and *Íslendingasögur* research, Lars Magnar Enoksen is another rather prolific contributor.<sup>103</sup> Despite his prolificacy, all of Enoksen’s major works are popular, as opposed to academic in nature, and even more strongly biased in opinion and observation than Þorsteinn’s works. I am not alone in my analysis of his works, as both Lars Lönroth<sup>104</sup> and Henrik Williams have reviewed his work and found it distasteful, with the latter going as far as to claim “[Enoksen’s book *Runor: Mästarens Handbok* was] full of factual errors, absurdities, nonsense and unproven claims” (187). Despite his clear passion for the sagas, all things Viking, and *glíma* in particular, Enoksen cannot be taken seriously in his scholarship because of his almost fanatical obsession with the mystical and mysterious nature of *glíma*. It is of note here that Enoksen claims to have had *glíma* techniques passed onto him directly from the pervasive Þorsteinn Einarsson himself.<sup>105</sup> Although both unscholarly to differing extents, Þorsteinn and Enoksen’s respective works lack scholarly significance for the same reasons. Both authors have, as Hobsbawm and Ranger would say, “invented tradition” (2) and retroactively projected the merits and perceived “ancestry” of modern *glíma* back onto the literature (and past), despite source evidence to the contrary and a lack of corroborating evidence within that very literature. Furthermore, Enoksen (and to a lesser extent Þorsteinn) is particularly guilty of obfuscating his sources and conveniently setting up his “teaching system” in a way that portrays his techniques and their ancestry as being beyond criticism. Similarly, many of the wrestling and fighting techniques that he attributes to “the Vikings” also appear to be “beyond historical evidence”. Language such as “These standards proclaim that Glima is an old martial art with strong traditions of the North, and mastery can only be acquired from the recognized masters of the art”; “Those, who practice Glima are considered to be the guardians of an unbroken tradition which can be traced back to Viking age Scandinavia, and they are very proud of this fact,” and “Only those who are awarded the official certificate signed and approved by the Viking

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<sup>103</sup>His works related to grappling and social life in the sagas include:

Enoksen, *Old Military Rough'n'tumble: Scandinavian Warrior Wrestling*; Enoksen, *Runor: mästartens Handbok*; Enoksen, *The Secret Art of Glima: an Introduction to Viking Martial Arts*; Enoksen, *The Wisdom of the Vikings*; and Enoksen, “What Does a Mythological Text in Snorra Edda Tell Us about the Ritual Ceremonies That Surrounded *Glíma* Fights in Ancient Times.”.

<sup>104</sup> Lönroth, ["Enoksen hugger i sten när han tolkar vikingarnas runinskrifter"](#).

<sup>105</sup> Enoksen, “The Masters of the Viking *Glíma* Federation and Their Credentials.”.

Glima Federation and its masters are regarded as authorized instructors in this art” (Enoksen, “The Masters of the Viking Glima Federation and Their Credentials”),<sup>106</sup> which can be found throughout the Viking Glima Federation homepage<sup>107</sup> (of which he is the president) is not only sensationalistic and attempting to pull at nationalistic and ethnic strings, but is also inherently unacademic and scientific. As Ben Spatz puts it eloquently:

A teaching tradition that is only passed down through personal contact cannot claim scholarly rigor, because such rigor is based on assessment and citation that extends beyond interpersonal contact. [...] Documentation, in the broadest sense, is the difference between knowledge, which may or may not be documented, and scholarship, which necessarily engages with an archive across epistemic distances both synchronic and diachronic.

(241)

Unfortunately beneath the shroud of “direct ancestral lineage” the arguments and techniques Enoksen puts forth in his books and teachings are not underpinned by any real documentation, and what source evidence there is on the wrestling techniques of “the Vikings” is often at-odds with Enoksen’s conclusions. A foundation of any real claim to research is having an honest account of the sources of one’s knowledge, and arcane teachings behind closed doors do not constitute serious research. As Richard Bailey argues, “The center of gravity of combat activities lies firmly in the styles that sell themselves (whether explicitly or implicitly, honestly or dishonestly) as traditional. Indeed, the appeal of these systems comes largely from the sense that they have survived for a very long time” (50). In the case of Enoksen’s works, it is clear that he relies heavily on advertising his forms of “Viking combat” and “Viking wrestling” as being both highly traditional and being very old, when in reality I argue that they are neither as old as he claims nor as traditional.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Enoksen, “The Masters of the Viking Glima Federation and Their Credentials.”.

<sup>107</sup> Found here: <https://www.viking-glima.com/>

<sup>108</sup> For example, Enoksen claims that “[Combat Glima] was practised as a preparation for battle when a warrior loses his weapons or is forced to the ground and must fight his way back to a standing position”(“Combat Glima”). As Enoksen does not cite where he gleaned this information from, it is unclear how he came about this knowledge. I am certain, however, that he did not find mentioned in any of the

Clear parallels can be drawn between how *glima* historians and enthusiasts (such as the above-mentioned) portray the history of their martial art and how the histories of various other, often “traditional”, martial arts the world over have been portrayed. In discussing taekwondo’s recent origins and Korea’s attempt at its “de-Japanification”, Bowman states that Korea’s project included:

First, trying to persuade martial arts teachers in Korea to use their new name, ‘taekwondo’; second, coming up with a spurious etymology for the made-up characters of the new name; and, third, claiming that it had an unbroken connection with ancient legendary warrior kingdoms, folk traditions, indigenous sports and heroic battles against invaders.

(“Making Martial Arts History Matter” 915–6)

In a similar vein, the previously mentioned *glima* authors disregard any and all changes or modern additions that have been made to *glima* while simultaneously emphasizing, whether through etymological argumentation, dubious claims of lineage, or selective histories, *glima*’s “unbroken connection” to legendary Viking warriors and their culturally unique fighting techniques. This is, however, not isolated behaviour, as I will go on to show. As Bowman contends, “Practitioners of all ‘traditional’ martial arts, from wherever, tend to believe in equivalent versions of magnificent histories”(“Making Martial Arts History Matter 916). In this regard Enoksen comes off as particularly keen on emphasizing that the variant of *glima* that *he* and *he alone* can teach replicates the very techniques that actual Vikings used in combat many centuries ago. Furthermore, both Enoksen and Þorsteinn, and to a lesser extent Nichols, seem to be viewing the grappling and wrestling described in the sagas in a vacuum that ignores all other possible historical and geographical grappling influences *other* than traditional, Scandinavian-specific *glima* (despite its commonalities with hundreds of other folk wrestling styles around the world); which they then proceed to directly correlate, through dubious

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historical source materials; all of which unanimously remain quiet on this subject. Not only is there no saga source evidence that there was a style of *glima* known as or referred to by any variant of “Combat Glima”, but there is literally no evidence that this or a similar style was specifically practiced in preparation for combat. This is either conjecture on Enoksen’s part, or simply his projecting his desired narrative onto the past.

evidence and argumentation, to the specific variety of modern *glíma* that they themselves teach/taught and promote. It is hard to ignore the thinly veiled ethno–nationalistic undercurrents that such argumentation reveals. Moenig and Minho discuss such problems once again with regard to taekwondo:

Although the portrayal of taekwondo’s history by the World Taekwondo Federation, the Korea Taekwondo Association, and the Kukkiwon owes much to the imagination, it appears to be more convenient for these organizations to hold on to the established fictional history, than to initiate a balanced historical discussion. Moreover, a chauvinistic scholarship has developed within Korean academia, which generally supports the ‘official’ storyline. As historians Eric Hobsbawn and Terence Ranger have pointed out, if rituals are repeated often enough, they tend to become tradition; and, if narratives and myths are told over and over again, they have the potential to become history. In the case of taekwondo, the tales of taekwondo’s ‘ancient’ roots have been repeated so many times and for so many years that these accounts have actually become ‘history’ for a large number of world–wide, taekwondo practitioners and followers. Under scrutiny, however, taekwondo history and tradition, as presented by the taekwondo establishment, comes perilously close to being little more than fiction. (158)

Although *glíma* does not share taekwondo’s official or governmental levels of support (nor international popularity, perhaps due in part to a lack of such support), its modern supporters retain the desire for it to be seen and credited as traditional and ancient. Further complicating this issue is *glíma*’s advertised age: although the sport as we know it today, I argue, is relatively young (i.e., from around the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), it does indeed have roots, however vague, dating back centuries. These issues are compounded by the terminological confusion, mentioned earlier in the “Definitions” section (1.1.5.), where “*glíma*” in different contexts can be understood as a grappling sport or as an archaic and broad term for “wrestling”. Like taekwondo, however, under scrutiny much of *glíma*’s alleged history and tradition, particularly as ordained by some of its enthusiastic practitioners and supporters mentioned above, also comes perilously

close to fiction (such as the projection of harnesses and wrestling jackets back onto the grappling of the sagas without evidence).

The concept of an “unbroken” or “pure” lineage within a martial art is further problematic in other ways. There are no records of any codified or permanent *glíma* techniques (other than what can be parsed from the saga’s primary texts). Unlike later mainland European (weaponed) martial arts, there are no “fight books” from the Viking Age cementing and describing for posterity the techniques from which *glíma* is made up or how to perform them.<sup>109</sup> Rather, dissemination of *glíma*/grappling techniques was done from person-to-person, teacher-to-student for generations. In discussing Aikido, Lorge touches upon a relevant keystone issue in the transmission of martial arts techniques when he broaches the topic of an “orthodox” practice being transmitted over time:

A rolling series of disciples who lived and trained with the founder [of Aikido], Ueshiba Morihei (1883–1969), over decades learned an evolving art directly from the master. Every disciple who learned directly from the master could reasonably claim that their practice was orthodox. Yet practice differed from disciple to disciple. Of course, changes in the art the master taught account for only part of the differences. Many of the differences were due to personal preference, and certainly many of the differences are only significant to advanced practitioners of the art. Without constant reference to a fixed standard, each disciple’s teaching might become even more different from the others. Subsequent generations of practitioners create even greater divergence.

(910)

While the changes in technique, orthodoxy, and transmission that Lorge discusses in Aikido have happened over the course of the last century or so, *glíma*’s history stretches back almost a millennia, making any claim to an orthodox or “unbroken” chain of teaching seem that much more dubious. Rather than stemming from one progenitor or master, the progenitor of *glíma*, if such an implausible individual existed, remains

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<sup>109</sup> For further discussion and description of such fight books see: Jaquet et al.

unknown. Further compounding the issue, the techniques used in *glíma* were not codified until relatively recently (towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) and, as opposed to the example of Aikido, were passed down through dozens of generations. In short, the potential for divergence in any “originator’s” techniques or orthodox style of *glíma* is myriad. Lorge goes on to state that:

Functionally, all practice tends to follow the personal inclinations of each teacher and student. The only way to maintain a consistent practice across different teachers and students is to establish a curriculum. Curricula usually require institutional support to maintain and police standards. Prior to the late nineteenth century at the earliest, there were no institutional frameworks for creating and maintaining standards of practice in martial arts.

(910)

Here Lorge argues that only through the establishment of a curriculum (bolstered by a policing institution) can consistent practice be maintained across different teachers (and in *glíma*’s case numerous generations). Once again, no such established curriculum or institution existed for *glíma* until the end of the nineteenth century, meaning disparate instructors across multiple generations would have had to all teach virtually identical techniques while following the same (unwritten and uncoded) rulesets and wearing/utilizing the same gear (or lack thereof) in order for claims of modern *glíma*’s (and some of its instructor’s) authenticity to be taken seriously. Referring to the individual martial artist or instructor, Lorge continues by stating that:

Practitioners of martial arts generally assume that what they are practising is ancient or traditional. [...] The men and women who created the modern martial arts were self-consciously picking and choosing not just techniques, but also histories. While few would have identified themselves as ‘scholars’ all of them looked to the past that was available to them and integrated it into their practice.

(911–2)

Although referring primarily to “traditional” Asiatic martial arts, I would argue that Lorge’s stance holds true for most historical martial arts; particularly those that have been

passed down generation after generation. I argue that *glíma* and many of its instructors and perpetuators are no exception: The abovementioned champions of *glíma*'s unbroken lineage certainly seem to assume that their (modern) form of *glíma* is in fact traditional, and it would also appear that they have self-consciously picked and chosen both the techniques and styles they deemed historical (with or without corroboration from the primary texts) as well as their desired history for the sport, its techniques, and its dissemination.

Interestingly, many of the issues and criticisms I bring up against the above authors' works on *glíma* are not unique to the sport and find their parallels in other martial arts and grappling sports. The aforementioned Korean ssireum has followed a very similar socio-cultural historical trajectory. As ssireum researcher Christopher Sparks states:

Ssireum's history prior to the 20th century is scattered and piecemeal, but available archaeological and historical evidence suggests that it has been played in Korea for at least two thousand years. It is also clear from the same evidence that ssireum has been played quite differently over time. Contemporary ssireum is based on the selective retention and interpretation of some of its previous forms along with the addition of novel, modernized features. Much of what ssireum is popularly said to represent at present is based on homogenizing local views of history in the Korean peninsula. For example, the rule structure that prohibits strikes and kicks extends the metaphor of ssireum as a nonviolent contact sport in accordance with the portrayal of Korea as a peaceful nation. Ssireum became an extremely popular national sport during Korea's modernization, but an international financial crisis all but destroyed it in the late 1990s. Industry leadership has continually sought ways to redevelop Ssireum. At present, this includes exporting Ssireum to foreign countries in order to create a global league.

(5)

Here, as already argued with Iceland's *glíma*, we can see that the sport of ssireum has changed over time, includes novel, modernized features (such as attire and belt models), has become more codified with socially rationalized rulesets, and has even had its

modern supporters (as *glíma* has had Jósefsson followed by Þorsteinn and Enoksen) attempt to export and internationally popularize it.<sup>110</sup> I draw this comparison not so much as to highlight the similarities between *glíma* and *ssireum*, but rather in order to cast light on and emphasize the (not uncommon) problematic nature of the above authors' claims to *glíma*'s unwavering ancestry and allegedly unaltered state. Similarly, in reference to Japan's kendo, Yasuhiro Sakaue states that:

Whatever the future holds for kendo, it will inevitably have to deal (whether 'traditionally' or 'creatively') with the paradoxes involved in maintaining an identity and an institutional stability achieved via the production and manipulation of often internally contradictory invented traditions.

(23)

Such "internally contradictory invented traditions" can be seen in both Enoksen and Þorsteinn's above works, as well as in many popular works and websites where modern *glíma* is described as a virtually unaltered form of the grappling found in the medieval sagas, while simultaneously having become modernized with codified rulesets and belts and harnesses that are seldom if anywhere accounted for in the primary texts.

The tendency to exaggerate, fabricate, or alter a martial art's past is not something unique to *glíma*, *ssireum*, taekwondo, or kendo, nor is pointing out this phenomenon a particularly isolated or unique act in modern academia. In discussing Japanese martial arts in general, Stephen Chan points out that many Japanese customs that we take for granted as having originated in antiquity are in fact only two or three centuries old and have only relatively recently been codified. He goes on to state that:

The idea of codifying everything spread to the practice of martial arts. Here, however, it must be said that none of the present martial arts forms in today's Japan, with the possible exception of *Kyudo* (the way of archery) and *Sumo*, took on their present codified forms until the last century. Even *Kendo*, *Judo*, *Aikido*, and, especially, *Karate*, have near or actual 20<sup>th</sup>-century origins – although they

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<sup>110</sup> Þorsteinn compares *glíma* to *ssireum* in the introduction of his appeal to the International Olympic Committee to have *glíma* included in the Olympic Games ("Glíma, Icelandic Wrestling." 1).

can, of course, claim ancestors.

(71–2)

From Chan’s statement we can see that, as I have argued, *glíma* would certainly not be alone in being a modern martial art that has endured through various fabricated and revisionist histories. In fact, it seems likely that *glíma* indeed falls well within the majority of martial arts in regard to how it is commonly and commercially being advertised and sold. As I have shown, like several of Chan’s above-mentioned martial arts, much of what constitutes modern *glíma* has “near or actual 20<sup>th</sup>-century origins”. Like these “traditional” Japanese martial arts, *glíma* can indeed also claim ancestors in the grappling techniques found within the sagas. It seems to be that the understanding (or even admittance) of this nuance (namely that modern *glíma* is descended from the traditional folk wrestling style found within the sagas, but has altered, changed, and added several factors) is somewhat anathema to the desired ancient perception of *glíma* that its above modern promoters wish to portray. And this defensive stance, too, is clearly not unique to *glíma* or the likes of Enoksen, Þorsteinn and Nichols. As Chan states, referring to the West’s romanticization of Japan and its national martial arts:

The romance the West holds for Japan is greater than that held by the Japanese themselves. For the Japanese, it does not matter if the outward forms change; that the forms were codified only recently; that all of society was codified recently. The idea of a uniform, ageless spiritual content is something that absolves all modernity; and transcends modernity itself.

(72)

Here, once again, parallels can be drawn between the martial arts of Japan, their ever-evolving history, and Iceland’s *glíma*. Like the Japanese and their (often not so) traditional martial arts mentioned above, *glíma* and many of its modern proponents allow the ideal of *glíma*’s (and indeed Iceland’s) “ageless spiritual content”, i.e., its perceived direct “Viking”, “North(ern)” and medieval descent, to far outweigh the historical realities of its rather modified and modernized form. Furthermore, as Chan points out regarding the West’s romanticization of the Japanese and their martial arts, the works and

wording of Enoksen above seem to project a similar romanticization of *glíma* that takes advantage of modern popular culture's fascination with all things "Viking" and allows this pining fascination to supersede historical fact and primary sources.<sup>111</sup> Regarding such romanticized histories, I would like to lastly once more quote Bowman in his summarizing of Rey Chow's argument about cultural identity anxiety:<sup>112</sup>

A fascination with the ancient, the pre-modern and the primitive can often be read as a symptom of cultural crisis. Chow argues that 'primitive passions' are symptomatic of the chaotic or traumatic conditions of industrial modernity and postmodernity. In other words, passionate investment in ideas about ancient natives and their practices can be read as symptoms of anxieties about roots and identity in the present.

("Making Martial Arts History Matter" 930)

I suspect that exactly such anxieties lie at the root of many of these "traditional" *glíma* proponents' works and ethea. For example, Þorsteinn and Jósefsson's desire to spread to the world their small, isolated, and often overlooked culture's (allegedly) unique combat system was clearly a driving force in their work, and I would argue that this desire derived from precisely the fact that they wanted their culture to be represented alongside, rather than overshadowed by, the rest of mainland Europe and the world's cultures. And, although it goes beyond the scope of this thesis, I think it would be interesting and potentially fruitful to examine the extent to which national, racial, and ethnic insecurities and tensions were also driving forces in the ways and language in which *glíma* is often advertised, particularly in regard to the modern popular audience.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Similar popular romanticization of *glíma* can be found throughout various websites such as those belonging to The Academy of Viking Martial Arts (<https://www.vikingmartialarts.com/>), Hurstwic's "Viking Combat Training" (<http://www.hurstwic.com/>), and About History's "Glima – The Nordic Martial Art Practiced by the Vikings" (<https://about-history.com/glima-the-nordic-martial-art-practiced-by-the-vikings/>).

<sup>112</sup> See: Chow.

<sup>113</sup> See previous quotes from Enoksen on this subject and the various *glíma* websites footnoted above. For further discussion of this and related issues see also: Dobratz and Shanks-Meile; Fricke; and Gardell.

Regarding more traditional scholarly work on *glíma*, I now change course in a more academic and less problematic direction. John D. Martin provides us with a quality academic article in his “‘*Svá lýkr hér hverju hestaðingi*’: Sports and Games in Icelandic Saga Literature”, which does not focus on wrestling or *glíma* in particular, but rather as its title suggests, on the broader topic of sports, games, and competition within the sagas. In this article Martin does, however, offer a variety of insights into sport and competition’s place both within saga society and their literature. Much of his article revolves around his argument that “dramatic episodes centred on competitive activities [...] provide both psychological insight into and a social context for the deeds of chief actors in the sagas as well as insight into the role that such competitive activities played in medieval Scandinavian society” (Martin 25). Much of Martin’s argument dovetails with my own regarding the saga society’s familiarity with the sports and social activities, such as grappling, about which they so frequently wrote. To lend further evidence to the sagas’ historicity Martin states that:

The resemblance between the social dynamics depicted in the sagas and similar dynamics observed in real world cultures is too strong to be coincidental and that in their depictions of social interactions surrounding competitive activity, at least, the saga compilers were writing as close to life as they could.

(34)

In doing so, Martin touches upon not only the importance of sport and competition to the saga society, but also argues their importance in driving many of the saga narratives. He gives several examples from different sagas of Icelanders showing how the saga authors used scenes of sport and competition to both advance their narrative and to establish and promote the protagonists’ character and social standing (Ibid. 34). He then goes on to cite various real–world sporting examples from across Native North American cultures in his argument to maintain the historical veracity of sports mentioned and detailed within the sagas.<sup>114</sup> I found his work to be both useful and insightful in regard to arguing facets of

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<sup>114</sup> For example, Martin states that “If one examines the function of sports in the traditional Shoshone, Arapacho, and Cheyenne societies of the North American plains, for example, one finds striking parallels to

the sagas' historicity in my own investigations into grappling's social and cultural importance within the saga societies. Primarily, Martin's work further buttresses my argument that the saga authors were indeed "writing as close to life as they could", and that the depictions of grappling within the sagas are therefore to be viewed as real, practical moves that represented the actual techniques that grapplers of that society performed and were familiar with.

In line with Martin's work, B.A. Thurber also touches upon sport and athletic displays in saga literature, although once again he does not focus on wrestling. Regardless, his article "The Viking Ballgame" lends further support to the notion that the various sports, games, and wrestling competitions mentioned throughout the sagas were not merely fiction, but rather that these social gatherings served as staples of medieval Scandinavian society (174–5).

One of the only academic works to broach the topic of grappling in the sagas is Sixt Wetzler's dissertation *Combat in Saga Literature: Traces of martial arts in medieval Iceland*. Although the majority of his work is in regard to armed combat as opposed to wrestling and grappling, it still remains one of academia's only works to (admittedly peripherally) broach grappling and its social importance in medieval Scandinavia. Conceptually and theoretically, much of Wetzler's work revolves around the premise of accurately analysing medieval Icelandic combat sequences, and the potential of modern scholars to recreate and identify traditional modes of combat. Concerning wrestling, Wetzler designates a chapter of his doctoral dissertation to *glíma* (i.e., written depictions of wrestling in the sagas) and offers valuable insight into both the social and cultural backgrounds surrounding unarmed combat in medieval Scandinavian literature.<sup>115</sup> In particular, he focuses on three primary aspects of wrestling within the sagas: the social context, organization (rules), and techniques. In doing so he also puts forth a strong argument as to grappling and wrestling's importance to medieval Icelandic identity. In further harmony with the position of my thesis, Wetzler argues that:

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the functions that sport and games play in the Icelandic sagas. In all three of these cultures, organized athletic contests and games were a means by which young men gained or lost social status" (40).

<sup>115</sup> See: Wetzler 226–35.

The unchanging ‘experimental setup’ – two human beings try[ing] to throw each other to the ground – leads to a remarkable similarity, often even congruency between (historical and recent) wrestling methods from around the world.

Parallels between the ancient Egyptian drawings of Beni–Hassan and modern Iranian *koshti*, between early modern wrestling manuals from Germany and Olympic judo are numerous, and can be found without effort.

(232)

From his subject matter to the arguments and evidence he puts forth, Wetzler’s work, although not focussing on technique identification or recreation, does parallel and buttresses my thesis in several important areas, particularly with regard to the importance and implications of specific grappling-related terminology and wrestling’s social popularity amongst medieval Scandinavian society. I found it a valuable resource in my research.

F. J.J. Peters also broaches the topic of wrestling within the sagas in his brief paper “The Wrestling in ‘Grettis Saga’”, where he, too, is one of the few scholars to attempt to dissect individual wrestling techniques performed in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* while explaining their anatomy and socio–cultural significance to the reader. Peters’ primary argument is that “two distinct forms of wrestling are employed in *Grettis Saga*, an older Nordic *hrygspenna* [“backhold”, as in Scottish *backhold* wrestling] style against nonhuman adversaries, and a newer, exclusively Icelandic *glíma* against all human opponents” (235). Although there is evidence supporting this specific claim as it relates to *Grettis saga* (in which the protagonist, Grettir the Strong, wrestles both monsters and men), this work can also be misleading in that it neither represents nor holds true for the majority of the other sagas that include wrestling sequences. In a similar fashion to that of Þorsteinn, Peters also seems to take certain liberties when describing various techniques, once again implying without citing evidence that the moves being performed are “modern Icelandic *glíma*” maneuvers, despite their staggering similarity to ubiquitous wrestling techniques performed by other cultures in different parts of the world (such as the Classical Greeks or Ancient Nubians and Egyptians) and the absence of any mention of harnesses or thigh–grips in their source

description or the fact that Grettir performs grappling techniques against fellow humans, such as the overhead belly-to-belly suplex, that are explicitly illegal in *glima*.<sup>116</sup> I will also later show, in these sections (4.1. and 4.2.) analysing specific wrestling techniques, that there is no such pan-saga distinction made between the maneuvers that are utilized against men and monsters. The dichotomy between which wrestling maneuvers (i.e., lethal/nonlethal) are utilized does not seem to depend upon whether the protagonist is fighting a man or a monster, as Peters suggests, but rather depends upon the protagonist's individual relationship with his opponent, and sometimes the social setting. In other words, lethal maneuvers are generally used at the instigator's discretion, largely irrelevant of whether or not his opponent is a man or monster. In this light, it makes sense that, generally speaking, the protagonist will probably be wrestling "to the death" whenever he is facing a monster. Conversely and rather logically, especially when the grappling takes place in a social setting or for sport, the two contestants usually refrain from killing one another. When two human grapplers meet outside of the confines of society or have animosity between themselves, however, the sagas are replete with examples of homicide by way of wrestling (such as in the previously referenced passage involving Raud's decapitation of his human foe in *Saga of Finnbogi the Mighty*).

A further issue I take with Peters' work is his seeming lack of basic grappling fundamentals. While describing the backhold wrestling technique *hrygspenna*, Peters states:

Opponents faced one another, placed hands on the other's waist, and then "snatched" quickly to fasten their hands on the backbone of the opponent at the base of the spine. At this point the opponent was "captured" by being hugged closely to the attacker and was *lifted by arm strength alone* off the ground [emphasis added].

(236)

This is a fairly egregious misrepresentation of *how* one would, particularly an experienced grappler such as Grettir, lift an opponent from such a position. Other than

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<sup>116</sup> See "Grettis Saga" and "Belly-to-Belly Overhead Suplex" sections (4.2.4. and 4.2.4.2.) of this thesis.

simply clasping around or underneath the opponent's arms, one's own arms are exerting little strength other than to squeeze inward: the power, and the literal "lift" is being executed by the *hips and legs*, just as in almost every wrestling throw (as opposed to trip) of any kind. When embracing an opponent in a "bear-hug" the arms become almost useless in terms of their ability to "lift": it is solely by getting one's hips (one's center of gravity) beneath that of their opponent's that one can lift them up to one's chest. In doing so, one uses the position of one's hips and the strength/extension of one's legs to lift their opponent up. This is basic, fundamental grappling knowledge that applies to all forms and variants of wrestling. It is no small oversight to ascribe the lifting on one's opponent in such a fashion as "by arm strength alone", and to do so is so structurally backward as to raise several questions as to Peters' understanding of the basic anatomy and physics of wrestling. This lack of understanding with regard to basic wrestling principles, in conjunction with a penchant for vague assumptions about the connection between the wrestling that appears in the sagas and modern Icelandic *glíma*, has resulted in my having little other than peripheral use for this otherwise welcome piece of scholarship in the current area of research.

Of the various above authors who have waded into the territory of Scandinavian martial arts few have engaged the topic through the lens of embodied knowledge: a critical factor, as will be discussed, in any meaningful analysis of martial techniques' efficacy or understanding. Before moving on to discuss in earnest the underpinnings of embodied knowledge and its potential merits and insights in identifying martial techniques from a written historical text, I would first like to give a broad overview of the historically problematic issue of the mind/body dichotomy within academia and the social sciences and discuss the concept of habitus as it pertains to the individual's body (as opposed to a society) and the acquiring of embodied knowledge. In discussing mind-body dualism, I will return to the issue of why the body has been neglected in comparison to the mind throughout large swaths of academia, and further discuss the ways in which knowledge can be stored within one's body (and later utilized). This discussion in turn will allow for more meaningful discourse surrounding the formation of (grappling) habitus and how a proper understanding of such a habitus can in turn facilitate a deeper understanding of embodied knowledge and related principles, particularly as they pertain

to grappling knowledge and the potential to accurately identify techniques from written texts.

### **3.3. Mind-Body Dualism: The Body in Academia**

A key to being able to discuss in detail the process of skill acquisition, particularly as it pertains to embodied practices such as grappling, lies in understanding the nature of how the mind and body interact. In investigating this issue the current thesis aims to shed light on not only how society and academia have understood (and often blurred the line between or even confused) the mind and body, but also how this relates to the reasons why embodied knowledge and the body have largely been overlooked in academia, particularly as they pertain to identifying physical acts described in written mediums. It is important to examine these developments as doing so will lend clarity and background to our current, modern understanding of the relationship between the mind and the body and will also better frame our current understanding of this relationship within broader academic and historical contexts. It is therefore prudent to discuss such matters before moving on to meaningful analysis and the identification of specific grappling techniques from primary texts.

Gaining prominence with Descartes (although being a topic of debate at least as far back as Plato), the concept of dualism, or more precisely, the concept of the mind and body both being real and neither being able to be assimilated to the other, has been somewhat vexing and a point of contention between scholars and philosophers for centuries.<sup>117</sup> Broadly speaking, the primary claim of *Cartesian Dualism*, famously defended by René Descartes, is that the incorporeal mind and the physical body causally interact, despite their being ontologically distinct substances. In other words, mind–body dualism posits that the mind can and does cause physical reactions, and that the body can cause mental reactions. Problematically, mind–body dualism signifies that mental phenomena are inherently non–physical, or simply that the mind and body are distinct

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<sup>117</sup> For a detailed history of dualism and the various other forms that it can take see: Robinson.

and separate entities. One fundamental question that is commonly raised in regard to this is: How can the incorporeal mind cause or interact with a material body (and vice versa)? This and other relevant questions have been taken up by many scholars and philosophers over the last century and beyond, and are particularly relevant to research regarding martial and embodied skills and practices.

The Cartesian stance on dualism, mainly that the mental and immaterial mind/spirit can exist outside of or detached from the body, and that the body cannot think, was widely accepted by the Western world until relatively recently (“Dualism”, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). The Cartesian view on mind–body dualism gave primacy (both in research/discussion and in perceived importance) to the mind in both individual and social functions and aspects, most often leaving the body in a secondary or wholly separate role.<sup>118</sup> I posit that as a result of dualism’s influence throughout much of history and at least since antiquity, perhaps its legacy is partially to blame for the relatively sparse amount of attention that the otherwise frequent and popular grappling scenes in the sagas have received.<sup>119</sup> Referring to the 1990’s, Margot L. Lyon bluntly states that “Contemporary sociological and anthropological accounts of the body tend to ignore material processes of the body, seeing them as outside the boundaries of social science, and giving priority to the ways in which the body is an object of discourse” (83). With the field of Old Norse studies being somewhat traditional (relative to Cultural Studies or Martial Arts Studies), it does not seem far–fetched that up until only recently

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<sup>118</sup> Crossley expounds upon a possible (ulterior) motive for both Descartes’ rigid compartmentalization of the mind and body and for his lending primacy to the mind in such a relationship: “Although Descartes claims to discover this distinction through rigorous philosophical meditation [...] it is commonly acknowledged that Cartesian dualism represents an effort to rescue a religious conception of the human soul from the new science of matter that was emerging at Descartes’ time of writing and which seemed likely to explain, mechanically, all physical behaviour, including human behaviour. [...] Descartes, who was a pioneer of this science as well as a philosopher, sought to rescue the religiously inspired self–image of the age by locating the soul and essence of the human being in a mental substance quite distinct from the physical substance (matter) defined and analysed by, among others, his near contemporaries, Galileo and Newton;3 a substance whose properties and behaviour could not be explained in the terms of the new science of matter. The human body is a machine like any other, Descartes believed, but the human essence does not lie in this body. It lies in the mind that occupies this body, a mind which is not mechanical” (“Habit and Habitus” 143–44).

<sup>119</sup> In order to remain within the scope of this thesis the majority of discussion regarding mind–body dualism will be within the confines of sociology and related fields, where much of the relevant debate regarding this subject has taken place. For an overview and discussion of the mind/body split in anthropology see: Ecks 153–158. For an overview and discussion of dualism in psychology see: Harré.

passages in the sagas dealing with (and often requiring the interdisciplinary and embodied knowledge of) grappling have been overlooked or deemed as unworthy of serious scholarship or academic attention. This, in conjunction with the fact that the majority of scholars, Old Norse scholars being no exception, have little to no embodied experience with grappling (or other such embodied practices such as archery or swordsmanship) further highlights the need for a proper interdisciplinary approach to the issue (and significance of) detailed combat and grappling scenes in the sagas.

The tide has, however, been slowly turning against Cartesianism and mind–body dualism for some time now, and more and more academic work is turning its focus towards the body and its epistemological potential. Such a turn is evidenced by Channon and Jennings during their empirical review of embodiment through martial arts and combat sports:

Over the last 35 years, social scientific interest in martial arts and combat sports (MACS) has been expanding, with research articles published across an array of English–language journals within the sociology of sport and related disciplines, as well as the publication of several academic books on specific fighting systems and on MACS in general. Following Columbus and Rice’s advocacy of a phenomenological approach to their study, MACS research since the late 1990s has begun to explore the subjective experiences and embodied insights of long–term practitioners.

(1)<sup>120</sup>

This is not to say, however, that mind–body dualism has been universally either derided or embraced since its philosophical conception: the debate has been filled with nuance and ebbed and flowed over time. As Jens Loenhoff argues, the general juxtaposition of the body as “opposite of mind and soul or as the adversary of reason” in modern scientific and philosophical affairs is to be blamed not solely on factors internal to

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<sup>120</sup> For Columbus and Rice’s phenomenological approach on the study of embodiment see: Columbus and Rice, “Phenomenological Meanings of Martial Arts Participation” 16 – 28; Columbus and Rice, “Psychological Research on the Martial Arts: An Addendum to Fuller’s Review 127– 35. See also: Pietersma.

science and scholarship. Rather, Loenhoff points to Greek antiquity, where the body was always referred to in the plural, never being described in the singular, and allows the conclusion that a “specific act of abstraction of the modern era which, in turn, is the result of a certain cultural and social evolution” is at least partially to blame (69).<sup>121</sup> Concerning more recent shifts in academia, Lyon puts forth the argument that the body has been left out of much of modern sociology because during its genesis the field considered the body to be pre-social, and therefore of little relevance to discussions of social order and change. Referencing Bryan S. Turner,<sup>122</sup> she states:

Turner [...] has commented on the reasons why classical sociological theory failed to develop an explicit sociology of the body. One of these is the dominant concern of sociology in its formative period with structure and the conditions required for the establishment and maintenance of social order as well as conditions for change. As the body was considered a function of nature, as part of the natural phenomena, and therefore pre-social, it was excluded from consideration. This pertained in the foundation of most of the social sciences, and emphasis increasingly came to be placed on consciousness, thought and reason. (84–85)

As can be seen from this conclusion, from its inception the field of sociology (and indeed “most of the social sciences”) has for the most part ignored the role the body plays in society and its formation and growth. Compounding this, when dealing with the body much of modern sociology is discussing the body as it pertains to society and social interaction, frequently ignoring or glossing over the individual’s body and its role in the attainment of (embodied) knowledge. Turner further echoes these criticisms in lamenting the lack of empirical research of the body with regard to the study of dance:

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<sup>121</sup> Although I will be focusing on more recent criticisms of Cartesian dualism, for a good overview of Spinoza’s rejection of the notion as well as similar critiques by Deleuze and Guattari see: Buchanan 73–91.

<sup>122</sup> For additional discussion of the body in sociology see: Turner, “Recent Developments in the Theory of the Body.”; and Turner, *Regulating Bodies*.

A focus on dance can help us also to consider the current status of the sociology of the body, mainly because the promise and limitations of social studies of the body are replicated in dance studies. My principal criticisms of the existing sociology of the body are, first, that it has become too theoretical, and hence it is often divorced from empirical research. While theories relating, for example, to the social construction of the body proliferate, there are few important, genuinely creative ethnographies of embodiment.

(“Introduction–Bodily Performance” 7)

I argue that the legacy of such institutional stances can also be seen in the disproportionate (given their frequency) lack of attention given to the body and embodied activities such as grappling in traditional fields such as Old Norse Studies. This sentiment is supported by social anthropologist Jeremy MacClancy’s work on the anthropology of sport, where he states:

Until fairly recently most sociologists, and social historians and many anthropologists have neglected sport as a potentially fruitful object of study. According to the feminist sociologist of sport, Jennifer Hargreaves (1994:6), this neglect was partly due to the fact that mainstream ideas about sports are concerned with the physical body, which was viewed as ‘natural’ and ‘unchangeable’; hence it was thought there was nothing deserving of analysis. A further reason for this neglect was the influence of the popular belief that sports have ‘a life of their own’, on essentially separate from ‘important’ aspects of the social world such as work, politics, and economics.

(1)

Interestingly, this stance supports my argument made in the “Grappling: Origins, Play, and Fundamentals” section (1.2.) of this thesis, whereby I argue that the human body has indeed not changed significantly over the last several millennia. The body’s apparent resistance to change has, however, apparently led to a historical lack of scholastic interest in it. Despite such oversights of the past, regarding contemporary work in the field of social sciences Lyon admits that there have been modern approaches to the body that

have attempted to undermine Cartesian dualism and promote interest in the body. Highlighting what she terms the “seminal” works of Norbert Elias. Referencing Elias,<sup>123</sup> Lyon states that:

There is growing concern with the limitations inherent in the dichotomous thrust of foundational categories in Western thinking: nature/culture, body/mind and so forth. Johnson (1987) and Lakoff (1987), for example, have each examined how basic cognitive categories are grounded in bodily experience, thereby addressing the role of the body in knowledge and consciousness.  
(84)<sup>124</sup>

Regarding the limitations of this “dichotomous thrust” prevalent in Western thought, Chikako Ozawa–De Silva further pinpoints a recent turning–point in the discussion:

Beginning with Bryan Turner’s *The Body and Society* (1984), however, there has been a major turn to incorporating the image of the social actor as an embodied being into social analysis. This has inspired fresh approaches to such topics as the sociology of medicine (Turner, 1987, 1992), the constitution of the self in late capitalist Western societies (Giddens, 1991), and the re–examination of aspects of popular culture as diverse as body–building, dieting, sports and dancing (Scott and Morgan, 1993).  
(21)

The blossoming interest in the re–examination of aspects of popular culture, such as sport or grappling, is particularly relevant to my current thesis, despite my work being concerned with that which was socially popular centuries ago in medieval Scandinavia. The very fact that I am writing a dissertation on such a topic while drawing from a wide

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<sup>123</sup> See: Elias, *The Civilizing Process / 1*; Elias, *The Civilizing Process/ 2*. Regarding Elias’ approach to the body, Shilling and Mellor bolster Lyon’s argument by stating that “Elias’s (1987, 1982 [1939]) work, for example, although not displaying the mind/body dualism characteristic of Giddens’ analysis, provides us with a historical base which could be used to help explain why there has been a certain marginalization of the flesh in the modern world”(Shilling and Mellor 8).

<sup>124</sup> For their respective arguments see: Johnson; Lakoff.

array of relevant resources is further testament to this change. Ozawa–De Silva goes on to echo Lyon’s above sentiments about Western sociology of the body from an Eastern perspective, noting:

For all its merits and innovations, British sociology of the body is still characterized by ethnocentrism and by the not fully recognized or addressed limitations of its Cartesian–rationalist philosophical ancestry. Insofar as these Western sociologies offer themselves as universal theories, it is necessary not to undercut them, but to show that in actuality they only offer one version to human embodiment and social instrumentality among others.

(22)

As referred to by Lyon above, Ozawa–De Silva points to Western sociology of the body’s penchant to view the Cartesian mind/body split as a limiting problem to be struggled with.<sup>125</sup> Ozawa–De Silva further posits that sociology of the body in the West seems perhaps overly invested in “the assumption of the unitary and persisting self as the basis of human personality; the view that a dialogue with biology provides the most serious non–sociological account of embodiment; and the assumption that a weak social constructivist model of the body is the only appropriate one” (Ibid.). To counteract some of these assertions, and to view the issues from a non–Western perspective, Ozawa–De Silva summarizes the ideologies of the body of Japan’s Ichikawa Hiroshi<sup>126</sup> and Yuasa Yasuo, noting that:

In the modern Western tradition, mind–body theory is primarily concerned with the empirically observable correlations between mental and somatic phenomena.

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<sup>125</sup> Once again echoing Yasua, De Silva references martial arts and Japanese theatrical arts in comparing traditional Eastern and Western understandings of mind–body dualism: “Yuasa begins his argument by noting that what is distinctive in Eastern theories of the body is ‘the oneness of body–mind’ (shinshin ichinyo), a phrase also used in Japanese theatrical arts, such as Nô theatre, and martial arts like Jûdô and Kendô (1987: 24). The oneness of body–mind is thus a goal or ‘an ideal for inward meditation as well as for outward activities’ (1987: 24). Yuasa is critical of Western traditional views of the body, which tend to separate analytically the mental from the somatic mode, but he acknowledges that many Western thinkers, such as Merleau–Ponty, have been aware of the inseparability of the body and the mind” (30).

<sup>126</sup> See: Ichikawa, *Seishin toshite no Shintai* (The Body as Spirit); Ichikawa, *Mi no Kôzô: Shintairon wo koete* (Structure of the Body: Overcoming the Theory of the Body).

In the Japanese tradition, however, mind–body theories focus on how a disciplined practice allows one to attain mind–body unity. In studying the mind–body problem in the Western tradition, it is appropriate to investigate the act of raising one’s arm, and to inquire as to the relation between mental intention and somatic movement. In Japanese theories, however, learning to hit a baseball would be a more appropriate example. What is the relationship between the intellectual theory of the swing, the somatic practice of the swing and the integrated achievement of the skill? In this contrast, we again see the difference between concentrating on an intrinsic mind–body connection as opposed to an acquired mind–body unity.

(34–45)

These examples, and the questions they necessarily raise, prove very difficult for traditional Cartesian dualism to answer, or even engage with. They make apparent that the mind and body are certainly not separate, and that there is not a direct (or singular) chain of command between the two. Backtracking somewhat, and to aid with perspective regarding the above examples of raising one’s arm or swinging a baseball, Ozawa–De Silva examines the framework for Ichikawa’s argumentation:

Inspired by Descartes’ insightful notion of the ‘mind–body union’ [...] Ichikawa writes that the mind has two functions: one is that the mind thinks, and the other is that the mind is both active and passive toward the body, since the mind is unified with the body. [...] To explain Ichikawa’s ‘body as structure’, I will focus on the ‘the orientational structure’ and ‘the intentional structure’. Ichikawa uses these terms to explain the two ways in which the body directs itself with regard to its environment or ambience. The orientational structure is that aspect of the body not consciously directed towards the environment, such as heartbeat, habits and learned skills. The intentional structure is that aspect of the body which consciously engages the environment, such as picking up an object or using a skill. The orientational structure can attain unity at the unconscious level as the reflection of pre–conscious functions influencing the conscious level. The orientational structure directs the ‘way’ of the intentional structure, while not

actually determining it. On the other hand, the intentional structure attains unity at the conscious level. It controls the orientational structure, but it does not decide it in detail. Such duality of the body creates the mind and the body in the sense that it makes the freedom of the conscious possible while not completely controlling it (1993: 100–4).

(23, 26)

I find Ichikawa's understanding of an "orientational structure" and "intentional structure" to be a more practical, if not still somewhat artificial, divide through which we can attempt to identify the roles of the mind and body as they relate to one another; at least more so than the traditional Cartesian mind–body divide allows. The interrelationship between the orientational and intentional structures seems more flexible and less rigid than Cartesian dualism, but is, at the same time, vaguer. Whether this "vagueness" makes it a more realistic framework through which to understand how the mind and body interact is perhaps a matter of degree and definition: the orientational structure (not consciously directed towards the environment, e.g., heartbeat or ingrained skills) directs the way of the intentional structure (conscious environmental interaction, e.g., using a skill or picking up an object), while not actually determining it. Simultaneously, the intentional structure controls the orientational structure, but not in detail. Overlaid on this frame is the concept that the orientational structure can attain unity at the unconscious level, while the intentional structure gains unity at the conscious level. Although clear traces of a dualism (of the body in particular) remain, this theory allows for relative freedom of the conscious while at the same time allowing for some degree of somatic "thought": a process that I would argue points more closely towards an understanding of embodied knowledge than does traditional mind–body dualism. Ozawa–De Silva goes on comment on Ichikawa's theory, stating:

Thus, what is unique and creative about Ichikawa's thought is that, unlike those who see the body and the mind as ontologically separate entities, he views mind–body separation as the gap between the function of the orientational structure and

the intentional structure (1993: 104).

(26)<sup>127</sup>

With this insight into Ichikawa's thoughts on the relationship between the mind and body (and its orientational and intentional structures), we can understand that although there is on some level a dualism or separation of the mind and body, the "gap" between the function of the body's orientational and intentional structures serves as the missing link of communication between the mind and body. Once again, this at the same time seems both more and less vague than Cartesian Dualism and to contain something akin to circular reasoning, although it also seems to show a more profound understanding of the intricate back-and-forth relationship between the mind and body. The aforementioned "gap" between the function of the body's orientational and intentional structures, the understanding that there is, on multiple levels, a unity between mind/thought and body/motion indicate that Ichikawa's framework and understanding of the body is more practical, if not also more advanced, than Cartesian Dualism. In a similar and culturally contemporary vein, the Japanese philosopher Yuasa Yasuo states:

To put it simply, true knowledge cannot be obtained simply by means of theoretical thinking, but only through 'bodily recognition or realization' (*tainin* or *taitoku*), that is, through utilization of one's total body and mind [...] this is to 'learn with the body' not the brain.

(25)

Although admittedly "put simply", here Yuasa straight-forwardly contradicts traditional mind-body dualism by confidently claiming that *only* through the *total* use of one's body and mind can one obtain true knowledge, even going as far as to add that this is how one learns "with the body". This may at first seem vague, as perhaps so too did Ishikawa's argument above, but in truth I would argue that this is *very* close to our current

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<sup>127</sup> Bruno Latour seems to echo this sentiment, although in differing language, when he states that: "If we modify the conception of science and take seriously the articulating role of disciplines, it becomes impossible to believe in the dualism of a physiological body pitted against a phenomenological one" (224).

understanding of embodied knowledge: we will return to and expound upon this and similar statements and theories in the upcoming section (3.5.) on embodied knowledge.

Returning to Western scholarship on the issue, Mike Featherstone and Bryan S. Turner, in their introduction to the first issue of the journal *Body & Society*, give an overview of the growing focus on the body's importance in (post)modern social philosophy. In their synopsis of the modern study of the body, they, too, claim that there has been a neoteric denouncement of mind–body dualism as well as:

A major contribution to the study of the body from the phenomenological inquiry into everyday life, the hermeneutic critique of the rationalist legacy of Plato, and phenomenological critiques of Cartesianism; in this philosophical field, the work of Husserl, Dilthey, Heidegger and Merleau–Ponty has been crucial. The twentieth–century critical response to the rationalism of Descartes, and the Cartesian view of the body/mind dualism has produced eventually a post–structuralist orientation to the importance of emotions, desire, and the affective life. [...] Much of the postmodern debate about the difference can be traced back to Nietzsche and Heidegger. Nietzsche's view of the body, in turn, was fundamental to the development of Freud's psychoanalytic theory and to Weber's sociology of rationalization and disenchantment.

(2)

While sociologists of the 1980's could legitimately claim that the body was for the most part absent from mainstream social theory and sociology, Featherstone and Turner admit that, as of the mid–1990's, such critical objections are “now almost commonplace” (1). They go on to argue that, rather than being regarded as a mere object, the body should instead be understood as a sentient entity, and that, as flesh, it is the capacity of the body to be “both sentient and sensible, to be a visible-seer, a tangible-toucher and an audible–listener”.<sup>128</sup> Contradicting traditional mind-body dualism, they claim that one does not have an experience of embodiment (i.e., the body is not merely acted upon), but rather we

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<sup>128</sup> This understanding of the body strikingly resembles Yuasa's conception of “bodily recognition or realization” which can only be attained through the “utilization of one's total body and mind”.

all experience by way of our conscious embodiment. All too often, they argue, recent sociological literature on the body thinks of these two aspects as mutually exclusive analytical divisions from which we must choose (Featherstone and Turner 2).

Bolstering such claims of exclusivity, and lending support to the idea that grappling, due to its corporeal nature, has for the most part been glossed over by academia, Margot L. Lyon contends that:

Most social scientific accounts of human experience and behaviour give primacy to cognitive processes in their determination. The body, implicitly or explicitly, rarely figures, tending to be treated either as largely irrelevant, or simply as a subject to construction in cultural and social terms, that is, as an object of meaning only. While the body is generally assumed to be the ground of experience and therefore to contribute to the construction of meaning, in acknowledgement of the phenomenological foundations of the social sciences, discourse about human bodily experience is still primarily about the derived mental categories through which the body is understood or constructed in sociocultural context.

(83–84)

As Lyon argues, much of the focus that was lent to the body in the social sciences often relegated it to a secondary role; echoing Featherstone and Turner, the body was thought of as an object to be acted on, but lacked its own agency, and was often considered a virtually separate entity from the faculties of the mind. Lyon claims that the relegation of this secondary and separate role to the body in late–twentieth century scholarship, particularly sociology, stems in large part from the “ultra–relativism of much of contemporary sociology of a postmodern orientation”, and that this vein of thought has only further isolated and marginalized the body in scholarship (Lyon 84). Lyon then explicitly references Foucault by stating that:

Even Foucauldian approaches, which treat the body as subject to regimes of power, in effect serve to separate or isolate the body through a disregard of its role in social agency. This ultimately works toward the disembodiment of theory, or

at least a narrowing of the scope of attention to the body, rather than toward the full integration of attention to the body within social theory.

(84)<sup>129</sup>

Nick Crossley, in his article “Body–Subject/Body–Power: Agency, Inscription and Control in Foucault and Merleau–Ponty”, would seem to at least partially agree with this assessment, adding that “a division is forming in the social theory of the body. We are being asked to choose. Should we study ‘the body’ as ‘lived’ and active, or as acted upon, as historically ‘inscribed’ from without” (99). Although Crossley argues, at least in relation to Foucault’s view of the body as being “inscribed”, that Foucault’s treatment of the body in his work has its merit, he goes on to compare and contrast the approach of the body as “lived” against that of the body as “inscribed upon”, using Merleau–Ponty as a champion of the former approach, and Foucault as a champion of the latter.<sup>130</sup> In doing so, Crossley claims that “there is a common ground between these two writers which allows their work – and particularly their work on embodiment, power and subjectivity – to be brought into a mutually informing and enriching dialogue” (Crossley 99). He goes on to further state that “a discussion of their work effectively shows that the distinction between the lived body and the inscribed body cannot be maintained” (Ibid.).<sup>131</sup>

Reflecting a similar understanding of the egalitarian relationship between the mind and body, Bill Hughes, invoking Nietzsche, states that “The body, as feeling,

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<sup>129</sup> For relevant works of Foucault’s see: Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*; Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1, the Will to Knowledge*; and Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality: Volume 2*.

<sup>130</sup> For Foucault’s related works see previous footnote. For Merleau–Ponty’s related works see: Merleau–Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*; Merleau–Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*.

<sup>131</sup> Crossley additionally states that, in contrast to Merleau–Ponty’s account that we are our (habit–based) actions, and that it is therefore by virtue of those very carnal actions that we take up a position in the social world, that “Foucault’s philosophical engagement with embodiment is rather vague and underdeveloped. He is less concerned to establish his ideas in the usual academic ways (i.e. argument and evidence) and his views are nowhere coherently laid out” (Crossley 101). It is therefore difficult to confidently or accurately assess Foucault’s stance on the body in regard to individual embodiment (as opposed to the body’s relation to societal engagement and formation). In his article *Merleau–Ponty, the Elusive Body and Carnal Sociology*, Crossley says of Foucault that he has tended to concentrate on a rethinking of mind and cognition, at the expense of having a ‘rethinking’ of the body. Crossley goes on to say that “It is arguable that there must be a tacit rethinking of the body involved in these studies, if they really have overcome Cartesian dualism” (Crossley, “Body–Subject/Body–Power” 43). For these reasons and others mentioned throughout the paper, Foucault, despite being a cornerstone of sorts in the field, is neither necessary nor particularly useful in my research discussions despite his varied and interesting insights.

passion, pain, love, laughter and contempt is hammered on to the anvil of intellect and the intellect is given its place in life alongside – not above – the faculties and capacities of the organism” (32). Wacquant also rejects the notion that the mind is separate from and strictly controls the body, and he, too, acknowledges the recent resurgence of anti-dualistic sentiment in sociology and the social sciences. In doing so, however, Wacquant points out an important distinction: that actual, individual bodies are often left out of such discussions:

One of the paradoxical features of recent social studies of the body is how rarely one encounters in them actual living bodies of flesh and blood. The books that have appeared in recent years on the topic rightly bemoan the suppression of the body in sociology and its commodification in society (Glassner, 1988), elaborate analytical typologies of its social government (Turner, 1984), ponder the duality of its physical and communicative dimensions (O’Neill, 1985), or deploy exegeses of its treatment in recent, especially French, cultural theory (e.g., Martin, 1990: 13–80), but typically offer precious few insights into the actual practices and representations that constitute the human body as a ‘ongoing practical achievement’.

(“Pugs at Work” 65)

This issue, that much of what has been recently published on the body in the social sciences does often not, in fact, directly engage with what the individual body is capable of and what its role in obtaining knowledge is, is doubly important in regard to my current research. In attempting to accurately identify physical, martial techniques (e.g., grappling) from a written historical text, I argue, as Wacquant agrees, that one must be *very* concerned with the body’s involvement in such processes, and how one’s body, through physical processes such as repetitive training and body callousing, for example, can operate without any conscious or reflective input from the mind. In the following sections (3.4. and 3.5.) on habitus and embodied knowledge I will be returning to this very issue in detail.

In his illuminating piece *Merleau-Ponty, the Elusive Body and Carnal Sociology*, Crossley analyzes and contrasts the two sociological concepts of the sociology of the

body and carnal sociology. In doing so, he roughly defines the former as the attempt by sociologists to combat the traditional neglect of ‘the body’ within the discipline by way of “an analysis of the manner in which it is constituted as a meaningful object withing specific discourses, and subject to a regime of practices whose function is to regulate and/or transform it in a specifiable manner” (43). He then defines the sociology of the body as addressing itself to “epistemological, ethical and aesthetic technologies which variously discipline, adorn, punish, celebrate, etc. ‘the body’” (43). The sociology of the body, Crossley argues, is concerned with what is done by a body, while carnal sociology, by contrast, addresses the body’s active role in social life (43). Although these two branches of sociology may on their surfaces seem to be a practical solution to the conundrum created by Cartesian mind–body dualism, Crossley argues that in their own ways each branch of sociology actually serves to reinforce pragmatic dualism. He therefore posits that:

If sociology is to take the body seriously, I contend, then it must embrace both of these perspectives and it must understand them to be twin aspects of a single problematic: the carnal sociology of the body. This is necessary because both perspectives, on their own, have the potential to dissociate and externalize the body and the social world, reifying both and, thereby, constituting a dualistic and reductionist approach to social analysis. The sociology of the body, for example, in examining what is done to the body, has the potential to externalize the ‘doing’ agent (e.g. self, society, symbolic order) from the body, to reify that agent and thus to position the body within an array of unhelpful dualisms (body and self, body and society, body and symbolic order). Carnal sociology counteracts this tendency by revealing that ‘self’, ‘society’ and ‘symbolic order’ are constituted through the work of the body (i.e. sentient and embodied praxis). On its own, however, carnal sociology has the potential to position the body as a transcendent force which creates society etc. from without or from ‘below’ – thereby again reproducing dualism and, at the same time, being unnecessarily and unjustifiably reductive. The sociology of the body counteracts this tendency by revealing that the body is always–already engaged in a specific social situation by means of

techniques or rule governed practices which are historically and geographically contingent. In addition, it argues that the body's relations with itself and with other bodies are always mediated by such practices.

(43-44)

From this argument we can see that despite both branches' surface aims, or at least their partial intent to further include the 'body' in sociology, they in fact undermine the very framework they seek to establish (i.e., in attempting to extricate the body from the bonds of Cartesian dualism these two branches of sociology instead further reinforce dualism, each in their way). As Crossley puts it, "the body eludes sociology every time it is dissociated from and juxtaposed to the social or one of its aspects" (Ibid. 44). Once again, this is problematic when discussing the body's potential impact upon society and vice versa, but doubly so when investigating the relationship between an individual's mind and body, and how through embodied practice the body can inherently "know" what to do without conscious input from the mind. For this very reason I will not be leaning upon either of these branches of sociology in my argumentation, although I have included them because I do believe they have merits in other unrelated areas of sociology unrelated to my current research, and because they help demonstrate the depths to which the "dualism problem" has enmeshed itself within the social sciences. Crossley goes on to argue that, according to Merleau-Ponty, the body has two sides: "sentient and sensible. It sees and can be seen, hears and can be heard, touches and can be touched. These sides are not separate from each other, as are Descartes's mind and body. They are reversible aspects of one and the same being" (Ibid. 46). Crossley goes on to reiterate that the flesh of the body consists in sensible-sentience, and that the body's "being-in-the-world" is at the same time mediated through both physical presence and perceptual meaning. He states that "This does not mean that the body is characterized by the attributes of the classical (i.e. Cartesian or Kantian) subject. Far from it. But it indicates that the body is 'more than an object'. It is a sentient being whose primary relation to its environment should be understood in terms of this meaningful sentience" (Ibid. 47). This defiance of Cartesian dualism, the understanding of the body as a "sentient being" that relates to its environment *through* its meaningful sentience, is a key concept in discussing and

understanding embodiment, and is further reflected in Eagleton's writing. The Cartesian primacy traditionally given to the mind over the body is almost inverted by Eagleton in his *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, where he states:

Truth is a function of the material evolution of the species: it is the passing effect of our sensuous interaction with our environment, the upshot of what we need to survive and flourish. [...] It is the body rather than the mind which interprets the world, chops it into manageable chunks and assigns it approximate meanings. What 'knows' is our multiple sensory powers.  
(235)

Here Eagleton posits that the body and mind are not simply equals, nor separate, but rather that it is the body's "sentient", corporeal role through which we interpret the world: our ears hear, our eyes see, our nose smells, our fingers and skin touch. From this perspective, the mind and body are far from separate, and are in fact inseparable and endlessly intertwined. As many of the previously mentioned scholars have alluded, there is no primacy between the body and mind, and if there were, there are many instances and practices where one could argue that such a primacy would be given to the body. Once again, this taking-down of traditional mind-body dualism necessarily leads us to a discussion of embodiment and embodied knowledge and their potential for practical application in academia. Before discussing embodied knowledge in depth, however, it will be necessary to first give a brief overview of the related (and somewhat foundational) concept of habitus first.

### 3.4. Habitus: An Overview

The animal engages with the world and a practical consciousness arises  
from it.

–*Bill Hughes,*

“Nietzsche: Philosophizing with the Body.”

The previous section’s (3.3.)aim was to give an overview of Cartesian mind–body dualism as well as recent scholarship on the relationship between the mind and the body, focussing on modern academia and scholarship’s movement away from a dualistic understanding of the mind and body. I have argued that this historical focus on dualism, and the resulting primacy given to the mind over the body, is largely to blame for academia’s (and particularly the social sciences’) relative disinterest in the body as a potential reservoir of practical information. Relatively recently, much of the void that was made in the subversion of Cartesian dualism in modern scholarship has since been filled by the useful concept of habitus.<sup>132</sup> Habitus is a complex concept that features centrally in Pierre Bourdieu’s theoretical framework, and the concept has changed and evolved both throughout Bourdieu’s writings and throughout the works of other scholars. With regard to understanding the fundamentals behind *how* and *why* embodied knowledge can be acquired, stored, and later accessed for scholarly purposes, the embodied dispositions, habits, and tendencies that organize how individuals perceive and interact with their surroundings (i.e., one’s habitus) are necessary and foundational concepts to understand.

As with the concept of cultural capital (discussed in the introduction), there is a tendency in recent academia to saturate academic texts with the concept of habitus, often

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<sup>132</sup> Indeed, the rise of and credence given to habitus was in large part cause for the coinciding diminishing support of mind–body dualism.

in an attempt to bestow gravitas in lieu of fruitful theoretical work or conclusions (Reay 431).<sup>133</sup> Furthering this point, Reay states that:

A great deal of educational research references habitus instead of working with the concept as Bourdieu advocates. Habitus is assumed or appropriated rather than 'put into practice' in research accounts, and it appears that it is 'the gravitas of habitus' that is desired rather than its operationalization.

(439)

In order to avoid such a pitfall I will first be defining the term, both with regard to Bourdieu's understanding and to how it applies to my current work. I will then review some contemporary scholars' understandings of habitus and go on to show how it relates to the concept of embodied knowledge and how it is fundamental in the identification of specific physical and martial techniques described in historical texts.

Nick Crossley states in his article "Habit and Habitus" that habitus is an everyday term in much contemporary sociology, largely because of its use in the work of Bourdieu (136). He goes on to specify that habitus is a somewhat ambiguous term, stating:

There is no single, authoritative and consistent definition of it in Bourdieu's work. He continually revises it in order to both address criticisms and meet the demands raised by his successive empirical projects. Furthermore, Bourdieu is not the only theorist to have a concept of habitus. Mauss (1979), Weber (2004), Adorno (1976), Husserl (1973, 1990), Elias (1996) and Deleuze (2004), to name only the best-known writers, all develop and use a concept of habitus in their work. And,

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<sup>133</sup> Crossley (2013) reflects this sentiment, adding that, in regard to contrasting Merleau-Ponty and Dewey's conceptions of habitus against those of Mauss and Bourdieu, his "main concern is to raise questions and to problematize our habitual use of 'habit' and 'habitus' in order to encourage further discussion of issues that can easily be glossed over when we use these concepts and, notwithstanding the exegetic nature of the article, perhaps also to discourage any attempt to short-circuit those discussions by recourse to 'the word' of any particular intellectual authority, be that Mauss, Bourdieu, Merleau-Ponty, Dewey or anybody else (138).

though there are similarities, their versions differ.  
(137)<sup>134</sup>

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to go into detail regarding every major theorists' varied definitions and understandings of habitus; much of habitus' application is in regard to societal shifts and habits at a macro level, whereas I will be focusing primarily on habitus as it functions with the individual. For a comprehensive overview of the history of the concept of habitus, however, see Roy Nash's article "Bourdieu, 'Habitus', and Educational Research: Is It All Worth the Candle?". With this multi-faceted ambiguity in mind, Bourdieu himself defines habitus thus:

[The habitus] is a socialised body. A structured body, a body which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world or of a particular sector of that world – a field – and which structures the perception of that world as well as action in that world.

(Bourdieu, "Outline of a Theory of Practice" 1)

In this definition, "body" is to be understood as an individual's body, and a clear demarcation between mind and body is implied: habitus is embodied, and it is not solely composed of cognitive attitudes and perceptions. The "field" to which he refers is a social environment or structure within which individuals and groups compete (for dominance, space, social prestige and privileges, survival, etc.). Academic disciplines, one's home, a sports team, or one's company are all examples of different fields, and all fields are held together by inherent interests and concerns. The Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies succinctly defines this understanding of "field" as follows:

A field can be exceedingly varied in scope and scale. A family, a village, a market, an organization, or a profession may be conceptualized as a field provided

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<sup>134</sup> Of the theorists mentioned, with the exception of Bourdieu, Husserl's conception of habitus is the most relevant to my current work due to its frequent emphasis on habitus and the individual's various action schemas. References to several of the other authors is made throughout this section where relevant and necessary. For additional works of Husserl's regarding habitus see: Husserl et al.; Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Methodology*. For an overview of Husserl's work on habitus see: Moran 53–77.

it develops its own organizing logic around a stake at stake. Each field is marked by its own taken-for-granted understanding of the world, implicit and explicit rules of behavior, and valuation of what confers power onto someone: that is, what counts as “capital.”

(Leander, “Habitus and Field”)

In this way the field imprints on individual bodies, and every body can be understood as being in large part the product of the matrix of fields with which it has interacted with. In simple terms, (individuals’) bodies are therefore influenced by and a product of their varied environments. Wacquant adds that the relationship between habitus and field operates in two ways:

On one side, it is a relation of conditioning: the field structures the habitus, which is the product of the embodiment of the immanent necessity of the field (or of a hierarchy of intersecting fields). On the other side, it is a relation of knowledge or cognitive construction: habitus contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world, a world endowed with sense or with value, in which it is worth investing one's energy.

(Wacquant, “Towards a Reflexive Sociology” 44)

While the field shapes an individual (i.e., their habitus), the individuals that constitute and interact within the field further shape and orient the field. This circular, two-way partnership between field and habitus can be seen in several other aspects and relationships involving habitus. In a similar vein we can see both that the body lies within the social world (made up of multiple fields), and that the social world lies within (or is imprinted upon/within) the body. A crucial feature of habitus is therefore that it is necessarily embodied, and is not solely composed of mental attitudes and perceptions (Reay 432).

Because habitus is comprised of the very social and environmental experiences that moulded one’s own habitus, there is once again a certain circularity in how an individual interacts with society and how that society impacts and forms the views and behaviours of the individual. As Reay states, “although the habitus is a product of early

childhood experience, and in particular socialization within the family, it is continually re-structured by individuals' encounters with the outside world" (434). These re-structuring encounters, in turn, are internalized into one's ever-evolving, ever-consuming habitus, which in turn will direct to some extent the individual's decisions and reactions in the future (and perhaps influence to an extent the direction of and norms within the various fields within which the individual is interacting). The individual, or one's body, has the free will/agency to make decisions, but at the same time the decisions one makes, or can make, are bound by environmental aspects (both physical and social) of the individual's upbringing and social context. Expounding upon this Bourdieu argues that habitus has the potential to generate a wide variety of possible actions, allowing for an individual to choose from amongst an assortment of both constraining and transmuting possible courses. He states that:

Habitus is a kind of transforming machine that leads us to 'reproduce' the social conditions of our own production, but in a relatively unpredictable way, in such a way that one cannot move simply and mechanically from knowledge of the conditions of production to the knowledge of the products.

(Bourdieu, "Sociology in Question" 87)

In this way there are acts, behaviours and practices that, due to their past and present social conditions, an individual will not contemplate or entertain (either because the practice is socially shunned or would have known negative and undesired repercussions). At the same time the range of possible practices to choose from is also inherently limited by these same formative conditions. Reay therefore goes on to claim that Bourdieu appears to have conceived of habitus as a multi-layered concept; one in which habitus operates more broadly at a general societal level and more complexly and in a more differentiated way at the individual level: "A person's individual history is constitutive of habitus, but so also is the whole collective history of family and class that the individual is a member of" (Reay 434). As Crossley points out, Bourdieu does acknowledge that habitus can and does evolve (Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, but he (Bourdieu) does not give a clear account as to how or why; the formation of habitus, at both the individual

and collective levels, is at best glossed over (Crossly “Habit and Habitus” 147). Further supporting this criticism of Bourdieu’s understanding of habitus, John Toner states that:

Despite the undoubted utility of [habitus], and the extensive influence it has had on thinking within the field of body studies, Bourdieu has been criticized for not making full use of the term. For example, although in his later work he emphasized the generative capacity of habitus, he failed to offer a detailed account of how the habitus is formed at either the individual or collective levels. (4–5)

Although Bourdieu does approach habitus from several angles, as Crossley and Toner have pointed out, he did not seem particularly interested in how it is formed, or indeed improved upon and honed (particularly at the individual level). In regard to the acquiring of a complex corporeal skill such as grappling, the formation and growth of the related habitus on a collective, and more so on an individual level, are of the utmost importance. Unfortunately and as evidenced in the previous section (3.3.), Bourdieu, and sociologists broadly, have for the most part neglected the issue of the body–in–movement; often ignoring the development of corporeal fields such as the sociology of dance or martial arts to instead focus on anthropological research (Turner “Introduction – Bodily Performance” 7). Once again echoing Crossley, Toner goes on to add that habitus requires further development to better accommodate reflexivity, and that habitus is characterized by a reflexivity and flexibility which allows the agent to shape secondary dispositions (6).<sup>135</sup>

Returning to habitus’ role in my current thesis, I am primarily interested in how it relates to the body on the individual level, and, problematically in regard to Bourdieu’s

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<sup>135</sup> For a detailed discussion of bodily reflexivity see: Crossley, Nick. *The Social Body: Habit, Identity and Desire*. London; Thousand Oaks, Calif., Sage, 2001. For additional related criticisms of Bourdieu’s habitus, see: Turner, Bryan S. “Introduction – Bodily Performance: On Aura and Reproducibility.” *Body & Society*, vol. 11, no. 4, Dec. 2005, pp. 4–7; Reay, Diane. “‘It’s All Becoming a Habitus’: Beyond the Habitual Use of Habitus in Educational Research.” *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, vol. 25, no. 4, Sept. 2004, pp. 438–440.

work on habitus, I am also expressly interested in how an individual's habitus is formed, changes, and adapts (i.e., how a grappler, or any skilled laborer, athlete, or artisan, gains expertise and mastery of their trade), and why and how the knowledge contained within the individual's body may be accessed and transmitted. In this regard, focusing on an individual's acquirement of habitus while underlining the role of reflexivity in habitus' formation are essential, and Wacquant addresses these very issues in his "Homines in Extremis: What Fighting Scholars Teach Us about Habitus". Wacquant does so in part by focusing on the differentiation between a primary and a secondary habitus, where in reference to how pugilists train and hone new skills and techniques he writes that:

By deliberately acquiring specialized dispositions they did not have, dispositions that are constitutive of a bodily trade and philosophy, they spotlight the malleability of habitus [...] The primary habitus is the set of dispositions one acquires in early childhood, slowly and imperceptibly, through familial osmosis and familiar immersion; it is fashioned by tacit and diffuse "pedagogical labor with no precedent"; it constitutes our baseline social personality as well as "the basis for the ulterior constitution of any other habitus" (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977 [1970]:42–6). [...] The secondary habitus is any system of transposable schemata that becomes grafted subsequently, through specialized pedagogical labor that is typically shortened in duration, accelerated in pace, and explicit in organization.

(7)

These distinctions facilitate the discussion of acquired habits, traits, and specifically techniques, in that they allow for the easier discussion and separation of one's past, circumstantial habitus from one's often intentional, directed and present habitus. With regard to the acquiring of grappling skills, knowledge, and techniques, we will be almost exclusively concerned with the latter and more agency-filled secondary habitus.

Wacquant, in specific reference to martial and fighting arts, goes on to further compartmentalize habitus by identifying its three primary components: a cognitive, a conative, and an affective/cathectic component (Wacquant "Homines in Extremis" 7). The cognitive component of habitus consists in the categories of perception through

which agents dissect the world, identify its constituents, and give them pattern and meaning. In other words, you cannot master a complex skillset or corporeal craft without mastering the classificatory system “that both separates and relates things, persons, and activities into a distinctive semantic tapestry” (Ibid.). The second component of habitus, Wacquant claims, is conative: “it consists of proprioceptive capacities, sensorimotor skills, and kinesthetic dexterities that are hone in and for purposeful action” (Ibid. 8). Although between these two components of habitus we already have much of what is necessary to master a skill or corporeal trade, the third affective component of habitus is required in order for one’s habitus to allow them to truly become a “full–fledge member of a given microcosm”. It does not suffice, Wacquant argues, to be able to interpret a corporeal craft and to act in or by it in a conforming fashion:

One must also aspire to be in it and of it; one must be motivated or moved by it over time. The third component of habitus is affective or, to speak more generally, cathectic (in the idiom of Talcott Parsons) or libidinal (in the vocabulary of Sigmund Freud). It entails the vesting of one’s life energies into the objects, undertakings, and agents that populate the world under consideration. In other words, to make an adept pugilist (pianist, politician or professor) takes acquiring in practice the distinctive cognitive constructs and the skilled moves as well as developing the proper appetite for the stakes of the corresponding social game. (“Homines in Extremis” 7)

By identifying these three components of habitus, we can see that the cognitive and conative components of learning a skill or trade can be honed on a somewhat more individual level, while the third, affective component necessarily involves input from and the internalization of one’s broader, societal habitus. With regard to learning grappling, or acquiring a “grappling habitus”, the cognitive component necessitates interacting with other bodies on a primarily social level, while the conative component requires repeated interaction with other bodies (although usually individually) on a much more physical level. Meanwhile the third, affective component of habitus requires one’s body to interact with multiple individuals, often simultaneously, and to truly submerge oneself within the field (e.g., a grappling community, team, gym, culture, etc.). The understanding of how

these three components (as well the primary and secondary habitus) interrelate can help facilitate our understanding of precisely how complicated physical skills can be learned and how one's habitus, both on the macro and micro level, is variously involved in the process.

Having defined habitus to a sufficient extent, I find it practical to both discuss and differentiate from habitus the related term 'habit'. While the two terms are in many regards interchangeable, there are areas within the current discussion where drawing distinctions between the two terms will be necessary in order to avoid potential confusion or contradictions. It is important to point out that the difference(s) between the concepts of habit and habitus depend greatly upon whose version of the concepts are being compared: "Habit" can be and has been used in ways which correspond more or less identically to the way that sociology's main advocates of 'habitus' have used the concept, but not everybody uses either concept in this way (Crossley "Habit and Habitus" 156–57). This caveat aside, etymologically the word 'habit' stems from the Latin word '*habere*', meaning "to have or hold"; this notion is particularly revealing of possession and belongings as integral to habit. Importantly, Spencer underlines that habit necessarily involves both action (whether mental, physical, or vocal) and repetition (124). Spencer goes on to state that habit:

Is the result of action and exposes the power of action not only to generate an effect, but to produce and shape subsequent actions from the same source (Carlisle, 2006: 21–2). This leads Carlisle (2006: 26) to argue that habit: 'does not require memory, but rather a retention of the traces of past actions which may or may not become conscious'.  
(124)

This ability of an action, particularly when repeated, to produce and shape subsequent actions appears to reflect particular characteristics of habitus, while the "retention of the traces of past actions" found in a habit only furthers the comparison. There are, however, dissimilarities to be highlighted. In his article "Habit and Habitus" Crossley examines this very issue, writing:

Bourdieu spells out the difference [between habit and habitus] in a footnote to *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Having just discussed the inventive role of habitus, he writes that: “One of the reasons for the use of the term habitus is the wish to set aside the common conception of habit as a mechanical assembly or preformed programme, as Hegel does when in the *Phenomenology of Mind* he speaks of ‘habit as dexterity’” (Bourdieu, 1977: 218, note 47). ‘Habit’, Bourdieu is suggesting, denotes mechanical behaviour, a stimulus–response reflex, whereas ‘habitus’ implies a flexible disposition which, though pre–reflective, remains commensurate with purposive action and in no way precludes intelligence, understanding, strategy or knowledge on the part of the actor. (138–39).<sup>136</sup>

This distinction, that a habit is a mechanical, stimulus–response reflex or behavior, while habitus is flexible, pre–reflexive, dexterous and purposive, is key to differentiating the two overlapping terms. John Toner reflects a similar understanding of this difference when he states that traditional psychological conceptualizations of habit often portray human behavior as a conditioned reflex, thereby “imbuing the term with a peculiar degree of inertia” (Toner 4). Such conceptualizations, he goes on, signify the impassivity of human action and, although they possess some value in explaining how we perform simple actions, they appear ill–suited in explaining how skilled agents are capable of refining complex actions or addressing the variety of challenges that are common features of training and performance regimes (Ibid.).

Returning to Crossley, it is specifically the pre–reflexive, purposive and “dexterous” attributes of habitus that, he argues, entails competence and “know–how”. Habitus, as opposed to the more mechanical definition of habit, “captures the skilled activity of the expert player rather than the conditioned response of the lab rat” (“Habit and Habitus” 139). Crossley further argues that, as opposed to Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, “phenomenologists generally have a more dynamic and fluid notion of the habitus as a lived through structure–in–process, constantly evolving as an effect of the

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<sup>136</sup> Crossley goes on to show that Mauss has a similar understanding of the difference between habit and habitus, and that techniques are habitus rather than habits. See: Crossley “Habit and Habitus” 139.

interactions of the agent or group with both others and their physical environment” (Crossley “The Circuit Trainer’s Habitus” 39). To exemplify this understanding of habitus Crossley compares habitus to the layered expertise of a skilled football player: “The footballer who moves instinctively into the right position on the pitch, arriving just as the ball does and at exactly the right angle to it to put it in the back of the net, all without having to think reflectively about doing so, exemplifies [habitus]” (Ibid.). In this example, the footballer is not simply mechanically repeating a memorized maneuver or triggering a simple reflex. Rather, a complex matrix of past experiences is (dexterously) interacting with his/her sensory perceptions, resulting in an almost instantaneous and (pre)reflexive understanding regarding where to go, when, and what to do once there. Spencer both differentiates and connects the concepts of habit and habitus by subsuming one into the other; stating that the social sensitivity of the embodiment of habits can be seen as the accumulation of habits as disposition or habitus (124). Furthermore, it is not only positive, practical habits that are subsumed within habitus: habitus allows for a consideration of situations where habits collide, where one habit must be unlearned and another, preferable, habit learned (Spencer 126). With this subsumption of habits within habitus in mind, Spencer describes how a phenomenological practice, such as that performed by the aforementioned footballer, is constructed from layers of built-upon structures-in-process:

Habitus is understood as the acquired ability and faculty (Mauss, 1973). In the phenomenological tradition, habitus is a lived-through structure-in-process, continuously developing new abilities or technical capacities as an effect of the interactions of agent or group with others and their physical environment. In this tradition, it is the product of the power and pre-reflective tendency of the body-subject to habituate and, as such, maintain structures of comportment and experience that has proven valuable or useful.

(125)

Using this understanding of habitus, and once again referencing the situational expertise of the footballer, these proven “structures of comportment and experience” can be understood as the footballer’s previous training, their hours of practice and acquired

muscle–memory, their overall “skill” and “know–how”; all of which are instantaneously hearkened to, chosen between, and contextually performed exactly when and how accumulated previous experiences and their related bodily/muscle memory can best dictate. To exemplify the differentiation between habit and habitus take the following example: Both the act of absentmindedly tapping one’s fingers and of breaking free from a particular grip of a grappling opponent can be understood to be a result of repeated past actions. The former act is little more than a “stimulus–response reflex” is perhaps a tic, or triggered by nervousness, boredom, while the latter act, although also performed instantaneously, can be seen as a more flexible, skilled, and pre–reflective action that is taking into account numerous circumstantial and contextual cues and clues (i.e., allowing for a consideration of situations) in order to “instinctively” perform the correct and most practical–for–the–current–circumstances motor functions. In the current thesis, it is exactly these “skilled agents” and the “complex actions” they wish to perform that I am explicitly interested in. To this end, it is very much habitus, as opposed to the more mechanical understanding of habit, that I am concerned with, and I will therefore be using the term “habitus” moving forward in this thesis.

Having built upon Bourdieu’s now standard definition(s) of habitus, I have examined various scholars’ theories on the subject, with a focus on individual agency and a reflexive, dexterous understanding of habitus. Crossley succinctly summarizes the current academic understanding of habitus in a manner pertinent to the present study:

Theorists have used the concept of habitus to explain how skilled agents are capable of responding in an infinite number of ways to the infinite number of possible situations that they encounter in their field of practice. According to some perspectives, habitus is seen to represent a form of regulated improvisation that functions below the threshold of consciousness. [...] The interaction of conscious learning and unconscious schemata leads to the development of a reflexive habitus which allows performers to refine and adapt embodied movement patterns over time.

(“Habitual Reflexivity and Skilled Action” 3)

Combined with these formulations, the following sections of this thesis have been built upon the above-discussed conceptions of habitus as well as Wacquant's understanding of habitus as consisting of three components (a cognitive, conative, and an affective component) and being divided into a primary (macro) and secondary (micro) habitus. With these nuanced understandings of habitus serving as a foundation, this thesis will now focus on the related subject of embodied knowledge and how it pertains to the identification and reconstruction of corporeal martial techniques from written historical texts.

### 3.5. Embodied Knowledge and Reconstruction

We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body, either to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it, either to exchange actions and passions with it or to join with it in composing a more powerful body.

–Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari,  
*A Thousand Plateaus*

I have argued in the “Historicity” section (2.4.) above that it is reasonable to assume for a variety of social and rational reasons that the original, anonymous authors of both the Sagas of Icelanders and the legendary Sagas portrayed real, plausible techniques, and did not merely describe fabricated and exaggerated maneuvers to entertain his/her audience with the kind of superfluous violence that abounds elsewhere in the sagas. Relatedly, I have evidenced (as the primary text examples will also show and as I further evidence in the following sections) that the society for whom the sagas were written was necessarily familiar with many of the specific grappling techniques detailed throughout the sagas. Indeed, as I will go on to further argue, many of the grappling maneuvers described within the sagas were real techniques that were and continue to be used in various forms of grappling. Little of the aforementioned evidence and information, however, can help in the identification and understanding of specific maneuvers if not used explicitly in conjunction with a deep embodied knowledge, derived from one’s personal habitus, about the efficacy and plausibility of different wrestling techniques under varying circumstances, and the physics underlying both grappling and the human body. Although some identifications of techniques could be logically deduced (due to textual cues or descriptions) or guessed by one with little or no relevant embodied knowledge, such findings would necessarily run the risk of lacking the certainty of *knowing*, in practice, that a given identification must be the correct one (nor would they

pass basic standards of academic rigor). Furthermore, such “unembodied” deductions would, for example, have additional difficulty in identifying a technique that may lack certain positional details or whose description presumes a vocational level of familiarity with the sport/technique amongst the reader. It is therefore essential to couple embodied with academic knowledge in order to confidently and fruitfully analyse any written descriptions of highly skilled martial techniques.

Having already familiarized the reader with the backgrounds of both grappling and the sagas, it is now necessary to build upon the previously discussed understanding of habitus and have an in-depth engagement with the concept of embodied knowledge, and the related concept of the body schema, in order to convincingly demonstrate in part how historical, textual grappling depictions can be confidently identified and reconstructed. Once this is done, we will proceed to discuss the issue of how we, in the present, can, despite the passage of time, differing languages, culture, and varying quality of descriptions, accurately and with confidence analyse a written historical text describing a martial technique and identify the techniques described within. First, however, we must begin with an in-depth discussion of embodied knowledge.

As referenced in the “Definitions” section (1.1.6.) above, the notion of embodied knowledge is derived from Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. In his watershed work, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty examines the notion of embodied knowledge through the example of touch typing:

To know how to touch type is not, then, to know the place of each letter among the keys, nor even to have acquired a conditioned reflex for each one, which is set in motion by the letters as it comes before our eye. [...] It is knowledge in the hands, which is forthcoming only when bodily effort is made, and cannot be formulated in detachment from that effort.

(144)

To this end, Merleau-Ponty claims that the body has an “object” side (i.e., it can be seen, touched, and acted upon), but he adds that it also has a sentient or “subject” side, which sees, touches, and acts. Regarding the above example of touch typing and the previous discussion in the “Mind-Body Dualism: The Body in Academia” section (3.3.) , it is not

simply the typist's brain actively dictating where and when each finger should press which key, nor are the typist's fingers to be thought of as literally having a "mind of their own": rather, the body as a whole is a sentient being, and therefore, through its very "being-in-the-world", the body, acting through its fingers, is relating to its environment through a "bodily sentience". This "knowledge bred of familiarity" (*savoir de familiarité*) is the original source of embodied knowledge (Tanaka 149).<sup>137</sup> As with many of the arguments regarding the habitus in the previous sections, embodied knowledge is necessarily not constituted upon Cartesian mind-body dualism. With regard to the mind, embodied knowledge is not apparent as knowledge because it is not clearly represented; nevertheless, we experience it with certainty through our own bodies and (skilled) actions. Nor is embodied knowledge confined only to motor skills, but rather is concerned with the variety of human experiences which occur within our world of lived experience, or what Husserl refers to as *lebenswelt* (Tanaka 150).<sup>138</sup>

### 3.5.1. The Body Schema

As embodied knowledge is derived from one's underlying/overlying habitus, one's body schema is also closely linked to the acquiring of embodied knowledge. Broadly speaking, one's body schema is the collection of processes that register the posture of one's body parts as they relate spatially. One's body schema is constantly updated during movement, and this is generally and primarily a pre-reflexive and unconscious process. It is through the body schema that one recognizes their present posture and movement, and also how one knows the individual spatial positions of each of their body parts (Tanaka 153). In the upcoming discussion regarding embodied

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<sup>137</sup> Here Tanaka also notes that embodied knowledge is similar in concept to the procedural knowledge of cognitive science, as contrasted with declarative knowledge, in that it can be better presented by performance than by verbal explanation. It is also for these reasons that video links have been provided for several of the identified techniques appearing in this thesis. For more details see: Stillings, Neil A. *Cognitive Science: An Introduction*. Cambridge, Mass., Mit Press, 1995.

<sup>138</sup> Here Tanaka proceeds to describe differing types of embodied knowledge using the examples of a phantom limb, affordances, and the concept of personal space. Although these differing types of embodied knowledge have little to do with the research and questions at hand, they may nonetheless allow the reader a broader understanding of the various ways in which our body interacts with its surroundings.

knowledge and the identification of grappling techniques, an understanding of some of the intricacies of the body schema will be helpful. One's body cannot "know" how to perform a physical skill if it does not know where its own parts (e.g., arms, legs, hands, feet, etc.,) are both spatially and in relation to one another. Similarly, based on a written account of a martial technique, one cannot "know" how a technique is best performed if one does not, or cannot, from personal embodied experience, surmise where the two bodies would necessarily have to be (and in what positions) in relation to one another in order for the technique to be successfully executed. The body schema can therefore be a fundamental, if not necessarily evident, component in the identification of written martial techniques.

Merleau-Ponty further developed the notion of body schema, *or le schéma corporel*, from the philosophical viewpoint of one "being-in-the-world"; a view which he incorporated from the work of Heidegger ("The Phenomenology of Perception"). He acknowledged that the body schema is a subjective awareness of the body; it is, however, an indirect awareness which is felt through an ongoing task. Tanaka continues to define the body schema as coordinating one's body parts into action and organizing the necessary behavior for any given corporeal situation or interaction. As a result of our accumulated habitus (both primary and secondary) we know our body through living in action, and therefore do not need to represent it or be consciously aware of many of its internal processes; the more skilled or habitualized the action is, the less aware we become of it (Tanaka 154). There are, of course, internal processes such as our heartbeat that we cannot consciously or directly control. There are other complicated processes, such as breathing, that are on some levels subconscious or preconscious, and although we are (or can be) aware of such processes, we can choose whether or not to actively control or direct them. There are other processes still, those we are most interested in in the current work, that are highly skilled and have become habitualized through years of (secondary) habitus accumulation (i.e., repetitions, training, reflective adjustments, etc.,). A grappler's repertoire of techniques, skills, and trained responses fall for the most part into this last category: the more skilled or habitualized such an action is, the less the grappler needs to consciously act or react in order to both identify the (perceived) most

practical response and initiate and execute the appropriate response/technique in a timely fashion.

I will now use a running example of a grappler honing their grappling skills in order to discuss and further define the concept of the body schema. This example will then continually be returned to in further discussion regarding embodied knowledge. Although I will go on to describe fuller, more complicated grappling techniques, such highly skilled and habitualized actions can be represented in something as simple as wrist control: the action of grabbing one's opponent's wrist in order to control their movements and help facilitate the execution of any number of following (offensive or defensive) techniques. Wrist control is both an active and reactive action: as you are going to grab your opponent's wrist, your opponent is also trying to grab and control your own wrist(s). Therefore, simultaneously, a grappler is often constantly attempting to both control their opponent's wrist(s) while moving, twisting, and circling their own wrists out of their opponent's grip in order to prevent their opponent from gaining an advantageous position.<sup>139</sup> Without extensive training and repetition (i.e., acquiring the proper secondary habitus and its cognitive and conative components) such techniques are difficult to perform as one must constantly and consciously be planning and strategizing where, when, and how to move and defend their own wrists, arms, and hands while simultaneously keeping track of and reacting to what their opponent is doing with their respective various body parts. Compounding this, without the body schema, that is, without one's body automatically and intuitively "knowing" where its different body parts are (and those of one's opponent) in relation to one another, becoming proficient in or mastering such a skill would be near impossible. Because the body schema allows us to perform skilled actions without representing the body, it can therefore be understood as a corporeal system which enables habitual or skillful actions (such as fighting for wrist control). As Tanaka elucidates:

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<sup>139</sup> A similar simultaneous action/reaction found in grappling is the constant battle for the "collar tie": a technique performed while facing one's opponent by grabbing the opponent by the "collar", or behind the neck in an attempt to control their posture and limit their movement. In combination with wrist control, these (and other similar) perpetual attempts at controlling one's opponent's body can also be referred to broadly as "hand fighting".

Skillfully coping with a situation is made possible when a direct association is established between perception of an environment and appropriate action toward it. The perceptual appearance of a situation immediately solicits a particular action, and then the situational change brought by the action will create a new perceptual appearance which solicits a subsequent action.

(154)

In the example of two grapplers fighting for wrist control, it is clear that a direct association has been established between the perception of one's environment (i.e., one's opponent's body) and the appropriate (re)action toward it. Furthermore, the example also underscores how the "appearance of a situation", in this case one's opponent grabbing one's own wrist, solicits an immediate and particular action; that is, you wrest your own wrist from the grip of your opponent. This example also highlights an important aspect of both the body schema and embodied knowledge (one that could perhaps be deduced from an understanding of the underlying habitus): that, with sufficient familiarity (such as repeated practice and repetition of a skill or technique in varied environments and contexts) one's opponent in many ways becomes part of one's (necessarily interactive) environment.

In regard to the potential identification of grappling techniques from a written text, the concept of one's opponent being a part of one's environment and accumulated habitus is vital. As I will go on to argue, a modern grappler with sufficient grappling habitus and embodied knowledge (i.e., practice and training) is in a unique position to understand nuances written "between the lines" of a text describing a specific technique or maneuver, as their bodies have, through the very honing of their grappling-related habitus, "learned" what techniques are and are not possible given relatively few written cues about where and how two grapplers are positioned. This will be expanded upon and exemplified in detail during the later sections (4.1. and 4.2.) related to specific grappling passages from the sagas. In the meantime, some further discussion of the body schema, in particular the way in which one's opponent can be understood to be part of one's interactive environment, will be further highlighted.

In their article “The Body Schema and Multisensory Representation(s) of Peripersonal Space”, Holmes and Spence discuss the body schema as it specifically pertains to the space(s) around the body:

In order to guide the movement of the body through space, the brain must constantly monitor the position and movement of the body in relation to nearby objects. The effective ‘piloting’ of the body to avoid or manipulate objects in pursuit of behavioural goals [...] requires an integrated neural representation of the body (the ‘body schema’) and of the space around the body (‘peripersonal space’).

(1)

The body schema can therefore be understood as “an integrated neural representation of the body” while peripersonal space can be understood as the space immediately surrounding our body and that we are aware of, with one’s body schema constantly sending and implementing received sensory data from its immediate environment.<sup>140</sup> Much of the environment that we physically interact with is therefore within our peripersonal space, and thus a grappling opponent is almost constantly engaging with us in this space. In his article “Tàolù The Mastery of Space” Daniel Mroz discusses *tàolù*, prearranged movement patterns used in various Chinese martial arts, and how the individual can relate to their peripersonal space. In his discussion Mroz argues that the set structures of the repetitive and formal *tàolù* create the possibility of mental space and that, in following their behavioral prescription, one can accept external standards of movement. Mroz goes on to state that:

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<sup>140</sup> For more on peripersonal space see: Rizzolatti, G. “Neuroscience: Enhanced: The Space around Us.” *Science*, vol. 277, no. 5323, 11 July 1997, pp. 190–191, 10.1126/science.277.5323.190. Although beyond the scope of this thesis in terms of scientific field(s), the authors interestingly conclude: “It is not the case that any one single brain area is responsible either for maintaining a representation of the body, or of space in general, as was once thought. [...] Rather, the ‘body schema’ and ‘peripersonal space’ are emergent properties of a network of interacting cortical and subcortical centres. Each centre processes multisensory information in a reference frame appropriate to the body part concerning which it receives information, and with which responses are to be made” (Holmes and Spence “The Body Schema” Conclusion). Further interdisciplinary research on such complex interactions within and between the brain and body could certainly prove fruitful in furthering the understanding(s) of habitus, embodied knowledge, and the relationship between the body, mind, and actions.

In doing so we can transform, suppress or at least negotiate with our movement habits and preferences. Having externalized our decision-making process by following the rules of *tàolù*, we may notice that some of our constant mental chatter and our physical tics are silenced. In this silence, lateral thoughts and unusual movement impulses can arise, and novel avenues of perception and action become available to us”.

(10)

In essence this is another way to understand the body schema, peripersonal space, and their relationship to embodied knowledge: the “repetitive and formal” movements of *tàolù* become part of one’s habitus, and by focusing on these embodied, memorized movements one can clear their mind of distractions, essentially letting one’s habitus take over and navigate one’s body towards movements that “feel” right (or, as I argue, “feel” practical), with little to no conscious cognition. I argue that this is much the same mental state that a grappler or performer of any skilled practice may find themselves in when allowing themselves to surrender to their body’s own impulses and accumulated “know-how”. In doing so, “unusual movement impulses” can arise providing new, possibly efficient or practical ways of interaction with one’s environment (e.g., space, an instrument, one’s opponent, etc.). With regard to grappling, as alluded to above, the body schema interacts (both actively and reactively) with this space, and therefore allows us, with the proper habitus and experience, to interact at a sub/preconscious level with our opponent when they have entered this space, in essence allowing us to “sense” or “feel” what they are going to do in a prereflexive manner and respond instantaneously. In relation to this phenomenon Tanaka further writes that:

The body schema provides a body with the possible emergence of new actions. When facing a new or unfamiliar situation, new actions emerge through interaction with the environment. Although we are asked to deliberate in a detached way, we find how to act purposively through contingency. In this sense, the body schema is a self-organizing system of actions which is open to situational change. The acquisition of new skills or habits is made possible by this

aspect of the body schema.

(155)

Here we once again see that the acquisition of new skills can come from our past interactions with novel situations: the grappler (or any skilled performer) doesn't suddenly and intuitively know how to best control their opponent's wrists or escape from their opponent's wrist control. Rather, through practice, repetitive trial and error, and constantly allowing their body schema to interact with and find the best practical way to deal with a given situation, technique or environment, the grappler slowly perfects certain active and reactive techniques and ways of interacting with their environment/opponent that serve to reinforce their control or dominance of the situation. The body schema can therefore be seen as converting the perceptions of one's environment into the appropriate action towards the environment, while simultaneously facilitating skillful coping within various situations (Tanaka 156). In doing so, the body schema is also producing new actions through interactions with novel and unfamiliar situations (an opponent (re)acting in an unexpected way).<sup>141</sup> This is fundamentally how embodied knowledge of any corporeal skill is gained over time.

As with my ongoing example of a grappler battling for wrist control, such an understanding of the body schema and how it relates to habitus and embodied knowledge is also clearly reflected by Spencer. Regarding the training regimens of mixed martial artists, he writes:

The fighter's body intuitively reacts to their opponent's based on the body techniques learned in training. Through the accumulation of proprioceptive memory, the body has registered what it is to do in a given fight scenario. That is, the body senses what it is to do in a fight and reacts accordingly.

(129)

In this example the fighter's body knew how to "intuitively react" to his/her opponent explicitly because of the techniques that they had already learned, trained, and acquired

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<sup>141</sup> This aspect of the body schema also greatly coincides with Wacquant's previously discussed second, proprioceptive aspect of habitus attainment.

through the ongoing process of their body schema perpetually interacting with and producing new actions through their environment. In the same way a grapplers' habitus is developed and in turn (or rather, simultaneously) their embodied knowledge grows. As the above examples have shown, this embodied knowledge does not simply consist of the intellectual knowledge of how to perform a technique, but rather additionally includes the body's "knowing" how and when to initiate and execute the technique as well as how and when to instantaneously respond to varying actions and responses, even unexpected ones, from their opponent/environment. As was shown, the body's very ability to make and perform these prereflexive decisions and actions is itself the result of an ongoing synthesis of previous (and related) experiences (i.e., the formation of a habitus) in which the body learned through trial and error which responses elicit the most desired result to a given stimuli.

### **3.5.2. Identification and Exact Replication**

Having now defined and gone over some preliminary examples of what, in relation to grappling or a skilled response, embodied knowledge is and how it is acquired, it is now necessary to ask the question: *how* does one take one's (embodied) knowledge of wrestling and of Old Norse literature and combine them in such a way as to be able to accurately interpret the specific wrestling maneuvers found within these 700-year-old texts? More specifically, how can we know, now, what specific techniques were performed hundreds of years ago based solely off written and sociological evidence, and how can embodied knowledge help in this endeavour? In order to answer this question we must first be confident that our interpretations, necessarily based upon an acquired habitus and (embodied) knowledge of contemporary martial arts, are correct and applicable. Furthermore, the answer to this question requires an intricate and particular set of skills, knowledge, and experience, as well as an experimental attitude: a novice grappler or strictly observational researcher of grappling, for example, would not necessarily have the required experience and accumulated habitus to anticipate or intuit all of the possible options available given a particular written grappling scenario. Even

with the appropriate embodied knowledge, to define and replicate any of these centuries–old techniques with one hundred percent certainty would be near impossible. To begin unpacking this complex question let us first focus on the plausibility of replicating a centuries–old written martial technique.

Foremost, it must be made clear that *identical* replication is not the goal of this thesis: In as much as “there is more than one way to skin a cat”, there are also several different ways to perform the same wrestling or grappling technique. Different grapplers with different physiques or wrestling–styles may very well all perform the same simple throw, albeit with their individual and unique added nuances. Take, for instance, the “head throw”: The head throw can be initiated from any number of positions, including from when one’s opponent is behind them. A standard way to execute a head throw is by performing the following steps:

Step 1: Face your opponent and engage with them in such a way as you have your left hand (this technique as well as most others can be performed ambidextrously/from either side: for this example we will assume you have tried to control your opponent’s head with your left hand) behind their head, somewhat controlling their head movement and making them lean forward/crouch down.<sup>142</sup>

Step 2: During or shortly before or after step 1, advance your left foot forward, in between and in front of your opponent’s feet.

Step 3: Next, grab your opponent’s left arm at the elbow with your right hand.

Step 4: Pull their left arm towards you and downwards, while simultaneously turning your own body away from your opponent, to your right, in a fast and powerful motion.

Step 5: This combination of movements should ideally pull your opponent (who already has a compromised posture from Step 1/the collar tie) forward and off–balance, allowing you to continue your body’s rotation, pulling them to the ground.

Step 6: Once your opponent begins to lean–forward/fall, release your left hand (that was controlling their head by gabbing behind their lower–neck/head) from the back of their neck and push your left arm past the back of their head, which results in the back of their head/neck resting in your left armpit.

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<sup>142</sup> This can be done by acquiring the previously mentioned “collar tie”.

Step 7: Due to the momentum you've created, the grips/holds you have on your opponent (and where), your lower center of gravity, and your opponent being pulled off-balance, the result is a technique in which your opponent is thrown/dragged by their head and arm to the ground, with you (if performed successfully) maintaining a dominant and top position.<sup>143</sup>

At almost every step of performing the above-described head throw, or virtually any other grappling technique, there is room for variation. Indeed, variation is often a necessity when trying to successfully complete a technique against a resisting opponent. The head throw, done at speed, could very well appear to the untrained eye as one or two fluid movements. Indeed, there are numerous minute details that could be added to each step, as well as major variations. For example, the throw can be done without ever controlling either of your opponent's arms. As mentioned above, the maneuver can also be executed when your opponent has "taken your back", i.e., they have grabbed/embraced you from behind. There are any number of variant trips and leg positionings you could add/alter to counteract your opponent's attempts at resistance, and the same holds true for your hand grips and hip movement.

There are of course exceptions and variations to the labelling of this and any maneuver, particularly between different countries and languages. The head throw described above, even amongst Western wrestling aficionados, could rightly be described as simply a "head throw", a "basic head throw", or an "arm-in head throw". If different/more involved footwork were involved, it could also rightly be referred to as a "head throw trip", or "outside leg trip head throw", etc. Of course each country, culture, and language can and does describe moves with their own nomenclature, yet upon seeing/reading a thorough a detailed description of the technique, anyone proficiently knowledgeable about grappling, regardless of their cultural background, would be able to identify, visualize, and interpret the technique.

These variations of the same maneuver are still "the same move", however major or slight their differences in execution may be. In essence, many similar and related

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<sup>143</sup> For a visual demonstration of the head throw see: <https://youtu.be/IUeRxK1PYPM>.

grappling techniques fall under the same overarching “umbrella term”. Taking the above example into account, every technique, no matter how fundamental, has a variety of individual “parts”, or steps, that can be modified by the performer to suit his/her preference and/or the circumstances at hand (e.g., one’s opponent’s various attempts at defending themselves from the technique, size and strength differentials between the competitors, the current level of the competitors energy/exhaustion, or any variety of personal preferences in technique). With this in mind, while I do not think that it is possible or likely to accurately identify the exact minutia of the wrestling movements being described as performed by specific individuals in Old Norse literature, I am confident that in many instances the movements can be narrowed down and pinned to a particular family of techniques, or even to variants of a specific technique: just as we can recognize a well-known song covered by a pianist or guitarist despite it being played in their own style and with their unique flourishes, rhythm, and pace. In a similar vein, Bryan S. Turner, while discussing the reproducibility of bodily performance in dance, lends us interesting insight into this phenomenon in his example regarding Javanese court dance:

As late as 1916 or 1924, a treatise was composed for Prantgwadana VII on ‘rules for the art of dancing at the Mangkunagarn court’, namely the so-called Tayungan dance. Rule number 13 specifies the posture necessary for raising one leg (engkrang). This position involves a set of carefully described movements: ‘While the right palm is facing upward, the left leg moves forward, then the right palm is rotated inward in front of the right hip. While the head is turned to the left, the left leg is lifted and the left sampur is flicked backward’ (Brakel–Papenhuyzen, 1995: 219). These rules guarantee that the postures will be repeated according to their ritualistic significance, but the Tayungan dance remains a unique performance, in which the skill, dexterity and training of the performer produce an authentic aesthetic experience, but not one in which aura is diminished by its rule-bound reproducibility.

(“Introduction – Bodily Performance” 3)

Similar to the previous example of the head throw, we can see from the example of the Tayungan court dance that several specifically prescribed movements are necessary in order for the dance to be considered properly executed and for ritual significance to be gained. Also similar to the head throw example it is clear that each performance of the dance is not an “exact replica” of what is being prescribed, but rather a unique interpretation by the individual performing the dance which takes into account their physique, dexterity, and personal flourishes.

There is also the issue of what one means by “exact” when discussing the potential of recreating physical performances from the past. For instance, I have been privy to many debates on this topic where it has been argued that one can *never* know what *exact* movements were performed in historical descriptions of a maneuver because outside influences such as culture, society, and an individual’s nuances make each separate performance of a maneuver a unique occurrence in history. Although this is to an extent true on a technical level and for certain descriptions,<sup>144</sup> this kind of protestation misses the point and nuance of the “umbrella concept” of a technique altogether.

When we are being taught how to swim, or ride a bicycle, we are learning the individual steps of the process, and how they interrelate. You have not “failed” at learning how to perform the “breaststroke” or “freestyle” styles of swimming if you do not, with unerring accuracy, emulate the bodily mannerisms, breathing style and frequency, and speed of your teacher; and few observers would find your technique unrecognizable and consider that you have “failed” to emulate your teacher’s instructions if you manage to perform the styles in a proficient and practical manner. Any argument to the contrary would seem obsessively particular and unreasonable. I therefore find any academic argument lamenting that we can never “exactly” recreate the “precise” movements of *any* historical martial art/combat technique to be uncondusive to academic growth or discussion on the matter.

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<sup>144</sup> For example, simple constructions such as “she punched him in the face” or “he hacked at him with his sword” of course cannot be accurately/exactly recreated or identified as specific techniques as there are simply not enough details provided and the acts themselves involve too many unknown variables, e.g., how long the sword was, what the sword was made out of, what angles and at which velocity was it being swung, how did the recipient react, what was the recipient wearing in terms of armor or protection, etc.,

Indeed my goal is not to decipher the nuances of a grappling technique and *exactly replicate* the maneuver being performed in any given saga, as it would be impossible to scientifically replicate the *exact* measurements of two competitors' bodies, clothing, physical surroundings, mental states, surrounding temperature and distance from sea level, etc., (especially when basing the identification/reconstruction of the maneuver off of a historical written text). To attempt to do so would be absurd, and furthermore wholly irrelevant to the intended goal of this thesis: to show that one can accurately identify, describe, and recreate the broader martial *techniques* (as opposed to *individual instances*, i.e., *practices*, of a technique being performed) that are historically attested to in particular source materials. To return to the swimming analogy: my goal is to show that one can identify and recreate a described swimming style, not emulate the instructor's particularities and the exact circumstances under which he performed said style.<sup>145</sup>

### 3.5.3. Interdisciplinarity

Returning to the question of *how* one can combine one's (embodied) knowledge of wrestling and Old Norse literature in order to accurately interpret the specific wrestling maneuvers found in the sagas, let us focus now on the relative merits of each field of study and on interdisciplinarity. As I have argued, one key to identifying martial techniques recorded in a written medium is to personally have the required embodied knowledge. Another key is to have appropriate academic, social, and linguistic knowledge surrounding the texts in question. Yet a third key is then being able to bridge the gap and communicate between these two otherwise peripherally related fields. It is therefore important to broach the topic of interdisciplinary and to frame this thesis' current query within the broader context of interdisciplinarity with(in) Martial Arts

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<sup>145</sup> Interestingly, as I've argued is the case with wrestling due to its primordial nature, so too can swimming's practical techniques be traced back through history to seemingly disparate contemporary cultures. One such example is evidence of different breaststroke positions that can be found in roughly 8,000 year old rock paintings decorating the walls of (now) desert Saharan caves in Egypt. For more information and images of the paintings see: <https://africanrockart.britishmuseum.org/country/egypt/cave-of-swimmers/>

Studies. As I will illustrate later in this section, issues in translation, identification, and understanding may become apparent when one is lacking any of these three “keys”.

As laid out at the beginning of this thesis, in order to properly and accurately identify grappling techniques from a historic written source, one must be familiar not only with grappling and its techniques in general, but also with the various facets (e.g., linguistic, literary, cultural, etc.) of the source(s) in question. I argue that this holds true, to some greater or lesser extent, for any martial art and the respective historical, written depictions of its techniques. Problematically, this high level of knowledge of and interdisciplinarity between a martial art and its related historico-cultural texts is, by the fundamentally differing natures of the fields, not common.<sup>146</sup> Peter Lorge comments on the contemporary state of the academic study of martial arts by stating that there is currently a fundamental split between those who practise martial arts and those who study it. Practitioners, he claims, often do not see the value of studying martial arts, and many scholars do not think martial arts should be studied (904).<sup>147</sup> In response to such claims I find it necessary to build a bridge between the academic and literary world of Old Norse saga literature and the more corporal world of embodied knowledge (as they respectively relate to grappling). To be truly interdisciplinary<sup>148</sup> in any meaningful academic sense, one must be able to both create and understand communications between both/all the fields with which they are working. As Ben Spatz puts it, “to interpret and interact with epistemic synthesis or interdisciplinarity involves substantive and complex

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<sup>146</sup> That is to say, it cannot be expected of all serious academics and researchers of a particular culture to also be serious or competent in that culture’s martial art and vice versa.

<sup>147</sup> Lorge adds here that those studying martial arts cannot be required to practice the martial arts and that, while the study of martial arts would usefully be informed by practice (with which I agree), an outsider’s perspective (e.g., a non-practitioner) also brings something different to study. He goes on to state that it might be useful for researchers to therefore explicitly acknowledge their own background in order to avoid any confusion with respect to this issue. While I agree, I believe that there is a discussion to be had in regard to how researchers should best go about declaring their own, non-academic achievements in various martial arts. These achievements (whether belts, trophies, certifications, tournament/fight victories etc.) are often uncodified and are frequently unregulated and difficult (if not impossible) to verify, so this is a complex issue that needs further addressing within the field(s).

<sup>148</sup> In the case of this thesis I am using a specific definition of “interdisciplinarity”; one which encompasses and acknowledges the *academic* disciplines of Old Norse studies/literature and Martial Arts studies, while at the same time does not overlook the degree and sheer amount of (embodied) knowledge present in having a deep understanding of a physical discipline; in this case grappling.

interactions between fields of knowledge, each of which has its own (incommensurable) depth dimension” (153).

As alluded to above, to have a deep understanding of *either* Old Norse literature and culture or any particular martial art is already a feat unto itself yet will be insufficient in the analysis, interpretation, or understanding of and communication with the other. In the particular case of this thesis, and regarding interdisciplinarity in general, it is important to acknowledge that one facet of understanding does not take precedent over the other. When dealing with two strictly academic disciplines this may seem rather straight-forward, however, I would here like to stress that many fields and disciplines overlap with the physical world, few more so than Martial Arts Studies. In this regard, it is important to understand that one’s knowledge and martial prowess (in this case involving wrestling and grappling) are very much an integral-and-equal part of the interdisciplinary dichotomy between two such hitherto peripherally related fields as Old Norse Studies and Martial Arts Studies. To further compound this issue, if one were to have expertise in only one area, one’s credentials in the other, non-expertise area could be seen as suspect, and one may therefore necessarily find oneself bolstering one’s stance merely so as to not be discredited. These sorts of suspicions are less anticipated when dealing with two well-established academic fields, yet can understandably be problematic when trying to conjoin knowledge between a traditionally academic field with the knowledge of a corporeal, tacit physical art or sport. As Farrer and Whalen-Bridge state quite astutely in the introduction to their collection of essays *Martial Arts as Embodied Knowledge: Asian Traditions in a Transnational World*:

Simply put, the work in [*Martial Arts as Embodied Knowledge: Asian Traditions in a Transnational World*] stems from cross-training in the library and on the mat, and one result of this fruitful combination of theory and practice is liberation from defensiveness. This middle way must avoid two main kinds of partiality, which each stultify the discourse. Many martial artists may dismiss “theorists” who do not have the *embodied* authority of a martial arts master who has put in thousands of hours of practice. Or, a cultural historian who would not endanger intellectual credibility by being a participant-observer in what so many peers would mistake

for *fighting* might need to certify himself or herself by disparaging the actual embodied pleasures and experiences that are inescapable elements of martial arts practice. At its best, martial arts discourse is a training ground in which mind and body do not pull rank on one another, mainly because they have not been artificially separated.

(7)

Here Farrer and Whalen–Bridge touch upon a truth that I wish to emphasize in this study: that neither the mind nor body “pull rank” on one another in a proper interdisciplinary study of the variety I am undertaking. Although there is far more literature relating to the Old Norse/literary aspects of this research, that knowledge alone would avail me little in my goal if it were not paired with an equally robust knowledge and understanding of grappling: the physics involved, the different maneuvers and their multitude of (possible) variations, kinesiology and knowledge of the human body and how it moves, and knowing which techniques are effective, possible, or likely, and under what conditions. Furthermore, as is emphasized throughout this thesis, it is important to note the dual aspects of one’s “embodied authority”: on the one hand I argue that the above–mentioned practical understanding of grappling is required in order to gain certain insights into the possible identification of a martial technique from a written text, while on the other hand an understanding of the underlying theory (i.e., habitus, the body schema, embodied knowledge, etc.) is necessary in order to support *why* such insights are possible or reliable. In a similar vein as Farrer and Whalen–Bridge’s above argument, Spatz writes:

For interdisciplinarity to have any meaning, it must be based on competency in at least one discipline. Interdisciplinarity moves from one discipline towards another – ‘producing new forms of knowledge in its engagement with discrete disciplines’ (Moran 2002: 16) – rather than escaping from the requirement of competence in any field.

(230)

Spatz is correct for the most part, but I would like to add that in many instances, such as during my research on grappling in Old Norse texts, *competency* in at *least* one discipline

is not quite enough. In the realm of grappling, *competency* does not necessarily bestow one with the adequate levels of material and physical knowledge needed to transgress boundaries and impact upon scholarly research. Expertise is needed in order to have a wrestling “acumen” that can properly identify and give significance to the knowledge-transfer that can – and does – occur when this knowledge is applied to a cultural text. This database of knowledge is unfortunately not (readily) transferable, and must be learned first-hand through endless hours of practice, repetition, and habitus acquisition and growth.

Wacquant similarly describes the tacit acquisition and transfer of such embodied martial knowledge as a slow, laborious, and protracted process: “it cannot be effected by an act of will or a conscious transfer of information. It necessitates, rather, an imperceptible embodiment of the mental and corporeal schemata immanent in pugilistic practice [as well as in grappling] that admits of no discursive mediation or systematization” (“Pugs at Work” 72). Harkening back to the “Definitions” section (1.1.6.) of the thesis, I recall O’Connor’s ethnographic study of glass-blowing where she emphasizes that proficiency and expertise in a skill are defined by the interrelatedness of habitus, field, and the body’s ability to anticipate:

This anticipation is possible only when the practitioner understands the world’s imminence in which she operates and is therefore able to act immediately: the novice, though able to adapt, is not able to anticipate. Anticipation carries practice beyond the moment of action and is the faculty through which an envisioned piece can be realized.

(200)

With regard to grappling, and more specifically the ability to identify a grappling technique based off of a written description, I argue that this embodied ability to anticipate is a vital distinction between the novice grappler and proficient/master’s ability to “know”/anticipate what move or technique is probable or plausible considering the given (con)texts. As with all acquired skills, there is a “shades of grey” continuum between the abilities and embodied knowledge of a novice and expert grappler. Nonetheless I argue that, in order to maximize effectiveness in technique and contextual

clue identification from a written text, one's own grappling experience should fall more towards the "expertise" end of the admittedly vague spectrum. Furthermore, in an interdisciplinary context *expertise* is needed not in *at least* one discipline, but most definitely in *both*. The expert grappler would be at a loss as to how to interpret with any depth the surrounding cultural and social significances (not to mention the language and its particular terminologies) of the medieval Scandinavian texts and passages in question. Eric Burkhart comments on this issue by stating that:

Embodied practices like music or martial arts are hard to understand for non-practitioners who are lacking practical knowledge of the subject. As a practitioner, however, the individual embodied knowledge acquired through former education and training sets the stage for any scientific inquiry and any interpretation of source material. The reconstruction of past technique is therefore first of all an epistemological and hermeneutical problem.

(9)

With a firm background (both practically and theoretically) of habitus and embodied experience in grappling, the stage is therefore set to implement and conjoin with this knowledge a similarly robust background and understanding of Old Norse literature, culture, and language to successfully bridge the knowledge-gap between the two disciplines and fruitfully analyse from various angles the primary texts' passages regarding depictions of grappling.

It is furthermore important to note that in order to add to a habitus of understanding (in regard to both Old Norse literature and the human body/grappling) a common *language* must be utilized as well if there is to be any hope of successful knowledge dissemination between the two fields of study. In this regard it is pertinent to emphasize what Paul Bowman states in his *Deconstructing Popular Culture*:

The unavoidable proliferation of disciplinary specific technical languages (what Lyotard called 'paralogies') equals mutual unintelligibility and the disarticulation of different subjects and disciplinary realms. This is precisely why 'critique' from our perspective will either be unintelligible to the other(s) language, the others'

logic, in the others' 'context'. Thus, the point is precisely to intervene in and to alter other disciplinary discourses and their productions (knowledges) not by 'critiquing' them but by intervening in the disciplinary spaces of their production and legitimation.

(181)

The importance of being able to understand terminological subtleties is paramount. In the present context, this is why a discussion of habitus (and differentiating it from similar conceptions of habit), the body schema, and embodied knowledge were necessary in order to conductively communicate between disciplines. For the same reasons, the ability to extrapolate upon and identify the differences between the handgrips of a double-leg takedown versus those of a single-leg takedown is of great importance, as is the ability to infer the definition of certain Old Norse vocabulary and cultural settings, cues, and meanings. Regarding the readers and audience of texts such as the present thesis, it is therefore also necessary to break-down, describe (both textually and through video links) the various grappling techniques and terminologies used during my argument. The understanding of these otherwise seemingly trivial details is essential in being able to communicate through and between two or more areas of knowledge.

Exemplifying the necessity of dual (or three-part: Old Norse language/culture, embodied, and theory) expertise in such areas, I would like to return to my above criticisms of F. J. J. Peters' "The Wrestling in Grettis Saga" mentioned in the "Invented Tradition and Previous Research on *Glima*" section (3.2.) to illustrate an apparently imbalanced-understanding of the disciplines necessarily involved in identifying and describing a wrestling technique from an Old Norse written text. While his representation of *Grettis saga* regarding its Old Norse context (and the translation used) is accurate, Peters shows a clear lack of (or inability to accurately communicate) embodied knowledge and understanding when he states that, in regard to the protagonist Grettir picking up an opponent in a "bear-hug"-like grasp: "the opponent was 'captured' by being hugged closely to the attacker and was *lifted by arm strength alone* off the ground"(Peters 235). As I argued above, anyone vaguely familiar with the physics and mechanics of wrestling or grappling would know that one would not use "arm strength

alone” to lift an opponent, or even a box, off of the ground. Rather, a combination of one’s legs, hips, arms and core muscles are used. Indeed, if you actually try to pick up another human being (to say nothing of whether or not they are resisting you) you will find that you naturally, and by necessity, *must* use your legs, hips, and core for the brunt of the exertion. One’s arms can *squeeze* from such a position, but *lifting* one’s opponent with *only* the arms is not mechanically feasible. As can be seen from this example, such mechanical infeasibility could easily go unnoticed by one not in possession of the correct, or enough, embodied knowledge pertaining to the subject. This effect, unfortunately, can be domino-like: the next researcher or scholar to read Peters’ work may very well lack this same necessary embodied knowledge and further propagate the inaccuracy with no reason to maintain any doubt in Peters’ argument. In order to avoid such errs and to successfully convince either side of the issue (both the Old Norse and Martial Arts Studies academics) of the other’s merits, it is critical to both use a mutually intelligible language and substantiate one’s proficiency and knowledge in both realms.<sup>149</sup> For this reason, much of the latter third of this thesis is therefore spent analysing specific grappling passages from various Old Norse sagas in such a way as to underscore the importance of this interdisciplinary union.

The above example of a scholar seemingly lacking a fundamental understanding of the physics involved in grappling underscores another point I deem necessary to reiterate and expand upon: I would argue that a scholar working on such an interdisciplinary topic must not only be knowledgeable in both areas of study (i.e., Old Norse studies/literature and grappling/wrestling), but must, in regard to grappling, have *more* than simple academic knowledge of the topic. In other words, as the above example shows, *embodied* knowledge of grappling can be essential in the understanding and accurate identification of a written wrestling technique. That is not to say that a scholar equipped solely with an observational (i.e., non-practicing) knowledge of grappling would be unable to lend useful commentary on the identification of techniques from written sources, but rather that a scholar with embodied practical knowledge of grappling would necessarily have advantageous avenues, experiences, embodied knowledge, and

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<sup>149</sup> In doing so, one is also addressing and appeasing both sides of the broader academic/embodied dichotomy.

understanding from which to draw. I would therefore suggest that if a researcher without a relevant embodied background were to study a particular embodied skill that they at very least work in tandem with a relevant embodied expert (and vice versa<sup>150</sup>). Such a stance can be seen in Bourdieu's writings on habitus where he states that "Ideas like those of habitus, practice, and so on, were intended, among other things, to point out that there is a practical knowledge that has its own logic, which cannot be reduced to that of theoretical knowledge; that in a sense, agents know the social world better than the theoreticians" (*The Craft of Sociology* 252). Bourdieu is here referencing knowledge of the social world (i.e., one's habitus on a macro level), but this understanding of habitus and practice also transfers neatly to the individual/micro level where indeed an "agent" or active practitioner of wrestling will have additional knowledge and insights that a wrestling theoretician without such embodied knowledge and practice would not be privy to.<sup>151</sup>

In specific reference to historical European martial arts (HEMA), Daniel Jaquet reflects a similar view regarding the academic advantages of either having one's own or utilizing another's embodied knowledge:

In order to try to reconstruct [martial techniques] persuasively, not unlike dance scholars studying antique dance treatises, historical martial arts scholars are arguably in need of collaboration with practitioners in order to glean insights into the possible practical dimensions of textually recorded fighting techniques. Certainly, without practical interests and experimentation, the study of such

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<sup>150</sup> Lorge once again reflects this sentiment in stating: Study for the practitioner broadens one's perspective in perhaps the same way that practice broadens the perspective of someone who only studies (913). Such broadened perspectives could help avoid pitfalls such as Peters' aforementioned (mis)understanding of Grettir's "bear-hug".

<sup>151</sup> Although Bourdieu's social understanding of habitus and practice are in many ways transferable to an individual and performance-based understanding of habits, the latter was infrequently his target area of discussion. This notion is affirmed by Turner who comments that "Shusterman makes the interesting point that Bourdieu's analysis of the cultural field is exclusively concerned with the audible (musical taste) and the visual (conventional works of art). Performance is not addressed by Bourdieu, despite the centrality of a theory of practice to his sociology as a whole" ("Introduction-Bodily Performance" 4). See also: Shusterman.

technical primary sources remains limited.

(90)

These “practical dimensions of textuality recorded in fight techniques”, as I will continue to argue, are not only best learned through embodied engagement with the activity in question, but are also (and necessarily) best transmitted via this physical means: the unique, embodied understanding that a practitioner or a martial art or skilled practice has (in regard to their respective art) is often not a form of knowledge that can be easily (if at all) transferred or taught through speech or text alone. Regarding such somatic codes and their transmission, Bar-On Cohen writes:

After [training for] some time, martial arts students might notice that their body-self has changed; they have discovered out-of-the-ordinary ways of moving and of using their senses. They find themselves in a new place, whose existence they had not been aware of [...] The martial arts student encounters a new world of meaning whose notions are not formulated verbally. On the contrary, training dismantles notions designated by words and replaces them with other notions understood somatically [...] In order to grasp and use such notions and to carry out the practices they entail, the students also need to unlearn what they already know, to discard the dichotomous categories they normally use outside the training sessions.

(82–83)

These “bodily changes” and the “dismantling” and replacement of notions learned verbally by somatic understandings are precisely aspects of embodied knowledge that the solely observational researcher would have great difficulty grasping or understanding, and therefore great difficulty in applying to their research. While a non-practitioner (for example, an expert historian on wrestling or its cultural significance) could no doubt share astute insights regarding a technique, or perhaps identify a grappling technique that is described in great detail, they may also, as Peters above, struggle in understanding (or even be oblivious to) the options available to a grappler due to the physical circumstances and restraints of physics and the human body. With practical mastery and sufficient

embodied knowledge, however, an experienced grappler can, upon reading the description of a particular wrestling technique or scenario, immediately and indeed inherently know, through experience and acquired habitus, which techniques are more or less plausible and what physical and kinaesthetic restraints may necessarily impede particular conclusions. Discussing how this “know–how” is acquired and how it can be reflected upon, Toner writes:

The cultivation of reflexive body techniques [...] allows the performer to act back upon the body in an attempt to acquire new schemes of perception and action. Importantly, this form of reflexivity is a component of the habitus and we can continue to draw upon our primary habitus as part of the solution to a problem. Ultimately, habitual reflexivity enables the performer to consciously engage with the various options for change that are at his or her disposal.

(12)

This ability to reflexively “draw upon our primary habitus”<sup>152</sup> allows one, with sufficient experience, to not only learn by blind “trial and error”, but to also consciously take into account past (re)actions and consciously evoke our relevant habitus and past experiences in order to find the solution to a particular problem. In the context of this thesis, the “problem” at hand is in figuring out which grappling techniques are and are not plausible based off the details given in a written text and our embodied mastery and relation to the described technique or bodily positions. In attempting to answer such a problem one can physically try to imitate or recreate the depicted actions (with another body/partner), and/or one can use their embodied practical mastery of grappling to reflect upon and intellectually analyse the various factors of the combatants being depicted.<sup>153</sup> Regarding such mastery and furthering my argument Toner states:

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<sup>152</sup> It is unclear whether Toner, in his use of the term “primary habitus”, is referring to one’s broad foundational habitus, or explicitly to what Wacquant earlier refers to as a more circumstantial primary habitus based off of one’s upbringing and distant past (as opposed to more the immediate and intentional secondary habitus). Both understandings can make varying sense in their respective rights.

<sup>153</sup> Both methods were used thoroughly during the research for this thesis in order to analyse and speculate upon the most accurate identification of the various grappling techniques depicted within the sagas.

The practical mastery that characterizes skilled action can only be acquired through active engagement – that is, by developing a sensory appreciation of how different movements produce different effects on the environment. And yet, through such embodied practice experts accumulate a vast amount of experience (much of which will have been conceptualized and which will be available to conscious recall) that they can reflect upon and use to influence what they do and how they do it.

(20)

Here I would draw specific attention to Toner’s comment regarding the vast amount of accumulated embodied experience: much of it will be available to conscious recall. Although he is referring to skilled performer consciously recalling embodied experience in order to move and act in a specific desired way (as opposed to in a prereflexive manner), it is important to note that this conscious recall can be used “out of context” as well, i.e., in order to dissect a written passage or discuss the various possibilities one could have in response to a physical act (e.g., what grappling techniques would and would not be plausible in a given situation or with the limited details provided by an author). It is in this way that I argue that a practitioner of a highly skilled art, such as grappling, has additional unique insights and understandings into the art that a solely observational expert does not have access to.<sup>154</sup>

This argument is further buttressed by Crossley when discussing proprioception (the power of bodily coordination and one’s perception or awareness of the position and movement of one’s body). Crossley states, according to Merleau–Ponty, that proprioception should not be thought of as a strictly intra–bodily power, but rather should be understood as a coordination of a body–in–the–world; meaning that the body possesses a synthetic and coordinating power in relation to itself by means of its

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<sup>154</sup> Toner further echoes this sentiment towards the end of his article when he suggests: “Given the generative nature of habitus, it is important to consider the types of interdisciplinary work that will allow researchers to identify how performers are capable of enhancing their bodily capacities over time. To describe and better understand embodied action, researchers may wish to employ methods that are ‘truly grounded in the carnal realities of the lived sporting bodies’ (Hockey and AllenCollinson, 2007: 116). One possible method is Allen–Collinson and Hockey’s phenomenological–based mode of enquiry which has proven particularly illuminating in helping researchers to better understand the ‘fleshy’ realities of moving and sensuous sporting bodies (e.g. Hockey and Allen–Collinson, 2009)”(20).

(inter)action (with)in the world (“Merleau–Ponty, the Elusive Body” 54). Referencing the common examples of typing and driving a car, Crossley continues:

My fingers ‘know’ the space and layout of the word–processor keyboard, ‘I can’ type, for example, irrespective of the fact that I am unable to give a linguistic and reflective account of this layout (without looking). [...] A further point to note here is that our ‘corporeal schema’ [body schema] can be modified to include the equipment that we use. When we drive a car, for example, we not only ‘know’ its internal functional space, we tacitly incorporate its potential for motility, its size and acceleration potential, into our judgements.

(54)

In relation to the above examples, an “observational” typist or driver, i.e., someone who has studied and seen typing and driving but has not physically performed the tasks, may very well have memorized the layout of the keyboard or understand the mechanics of how to drive a car, but without practical skill (and practice) in doing so there are vast areas of knowledge regarding how and when particular skills or movements are needed that they simply lack access to and knowledge of. Importantly, Crossley adds that our body schema can be modified to “include the equipment we use”. This facet of the body schema is critical to the thesis at hand in that I argue that one’s grappling opponent is, to some great extent, an extension of one’s own body schema: when wrestling with another body *their* arm, leg, hand, neck, etc., in many ways becomes a physical extension of one’s own body, just as with a blind person’s cane, a race car driver’s vehicle, or a pianist’s keyboard. When gripping an opponent by the wrist, ankle, or neck a skilled grappler can sense the slightest movements in their opponent and even *use* their opponent’s body or movements against them. A skilled grappler can often sense, based on the context of how they are entwined with their opponent’s body, what their opponent is going to do and act accordingly; or the skilled grappler can use their opponent’s body against themselves (the opponent, that is) in order to control, choke, injure or otherwise submit them. It is for such reasons that I argue that having embodied knowledge (as opposed to solely intellectual knowledge) with regard to a skilled discipline such as

wrestling can be vital in accessing the knowledge necessary to *know* what techniques or movements would be possible in a (textually) given context.

As the above examples illuminate, and as discussed previously, this embodied knowledge applies not only to the individual's body schema, but also overlaps with the individual's environment and even the body of other individuals they are engaging in physical contact with. A scholar with only academic knowledge of grappling and wrestling techniques may know and be able to identify a great number of techniques based off a written description, but they necessarily will always be lacking a particular knowledge that would allow them to extrapolate with confidence what bodily possibilities are available between a grappler and his/her opponent when several contextual clues may be missing. A grappler with sufficient embodied knowledge and "grappling habitus", however, is not only able to *know* what techniques are possible and would work from which positions, but is also able to *know* how one's body schema interacts with his/her opponent's body, and which movements and complex interactions between the two bodies are more plausible and practical than others. In many ways the body of a grappler's opponent becomes an extension of their own body (schema).

Bar-On Cohen reflects this understanding when she discusses Sino-Japanese views of the body, stating that the interface between the body and that which is outside of it is not clear-cut. Similar to Mroz's understanding of the relation between the body and its surrounds with regard to *tàolù*, Bar-On Cohen states: "The body is sometimes understood to include not only that which is circumscribed by the skin but, during battle, the *ma* as well, the empty space between the two warriors facing one another, and the opponent's body as well" (83). Substituting "during battle" for "during a grappling match", I argue that a skilled grappler's body (and body schema) "reads" its immediate surrounding – from the space between itself and the competitor to the competitor's own body. All of these various spaces are integral parts of a grappling match, and the grappler, like the aforementioned footballer, uses their acquired habitus and embodied knowledge to instantaneously, and for the most part prereflexively, get a "lay of the field". Based off their perception of this "lay of the field", the skilled grappler then utilizes (again, often prereflexively) through a complex series of (micro)actions their embodied knowledge to interact with the ever-shifting field in a manner which has proven most historically

practical and effective for them, based off their acquired habitus and previous experiences in similar (though never identical) situations. In this way embodied knowledge can be understood as not only an inherent understanding of how one's own body works, what it is capable of, and what is effective in a particular (familiar) situation, but it also involves understanding one's opponent's body, how it works, where their body is relative to one's own, and what it is and is not capable of in a given scenario.

Through the culmination of the intricate relationships between the body schema, proprioception, habitus, and embodied knowledge discussed in this chapter, I contend that having sufficient embodied knowledge lends access and insight to knowledge and potentialities that can be gleaned from a written text describing a martial technique. This knowledge and these potentialities, I argue, may otherwise be elusive to a scholar lacking such embodied familiarity with the subject matter (or who does not collaborate with a scholar who possesses such knowledge). It is with these insights, necessarily gained from having first-hand embodied knowledge of the (or similar) techniques or sports being described, that an embodied practitioner can more accurately view the "entire playing field" of a written technique, including tacit messages and understandings such as a grappler's implied positioning, in order to analyze and identify it.

### **3.5.4. Underpinnings and Utilization of Embodiment**

Having gone over the history and various components and attributes of embodied knowledge, as well as its current place and potential within interdisciplinary academia, let us now answer the query and central issue brought up at the beginning of this chapter: How can we, in the present, interpret which specific martial arts maneuvers are being described in a written account from the distant past? Broadly speaking one must be equipped with both embodied knowledge of the martial art in question and the relevant requisite socio-cultural and linguistic knowledge (e.g., familiarity with the culture, its sport or a closely related sport, its norms, language, literature, etc.). Specific to this thesis and its case study, one must have the requisite knowledge and understanding of wrestling and grappling, as well as of Old Norse literature and medieval Scandinavian

culture, particularly as it relates to sport and wrestling. Even with an abundance of such background knowledge, however, the question still remains: how can one harness this knowledge and put it towards the use of interpreting written accounts of medieval grappling techniques and translating them into decipherable and coherent explanations of contemporary wrestling technique with any accuracy? It is one thing to have embodied knowledge in grappling and use this knowledge in order to identify or explain a written technique from a modern source. It is another thing altogether to assume that the passage of several hundred years has no bearing on our ability to do so with regard to a historical text in another language from another culture. This temporal shift must be kept in mind when attempting to analyse or identify a physical martial technique across centuries. The next step in order to solve this conundrum therefore lies in understanding and identifying the relevant common underpinnings and constants between the diverse circumstantial variables of the sagas and our own contemporary circumstances.

Despite the fact that the maneuvers I wish to analyse were described in and around the thirteenth century, in a different culture, in a different language, and for a different audience, there are still some important similarities between the original wrestling participants, their physical habitus, the saga authors and their audience, and myself. Namely, that we all share a similar human body, and that both the saga society and our contemporary world had/have access to and a certain level of familiarity with grappling.<sup>155</sup> That is to say that by “familiarity with grappling” I mean a common habitus and understanding of the human body, joints, leverage, various grappling techniques and maneuvers,<sup>156</sup> concepts such as centers of gravity and momentum, and the physiology of grappling, as opposed simply having partaken in the physical activity of wrestling. Both societies (“then” and “now”) also competed in (or at very least had a considerable understanding of) either serious or playful wrestling matches, and all of our bodies have and must always follow the same contextual laws of physics and gravity. Virtually all

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<sup>155</sup> As evidenced in the “Historicity” section (2.4.) above, it is clear that even though we cannot know the extent to which any individual anonymous saga author was familiar with wrestling, there are enough social, literary, and logical clues available to be confident that the saga society enjoyed and was familiar with grappling and *glíma* (hence its inclusion and multiple functions in so many sagas, as well as its own known terminology).

<sup>156</sup> As discussed in the “Grappling: Origins, Play, and Fundamentals” section (1.2.).

other differences between then and now, “there” and “here”, are inconsequential to our current focus. What one body could do then, it could do now, were it still around. By extension, what a body could do then/there, a similar body could do, similarly at least, now. It is this very postulation of universalism – that of our similar bodies, identical adherence to the same laws of physics, and, to a lesser degree, our similar passion with and understanding of wrestling – that allows us today to interpret what grappling techniques they, of centuries ago, once did. Burkhart contends that:

Though all embodied techniques have a functional component and the human body has certain relatively stable properties, fighting techniques do not just follow a paradigm of ahistorical functionalism. There is a difference between simple actions (such as executing a strike and applying force on a target, using a wrist lock or conducting a hip throw) based on relatively reliable properties of human bodies and the execution of complex fighting techniques based on the action–reaction–schemes described in fight books. The simple question how a fighting technique “works” on a biomechanical level is therefore highly underdetermined. (20)

Although I agree with Burkhart in regard to being able to ascribe functional components to embodied techniques and that the human body has relatively stable properties, I would like to emphasize a tacit point: The armed combat “fight books” to which Burkhart is referring to have additional complicating variables such as clothing (i.e., armor) and weapons, and are written in an instructive context for primarily noble and warrior classes. In contrast, the grappling sequences that I am analysing would fall more closely under what Burkhart refers to as “simple actions” and are furthermore remembered and recorded renditions of unarmed combat and sport that targeted an audience consisting not solely of the noble elite but also (and primarily) including the general populace as well.<sup>157</sup> These facts, in conjunction with the primordial nature of wrestling, its often vivid descriptions within the sagas, its cultural significance (both then and now), and the

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<sup>157</sup> See “Historicity” section (2.4.) above. For further discussion on saga audience, see: Sørensen; Clover, “Icelandic Family Sagas (Islendingasögur).” 239–315; and Orri 117–139.

relatively less complicated equations (again referencing weapons, armors, specialized gear, the materials from which they are constructed, their weight, etc.) of its techniques allow us to in many instances confidently deduce or “whittle down” a grappling technique’s biomechanical characteristics. Unlike bladed martial arts, such as fencing, or even most of the “striking” or pugilistic martial arts, the equation of any given wrestling technique has far fewer variables, many of which (combatant positioning, hand and leg placement, etc.) are often either revealed by the sagas’ writers directly or can be assumed or implied by the physical limitations and mechanical structure of the human body (in conjunction with the experienced analyst’s relevant embodied knowledge). In many instances a scribe’s detailed descriptions are not given, nor in fact are they needed, as the practical efficiency of certain fundamental wrestling maneuvers, grips, and hand–placements in conjunction with the basic principles of body mechanics and the audience’s subject–knowledge naturally yield an easily decipherable description to any in the audience with familiarity with and embodied knowledge of the sport. For different martial arts with more complicated “equations”, however, I would suspect that additional details or imagery would be needed.

This may sound like a tall–order for an entire audience of medieval farmers to take in, but let us view this hypothetical situation without the obfuscating technical terminology: If the majority of the intended audience were Icelandic farmers in and around the 1300’s, they would have frequent contact with wrestling (either as spectator or participant<sup>158</sup>), as can be discerned by the literary and social contexts in which the mention of wrestling is commonplace.<sup>159</sup> If members of this audience wrestled themselves (or were astute fans) they would, by the nature of their practicing, watching,

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<sup>158</sup> Many of the wrestling matches in the sagas take place in a social sporting context where there are not only competitors, but also mixed–gender spectators. Examples of such social gatherings (not limited to wrestling) can be found in *The Saga of Grettir the Strong* (Scudder 163), *Gisli Sursson’s Saga* (Regal 16–7) and *The Saga of Hallfred the Troublesome Poet* (Whaley 228).

<sup>159</sup> Refer to “Historicity” section (2.4.) above for the various social and literary evidence of wrestling’s importance in medieval Iceland.

and participating in the sport, be familiar with the basic positions, stances, hand-grips, throws, terminology, etc., Furthermore, in watching and/or competing in grappling or *glíma* matches these farmer-wrestlers would unconsciously have the necessary embodied knowledge and understanding of basic body mechanics (such as an implicit understanding of how to leverage one's body and utilize gravity against one's opponent, or knowledge of "how much" pressure or where one's center of gravity must be in order to perform certain maneuvers). In fewer words still, any audience members who also partook in or frequently watched grappling contests would naturally understand the necessary references, terminology, and physical underpinnings of a described technique because of the very fact that they *grappled*, or were at very least knowledgeable about it. In many instances I therefore have confined and defined parameters within which I can identify and even replicate a maneuver or technique based off of a 700 year-old written description.

As discussed above, someone with proficient grappling knowledge today may not be able to perform a particular practice or instance of a technique *exactly the same way* a saga hero such as Grettir the Strong was recorded to (allegedly) have done it, but they can certainly identify and broadly replicate the ("umbrella") *technique*. In other words, one can successfully identify and execute a wrestling maneuver that is described in a historical text without replicating the *exact minutiae* of the maneuver. It is also important here to draw the distinction between what wrestling maneuvers were being depicted and what wrestling moves were actually (allegedly) performed: As alluded to above in this chapter, I am not concerned with replicating a maneuver *exactly as Grettir* did it: it would be impossible to gauge to what extent the maneuver replicated its historical ancestor. Furthermore, as the authors of the sagas are for the most part anonymous and writing about events that took place hundreds of years previously, the maneuvers captured in the sagas themselves are "copies of copies". In other words, the saga authors are often/likely describing the "umbrella" technique that was performed, with no way or need to discern *exactly* how any given saga protagonist performed it (if indeed it ever actually happened in the manner in which it recorded). In this regard I am not concerned with the details as to *whether* a maneuver was once performed in "historical reality" by a saga hero: rather, I am concerned only with *which* maneuver was said to be performed, and *how* can we

identify and replicate it. To this end, Wetzler clarifies with regard to combat in general that:

A factual mode of combat' accounts for those kinds of combat scenes that, even though exaggerated, still depict fighting in a way that is grounded in reality, and reflects it more adequately. 'Historical reality' is, of course, a rather fluid thing to define. It is not meant here as 'factual historicity' – the question is not if the fights referred in the saga did indeed happen, or if they were fashioned after historical models. The question is instead, if the movements described in the saga compel to the techniques of martial arts that did or do exist.

(22)

Indeed, the saga authors themselves were not transcribing wrestling techniques that they saw first-hand: they were instead most likely attributing certain maneuvers to distant (and perhaps sometimes fictional) protagonists using their (contemporary to their own times) knowledge and understanding of grappling to do so. I am undertaking a similar task, although it is made more complicated by additional barriers such as language, culture, and (more) time. Nevertheless, my aim is to first identify whether or not what is being described is a credible or plausible technique, and once having done so, if applicable,<sup>160</sup> recreate and explain what technique is being performed through the use of textual analytics and my own embodied knowledge of grappling: whether or not the maneuver being described ever *happened* in historical reality is a tangent and mostly irrelevant issue.

Spatz investigates the topic of embodied technique and transmission in great detail, and while he concentrates his efforts on the embodied knowledge inherent to theatre, acting, and yoga, his arguments are also very insightful and convincing if extended to grappling and the transmission of its techniques. Spatz argues that the relationship between technique and practice is epistemic (i.e., that technique is the knowledge of how a practice is performed), and that this understanding allows us to

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<sup>160</sup> Many techniques are described either too vaguely or in a way that renders the technique implausible or unrealistic.

connect our practice of, for example, swimming or dance with that of people living thousands miles away or hundreds of years ago (41). Spatz goes on to state that “If we do the ‘same thing’, that is precisely and only because we are making use of the same technique, the same *knowledge of what is reliably possible* given the similarities we find in our bodies and environments”(Ibid.). Reflecting upon the *performance* of a technique’s historical uniqueness (e.g., an individual instance of practice), Spatz writes:

Practice, in this sense, is not repeatable. Every moment of practice is unique, no matter how small or large. [...] None can be repeated. As knowledge, on the other hand, technique is precisely repeatable and moreover is not bound to a particular moment, place, or person. Technique is not ahistorical but transhistorical: It travels across time and space, “spreading” from society to society.

(41)

It is therefore the techniques described in the sagas that I believe can be identified and recreated with reasonable accuracy, as opposed to the individual occurrence of a practice or instances of historical reality.<sup>161</sup>

With this understanding of a technique’s replicability in mind, I would like to emphasise that the similarities between our bodies and those of the saga protagonists are myriad, and that our environments and surroundings have similarly remained virtually unchanged. And despite there being, however, some instances in the sagas where a wrestling match takes place between a saga character and a giant, troll, or monstrous “other”, even in these cases the monstrous “other” always retains a humanoid body. Perhaps the only relevant aspect of the physical or environmental underpinnings that may differ with any significance between “then” and “now” is that of strength.<sup>162</sup> Other impalpable factors, such as social mores, conventions of thought, and values, if relevant at all to the identification and reconstruction of a technique, can for the most part be

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<sup>161</sup> Brian S. Turner discusses this issue in depth as it regards dance. See: Turner, “Introduction – Bodily Performance: On Aura and Reproducibility.” 1–17.

<sup>162</sup> Compared to his medieval counterpart, the modern grappler has access to a variety of dietary regimes, advanced nutrition, nutritional supplements, gym machinery, etc., Although there were no doubt “strong men” in medieval Iceland, I argue that they simply did not have the advances of modern science and society at their service in order to compete, in terms of strength and muscle–building, with modern athletes.

inferred from the notoriously culturally rich source material. Similarly, one of the most revealing and obvious substrates between grappling in medieval Iceland and the modern day is *intent*. Since time immemorial the purpose of wrestling has been to achieve and maintain physical dominance over your opponent. Due to such natural and historically constant factors such as weight and gravity, what is considered to be a “dominant” position has also remained strikingly unchanged throughout history.<sup>163</sup> Whether embraced in a standing clinch or trying to execute a throw or trip, a grappler has always used their weight, strength, skill and leverage to dominate their opponent.

Although the ways in which one can subdue their opponent in any form of wrestling match are variable, there are only so many *practical* or efficient ways to do so, particularly if one’s opponent is skilled and/or defending against their one’s attempts to dominate them. Because our modern intent in wrestling is the same as the intent of the ancient Egyptians, Greeks of antiquity, and medieval Icelanders (that is, to control, throw, and/or takedown one’s opponent), the best ways in which to realize this intent have also remained virtually unchanged.<sup>164</sup> Remaining physical factors, such as terrain, clothing, or weaponry can either be replicated today, or as is the beauty of wrestling’s primordial simplicity, are often irrelevant (i.e., to recreate a wrestling maneuver one need not worry about armors, weapons, or even clothing for the most part). A larger or stronger body, then as always, could perform feats that a weaker or smaller body perhaps could not (and vice versa), although this “difference” is in fact just another similarity between the past and present substrates. This will be addressed in more detail later. Other common objections towards this kind of identification/attempt at recreation often center on issues of clothing, terrain, movement principles, social mores, and codes and conventions of thought and behaviour. These all have a negligible impact on my current endeavour due to either their lack of a noticeable practical effect or their similarity to our current, knowable circumstances.

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<sup>163</sup> There are, however, martial arts such as jiu jitsu wherein a competitor in what would generally otherwise be considered a “weak” position frequently has the skill or potential to “dominate” their opponent. Further discussion on this point would perhaps be fruitful or called for if there were any examples in the sagas of such positional ground fighting. There are not.

<sup>164</sup> Relative to the adhered to rulesets.

Spatz goes on to say that “Technique consists of discoveries about specific material possibilities that can be repeated with some degree of reliability, so that what works in one context may also work in another” (42). In the case of my current research, these “specific material possibilities” are particular grappling techniques and maneuvers, and they, too, can be repeated with some degree of reliability. Indeed, the contexts under which most of the sagas’ techniques were recorded to have been performed can almost exactly be replicated today (with the obvious exception of trolls and giants). The very essence of what a practical (grappling) technique is necessitates that it be an efficient, repeatable way of accomplishing the intended task.

As I have highlighted, with our similar bodies and our similar environments we can reliably replicate certain specific grappling movements and maneuvers recorded in historical texts due to our virtually identical material and circumstantial substrates. In this thesis we have been and will be further interpreting from a written medium, however, so without visual aid and extremely detailed step-by-step description, how can we be sure which *particular* maneuvers are being described? The different passages and examples of wrestling throughout the sagas vary wildly in their level of detail, so how can we be sure that “this” particular move is what is being described as opposed to “that” similar maneuver? We are rarely fortunate enough to have the author of a saga plainly state a wrestling technique by name, or to have the author regale us with the precise details of a movement or throw. Were this the case, one could simply read or translate the description of the maneuver in the saga and compare it to a modern written description of the maneuver. Far more often, however, we find explanations of where the hero’s hands are in relation to his opponent’s body, and how his opponent is thrown, or how he/she lands. It is here that *expertise* in the realm of grappling shows its full value. As Bryan Hogeveen and Jennifer Hardes argue, even if one does study a description of a martial art technique in earnest, “much is forfeited in swapping an experienced other who we can touch and who can touch us for those who are distant in space and time. Two-dimensional images furnish a general orientation, but edification comes most acutely when anchored in an accomplished other whose spacing is much more intimate” (82). This is precisely where embodied knowledge and expertise in grappling become essential in deciphering the written descriptions of wrestling techniques, and further highlights the importance of

interacting with another body, particularly with regard to grappling, in order to acquire this bodily knowledge expertise.

Expertise in any art form or technique brings with it a certain intrinsic and inherent understanding of the subject. Once a particular movement, maneuver, or sequence of movements is practiced repeatedly (often thousands of times), it becomes “locked” into muscle memory. Once this is done, similar to riding a bicycle, it is very difficult to forget, and almost impossible to “unlearn”. The experienced grappler (as with any practiced martial artist) has often gone through this process with hundreds if not thousands of different techniques, partners, and movements, thereby creating a sort of semi-permanent mental “technique and positioning repository”, or habitus, that they can draw from at will, and with little to no conscious effort. Any martial artist, artist, athlete, or veteran hobbyist knows and has experienced this often tacitly understood and overlooked state of mind/body memorization.<sup>165</sup> The well-trained artist or Olympic fencer or judoka isn’t consciously aware of the *exact* movements of his/her brush, parries, or feints, yet he/she can immediately and automatically *feel it* when he/she has performed a movement correctly or incorrectly. In an identical fashion, a rigorously trained grappler *just knows* how to perform a move properly, even if he or she cannot verbally explain *how*; this is particularly true of situational movements, such as how one reacts and adapts to responses from a resisting opponent. Once again, this does not come from some innate knowledge, but rather from hours upon hours of physical practice, repetition, familiarity, and the acquiring of a highly specific and skilled habitus. As Connerton astutely puts it: “anyone unfamiliar with the conventions by which fictions are read or people clothed, would, for example, be quite puzzled if confronted with a lyric poem or a person dressed in the style of an *incroyable*<sup>166</sup>” (12). This holds doubly true for grappling and wrestling: an uninitiated grappler could understandably be confused by any sort of visual

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<sup>165</sup> For a detailed scientific explanation of expertise and its various forms, see: Collins 253–273. For a detailed ethnographic explanation of expertise, see the previously referenced: O’Connor, Erin 183–204.

<sup>166</sup> An *incroyable* is a flamboyantly dressed late 18<sup>th</sup> century French dandy.

demonstration or explanation as to how an *uchi mata*<sup>167</sup> or triangle-choke<sup>168</sup> are performed. Similarly, without a proper understanding (both academically and practically) of wrestling, an untrained observer may see “nothing” when in fact the competitors are fighting for the above-mentioned wrist control, neck/collar control, posture, or waiting for or trying to lure-out an opening in their opponent’s defences.<sup>169</sup>

Hogeveen and Hardes contend that a student can watch an experienced grappler “perform an arm-lock and scroll through it in their minds hundreds of times, but their body will not truly grasp the position unless studied relationally – preferably alongside a more experienced body” (80). Here they emphasize that in order to truly understand and be competent in a grappling technique it is not enough to “know” what a technique is or looks like, but to instead have the *bodily knowledge* of how to perform the technique with a real, resisting body. They go on to argue that “the poverty of learning from two dimensional images becomes evident when new students who have been nourished on a steady diet of YouTube clips and UFC events enter the academy. All quickly realize that a significant distance separates watching techniques and performing them with precision on a resisting opponent” (80). Indeed, many grappling and wrestling moves often seem “magical” or “impossible” when first witnessed by the inexperienced. Only through a thorough analysis and understanding of the maneuvers, in conjunction with thorough and repetitive physical training and practice, do these maneuvers’ “magical” properties wear-off and are they able to be accurately and confidently identified. I argue that bodily this familiarity with and understanding of such techniques allows the practitioner not only to better understand the technique on an embodied level, but could also aid in their ability to better contextually and conceptually identify and understand depictions of the technique, be they textual, verbal, or visual depictions.

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<sup>167</sup> Japanese judo throw/trip. Also known as an inner-thigh reaping throw.

<sup>168</sup> A jiu jitsu technique where one uses one’s own legs and one of their opponent’s arms to cut off the carotid arteries in their opponent’s neck, choking them. This move in particular can be puzzling to an onlooker as it is not at first evident why or how the choke is effective, or that there is even a choke occurring.

<sup>169</sup> MacClancy describes such a situation thusly: As in many other forms of wrestling [...] an attacking move involves a moment of exposure which an opponent can quickly turn to his advantage. For the novice observer, then, wrestling consists of a long period of waiting in which both wrestlers hold each other by the shoulders, arms outstretched and slightly bent from the waist, followed by a sudden explosion (25).

This is the precise situation we often find ourselves in when dealing with translations and descriptions of grappling-related passages and sequences within the sagas. Although the original grappling technique may be sufficiently and/or accurately described in an Old Norse context, much of a technique's nuance and detail can be literally lost in translation. Translators may read the descriptions of very real techniques and movements, yet, due to their lack of exposure to and understanding of wrestling and grappling, can mistakenly translate these passages and unknowingly render a practical technique as "fictional" or unrealistic.<sup>170</sup> This, in conjunction with several of the other "fantastic" aspects frequently found in sagas grappling passages (such as the undead, giants, magic, and indeed exaggerated wrestling maneuvers for entertainment's sake) perpetuates the relegation of the many real, functional wrestling maneuvers found within the sagas to the realm of fantasy as well. To most scholars these grappling passages are glossed over (and often poorly translated, as I have discussed and will address in more detail in the following chapter) and hastily categorized as "purely entertainment" or implausible. Indeed, this may well be a contributing factor to the grappling sequences not having attracted more previous academic attention or mention.

With expertise in grappling comes not only the ability to understand the specific terminology and context of *what* the saga authors are referring to regarding martial techniques, but also the invaluable ability to know what they *must* be referring to. This point is essential. It is not enough to be able to interpret only literally what the saga authors reveal about a particular technique: it is also necessary to be able to interpret their words in context and extract from them information that was not written on the page. As I argue, when dealing with written descriptions of real wrestling techniques, performed by or between two human(oid) bodies, one can draw from one's own embodied experience with grappling to "fill in the blanks" regarding unwritten contextual clues, such as which direction a body must be facing given a particular description, or what posture it must have, or how and where a certain grip must be applied in order for a movement to result

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<sup>170</sup> See the *Sörla saga Sterka* example regarding the term "fót" below (section 4.1.4.).

in the description given by the author. Analyses and conclusions of this kind can be greatly aided by sufficient expertise (represented in this case by and acquired habitus and embodied knowledge in grappling) in the topic. Conversely, such tacit contextual clues can be missed or misinterpreted by one lacking the necessary embodied knowledge of grappling.

This leads us back to the issue of how we can identify with confidence a maneuver being described by an author given only sparse details, or perhaps a maneuver's name with which we are unfamiliar. The first half of the solution to this issue lies in having the same (or similar) circumstantial underpinnings: as mentioned above, with our virtually identical physical and environmental substrates, we can confidently attempt to reproduce any physical movements or maneuvers that the heroes and authors of the sagas knew of and could perform. The second half of the solution then lies in using our acquired habitus and embodied expertise in the area of grappling to "fill in the gaps" of any lacking descriptions, where possible. Due to our similar substrates, the modern grappler can (and indeed has) practice(d) and learn(ed) the same and similar techniques as the ones that are described or referred to in the sagas. While trying to experimentally reconstruct or research these maneuvers and the possibilities of their identification, the combination of embodied expertise and wrestling's ubiquitous primeval pedigree serve as our reliable guide.

From the list of possible maneuvers being described we can ascertain the likelihood of certain possible or practical movements and techniques while eliminating the possibility of others in ways that a non-grappler simply wouldn't have the experienced habitus or embodied knowledge to even be aware of. In weighing the options of "which movements might the author be referring to in a particular passage", an expert grappler can eliminate and rule-out certain maneuvers (based on contextual clues such as the hero or his opponent's body positioning, what grip they have, their posture, etc.,) where a scholar otherwise ignorant of grappling perhaps could not. The (embodied) knowledge and expertise that an experienced wrestler has allows him/her to better understand, whether through trial-and-error or simply *de facto*, which specific moves could plausibly be performed given the details that the author has provided. The expert grappler, who has performed all of the embodied techniques in his/her repertoire

hundreds (if not thousands) of times knows that “Certain ways of doing things may simply be more evident, more obvious, and hence more common” (Spatz 64).

Because of the commonality in both circumstantial substrates and intent, the embodied technique in this scenario, as in others, “is objective in that it can only be developed out of the field of what is materially possible for bodies to do” (Spatz 61). Because our bodies, as well as those of the original enactors of these techniques, have finite possibilities in their movements (especially when taking into account the goal of “taking down” or “throwing” one’s *resisting* opponent, often within restrictive parameters dictated by particular rulesets and the laws of physics), so too is there a strictly finite and limited number of possible identifications for any specific description, no matter how vague, of a maneuver. With a lax description of a maneuver we may, of course, only be able to narrow down our possible identifications of the maneuver to a few or several possibilities, but frequently there are enough clues in the text to elicit, through elimination, a near-exact identification. These are the passages, and the techniques therein, that we will be concerned with in the final chapter (IV) of this thesis. Such identifications can only be done because/if the identifier has gone through the difficult and protracted process of trial-and-error with their own body, or immersed themselves in the sport and/or “culture” of the sport (i.e., having acquired the sufficient cognitive, conative, and/or affective components of *habitus*). A useful analogy in this instance is sexual intercourse: Regardless of culture, nationality, or upbringing (excluding of course the completely innocent/sexually uneducated), if one were to describe a particular sexual position or act in some detail, virtually anyone who has had sexual experiences (and indeed many who have none) would be able to identify it provided that they are familiar with the act, or acts similar to it. Even if one were completely unfamiliar with the forms and purposes of intercourse, the simple fact that all human bodies share certain similarities and analogues would allow one to imagine what is being described to some degree of accuracy. It is no coincidence, then, that grappling can be understood along similar lines.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Indeed intercourse and grappling share many of the same physical, visual, social, and societal properties. Many first-time viewer’s reaction to either wrestling or mixed martial arts contests is colored by their previous understanding and experience with sex: they find the grappling to be highly sexualized and, being

Spatz goes on to say that “The premise of realism is that materiality pushes back against technique, making some channels or pathways more accessible than others. However, technique itself is our only way of knowing which pathways are possible and how they can be reached” (180). In light of this, maneuvers that are found in the sagas and presumed to be “preposterous” or “impossible” may very well be real, practical maneuvers that only an experienced grappler would have the embodied knowledge and understanding to perform or identify; for only they have put their own bodies through the subtle, thorough, and ongoing trial-and-error process of acquiring the necessary habitus and embodied knowledge that learners of all techniques must go through. Taking this embodied knowledge and marrying it in an interdisciplinary union to one’s relevant academic/socio-cultural knowledge gives one the tools necessary to apply deep circumspection to otherwise alien (culturally, temporally, physically) depictions of martial techniques. Having now gone over the necessary circumstantial underpinnings of embodied knowledge and practice, in conjunction with having argued the primary texts’ historicity with regard to grappling, we are now prepared to address, analyse and interpret the grappling passages found within sagas without further or undiscussed epistemological restraints.

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ignorant of specific maneuvers and techniques, commonly relate the various positions and techniques to analogues found in different sexual positions and practices.

## **Chapter IV: Grappling Passages from Primary Texts and Technique Analysis**

### **4.1. Fornaldarsögur Grappling Passages**

Having broadly covered the epistemological requisites necessary to meaningfully discuss individual grappling sequences found within the sagas, I will turn to a variety of selected saga passages and apply the appropriate interdisciplinary knowledge needed to accurately decipher, argue, and identify particular grappling techniques from their written depictions. The passages used within this and the following “Íslendingasögur Grappling Passages” section (4.2.) are largely drawn from the corpus I assembled for my master’s thesis, *Grappling within the Sagas: The Techniques of the Heroes and the Knowledge of the Scribes Who Wrote about Them*. This corpus contains virtually all of the descriptions of grappling and grappling techniques found within the extant sagas that are detailed enough to be productively analysed (as opposed to various other passages and references to grappling that provide too few details to fruitfully identify or comment upon), so this corpus is necessarily the textual foundation for the present and following sections. The ways in which I have introduced and approached these passages, however, as well as how I analyse and contextualize them within the broader corpus, have been significantly rethought and expanded upon.

Additionally, particular attention has been paid to many of the translation issues that I did not have the linguistic knowledge to accurately or fruitfully analyse at the master’s level, and I have furthermore used different and standardized translations in several instances. I will contextualize and explain why I have chosen to look at each of the following passages, with a particular focus on: reinforcing my earlier arguments that the grappling techniques depicted in the sagas were often real, practical maneuvers; that embodied knowledge of wrestling allows the modern researcher to accurately make such judgments and may provide unique insights; that the saga authors and their audiences had

a presumed level of (embodied) knowledge and societal understanding of wrestling; and that the saga society as a whole culturally embraced grappling. All of these interrelated facets have academic merit in their own rights, but are cumulatively meant to serve as a positive example of a case study exemplifying that/what/how a researcher with the requisite embodied knowledge can accurately and confidently identify specific martial techniques from written historical texts.

To instigate this process I will begin by analysing relatively simple techniques, both in terms of technique and narrative complexity, drawn from passages of the legendary sagas before moving onto the often more complex techniques and social settings described within the sagas of Icelanders. As discussed above in the “Genre” section (2.3.), the lines drawn between what constitutes which genre of saga are for the most part modern attempts at categorization. Nevertheless, I will be dividing the analysis of passages broadly between examples from the *fornaldarsögur*, or legendary sagas, and *Íslendingasögur*, or sagas of Icelanders, because of some general differences in their depictions of grappling; the most prominent of which being the former’s proclivity towards portraying exaggerated or fantastic techniques. Furthermore, the sagas of Icelanders often lend more narrative importance to their grappling passages, which allows us additional insight into how grappling as a whole was viewed by their society at large. Ordering the examples in such a way, from the generally simple to more complex; from more fantastic circumstances and techniques to the more realistic; from the legendary sagas to the sagas of Icelanders; will allow for a more fluid and layered understanding and implementation of the explanations, theories, and analyses being utilized.

#### **4.1.1. Gríms Saga Loðinkinna**

I shall begin the examination of specific grappling passages with the fourteenth-century legendary saga *Gríms Saga loðinkinna* (The Saga of Grim Shaggy-cheek). This example serves as a good springboard into the analysis of such passages because it details a relatively simple and common grappling technique and utilizes very specific terminology in doing so. This excerpt also helps elucidate the grappling expertise and

familiarity that I posit the original scribe and his/her contemporary audience would have been privy to. This short saga takes place in eighth century Norway and is part of a “trilogy” of sagas entitled *Hrafnistumannasögur*, which centers around Grim’s father, Kettil Hængr. In *Gríms Saga loðinkinna* Grim’s bride-to-be mysteriously vanishes, and Grim sets out to find her. In his search for his betrothed Grim encounters two troublesome troll women, whom he dispatches easily with his axe and a magical arrow. Grim then scales a cliff and enters a large cave inhabited by the parents of the slain trolls. Here there is an interesting passage dealing with a grappling contest between the protagonist Grim and the elder troll-woman. The passage reads as follows:

Þá spratt Hyrja kerling upp og rann á hann, og tóku þau að glíma, og var þeirra atgangur bæði harðr og langr, því að hún var it mesta tröll, en Grímr var rammr at afli. En þó lauk svo, at hann brá henni á loftmjöðm, svo at hún féll. [Then the woman Fiery [troll woman’s name] jumped up and ran at him, and they wrestled hard and long, for she was a big troll, and Grim a powerful man. But the upshot was, he caught her out and threw her over his hip so she fell.] (Guðni and Bjarni, “Gríms saga Loðinnkinna” 273; Tunstall ch. 1)

I would first like to point out, as is not uncommon in the sagas, that the hero, Grim, is outsized and overpowered by his large trollish<sup>172</sup> opponent. We also read that “they fought/wrestled hard and long” (“og var þeirra atgangur bæði harður og langur”). Although the description is vague, it is likely not a literary “passing-over” of a back-and-forth wrestling match. Rather, those familiar with grappling or *glíma* would naturally interpret this sequence as a struggle for position, wrist-control, and a firm grip.<sup>173</sup> We can also see from the above passage that the protagonist does not utilize his

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<sup>172</sup> Trolls in saga literature Norse mythology tended to be large, ugly, and monstrous. Although their size is not always described, it can safely be assumed that they were superhuman in both size and strength. The Old Norse word for troll, “tröll”, is often used interchangeably with the term for giant, “*jötunn*”. Indeed, in the preceding passage of this saga one of the trolls Grim slays is referred to first as a troll, and then later as a giant.

<sup>173</sup> Virtually all grappling encounters begin with a struggle between the two participants for a dominant position or grip, with the exception of when one combatant shoots-in from a distance, thereby bypassing any necessity for proper grips. Especially in sanctioned *glíma* bouts, both participants are forbidden to even begin grappling or trying to throw each other until both get a particular, often agreed-upon, grip on one

strength alone to defeat his adversary, but rather uses a particular technique, a hip throw<sup>174</sup> to fell his opponent. To someone unfamiliar with the physics behind grappling, and more specifically throws, this passage serves as little more than a vague description of the hero struggling against and eventually overcoming his troll opponent. To a learned grappler, however, this brief passage is full of important details that pertain to how, and in what manner, the hero specifically outwrestles his trollish enemy.

First, as touched upon above, despite the hero being described as “rammur að afli” (being of “enormous of power”), his opponent is a “mesta tröll”: a very large, or “the greatest troll”. We can take this to mean that, although Grim is powerful, his opponent is even more so, as well as larger. I would also note here that the original text uses the specific term “*glíma*” to describe their engagement. As mentioned above, much like our modern colloquial use of the term “wrestling”, in Old Norse texts the term “*glíma*” was used as a broad “blanket term” to refer to both grappling/wrestling in a broad sense as well as the more defined sport *glíma*. Still, the author chose to use the term *glíma* to describe the grappling taking place instead of any of the various and common forms of the words “*fang*” (to grasp or hold) or “*bragð*” (a quick or sudden movement). This, in conjunction with the size difference between the adversaries and the fact that Grim eventually “throws”<sup>175</sup> his opponent with a “*loftmjöðm*”, would suggest that Grim did not overpower his foe, but instead used a technique that required skill rather than strength. In other words, he raised the troll–woman in the air with his hips. At first this description may seem somewhat nonsensical, or perhaps be attributed to bizarre translation or archaic terminology, but it is in fact a quite accurate description of a popular throwing technique that utilizes one’s lower center of gravity against one’s opponent.<sup>176</sup>

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another and/or begin circling in a waltz–like movement in order to allow for openings in their defense and to keep the pace of the match upbeat.

<sup>174</sup> The term *loftmjöðm* is attested almost nowhere else and can be literally translated as “lift/air–hip”.

<sup>175</sup> “*Brá*”, as used in the text, is a past tense form of *bregða*, which most commonly means “to cause to move quickly”, but can also be used in conjunction with *loft* to mean “to lift one aloft”. *Bregða*, in regard to describing *glíma* interactions, often means “to throw”.

<sup>176</sup> Maintaining a lower center of gravity than your opponent is a central foundation of almost all forms of grappling around the world. The hips are often one’s own center of gravity and, if one can manage to get their own hips beneath those of their standing opponent (often while their opponent is bent over) and use their own hips as a fulcrum to gain leverage and lift, throw, or otherwise control a much larger, heavier

Without the relevant embodied knowledge, coming to such a conclusion, and being confident in one's assessment, could prove difficult. Furthermore, familiarity with both Old Norse and the Icelanders cultural affinity towards grappling is also helpful: The term "*loftmjöðm*", translated above as simply "hip", is attested almost nowhere else and can be literally translated as "lift/air-hip". I would argue that this is the author's use of a specific technique name, and that this furthers my argument that the author used such terms under the presumption that his/her intended contemporary audience would understand its meaning. Regardless, through no coincidence the understanding of this technique as a hip throw that utilized one's lower center of gravity and skill (as opposed to strength) fits our scenario nicely, for in this instance our hero has already been described to us as being smaller in stature than his opponent, engaging in *glíma*/wrestling (as opposed to a brawl or melee), and using his hips to lift, throw, or move his opponent "so that she fell". Given this information I can confidently identify the maneuver being described as a hip throw variant, or more specifically as something very similar to the right hip-swing still practiced in *glíma* and various other grappling styles today.<sup>177</sup>

#### 4.1.1.1. Hip Throw

The standard hip throw (also frequently referred to as a hip toss or cross-buttock) is accomplished by facing one's opponent, holding them either around their chest, with both of one's arms under their arms/armpits (a position commonly referred to as "double underhooks"), or with one arm under one of their armpits, while one's other arm is over their shoulder (having an underhook and an overhook).<sup>178</sup> During either double underhooks or an underhook/overhook position, one's hands can be clasped in order to

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opponent. This also makes contextual sense as the troll woman is described as being larger, and therefore taller, than Grim, allowing for him to easily get his center of gravity beneath hers.

<sup>177</sup> This maneuver is also very similar to judo's *uchi mata*, except without the wearing of a gi, the traditional combat attire of both judo and jiu-jitsu, nor the grips that such attire allow for.

<sup>178</sup> Due to its popularity and versatility, there are actually several less common grips and variations of the set up for a hip-throw. The above-stated options, however, are by far the most commonly practiced due to their practical efficiency, and therefore the most likely to have been known to the scribe and intended audience.

prevent one's opponent from escaping or having enough freedom of movement to acquire their own leverage. A hip throw can also be done while holding one of your opponent's wrists, and then having an under or overhook with one's other arm. Once any of these grips are secured,<sup>179</sup> you should turn your body while putting your right hip to your opponent's right thigh (or your left hip to your opponent's left thigh), and proceed to bend your body at a 90-degree angle forward and to the left. Simultaneously, one must bend one's knees according to the proportion of one's waist height to that of their opponents, i.e., one must get one's hips "beneath" those of one's opponent while making adjustments depending on one's height and posture. This should be done quickly in a rapid/near-simultaneous succession of movements. If done properly, this will cause one's opponent to turn about in the air, pivoting over one's hip, and land on their back.<sup>180</sup> As one can imagine, there are many variations to this move, but given the details in *Gríms Saga loðinkinna* this is almost certainly the way in which the maneuver was done, or at least how it can be reasonably assumed to have been envisioned by the reader.

The use of vocabulary, phrasing, and terminology such as "*glíma*", "*og var þeirra atgangur bæði harður og langur*" and "*að hann brá henni á loftmjöðm*" imply that the scribe not only knew what he/she was talking about in regard to both specific grappling techniques and the back-and-forth format of grappling encounters, but that he/she assumed that his/her intended audience would also be familiar with the terminology. Specifically, the use of an arcane and rarely attested term such as *loftmjöðm* further lends support to the argument that the saga author and audience had at least a fundamental familiarity with grappling and its technique names, otherwise the use of such terminology would only confuse or be lost on the audience.<sup>181</sup>

As there is no further explanation of the maneuvers given in the text which is otherwise replete with graphic detail, we can take this to mean that the scribe,

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<sup>179</sup> There still remain additional, less common ways to initiate a hip throw.

<sup>180</sup> For a visual demonstration of a hip-throw see: <https://youtu.be/kzAXQ8xn1Z4>.

<sup>181</sup> It is of course probable from a statistical standpoint that many in the audience would either explicitly understand the specific technique being referred to or be otherwise vaguely familiar with it while still other audience members would be lost as to what the author was referring to, all hinging upon the various individuals' familiarity with and understanding of grappling. Nonetheless, from such terminological evidence (in conjunction with the evidence pointing towards grappling having been a popular and social activity) we can presume that at least the author and/or some of the audience would have explicitly understood this term and reference.

knowledgeable about at least the basics of grappling him/herself, assumed his/her audience to be equally so. Furthermore, regarding the hip throw, or right hip–swing, former Icelandic national *glíma* champion Jóhannes Jósefsson states that when it is “done in this way success is sure, and the fall is softer, in that the overcomer has perfect power over the outcome” (17). This implies that one can be “gentlemanly” with this throw, as done in sport, or put strength behind it and use it to forcibly slam one’s opponent, as is often depicted in the *fornaldarsögur* and *Íslendingasögur*. I would also add that the hip throw (or techniques similar to it) is found in so many different varieties of grappling that to label it as a technique unique to *glíma* would be misleading. Rather, it is a universally common technique in grappling that has been adopted *into* various wrestling styles around the world, just as many of the other techniques found within the sagas were.<sup>182</sup>

#### 4.1.2. Göngu–Hrólf’s Saga

*Göngu–Hrólf’s Saga* is a legendary saga whose primary intent was to entertain, with the anonymous author even stating as much in the saga’s introduction.<sup>183</sup> Despite this overt declaration to entertain, the wrestling techniques contained within are far from fantastical. Although there are several references to *glíma* and grappling in this particular saga, the one which is most realistic, detailed and pertinent to analyse takes place after a fight breaks out between the protagonist Hrolf and a visiting stranger, Hrafn, who later turns out to be the son of an exiled king. After engaging in a ballgame that quickly turns violent, Hrolf and Hrafn turn to wrestling:<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> For a 6th century Greek vase depiction of a hip throw see: Gardiner, “Wrestling. II.” 288. Various further vase and drawn Classical and Late Antiquity Greek depictions of the hip throw/cross buttock can be found in: Gardiner, *Athletics of the Ancient World* 181–197.

<sup>183</sup> “Of the many stories written for people’s entertainment, a number come down to us from ancient manuscripts or from learned men” (Hermann and Edwards 27).

<sup>184</sup> For more on such ballgames, which like grappling feature frequently throughout the sagas, see: Thurber 167–188.

Þeir glímdu ok eigi lengi, áðr Hrólfur vaf Hrafn upp á bringu sér ok færði niðr, svá at hann lá lengi í óviti, en af gekk skinnit af herðarblöðunum. [They hadn't been wrestling long before Hrolf lifted Hrafn against his chest, then threw him down flat, scraping the skin off his shoulders and knocking him unconscious.]

(“Göngu–Hrólfis Saga”; Hermann and Edwards 49)

Here we have described for us another maneuver that to the untrained eye may seem like a generic “slam” of little technical merit. Once again, however, the author uses a precise term “*glímdu*” (“wrestling”, as opposed to a vague term for fighting or quarrelling), and gives the grappling–educated audience enough details of the maneuver being performed to accurately identify it. In this instance, the technique depicted would most convincingly be identified as the Inverted Split Trick (in the parlance of modern *glíma*), or belly-to-belly slam/suplex<sup>185</sup>. At this point the author gives us a tacit/contextual hint as to the set-up of this maneuver: one of the only ways (and by far the most common) in which one could lift one’s opponent against his/her chest would be to first acquire the aforementioned over–under position (having one overhook and one underhook on one’s opponent) or double underhooks (performing this or similar maneuvers with two overhooks is also possible, although more difficult to achieve and therefore less common) on one’s opponent. One completely inexperienced with grappling may not come to such a conclusion. One with a solely academic understanding of grappling may come to such a conclusion in theory, but not necessarily know that this is true in practice. An academic with embodied grappling experience, however, would know what possibilities are at play from such a vague description both in theory and in practice. Similarly, one could conceive that by “heaving” one’s opponent up to their chest that the instigator is using primarily their arms, whereas a practitioner would know that the arms, core, and legs are necessary to do so, and which particular grips would be necessary. Both the over–under grip and double overhooks can only be achieved while one’s chest is in very close proximity to one’s opponent’s; if the initiator of the maneuver is not close enough to

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<sup>185</sup> This maneuver, and several similarly described ones, appear in several sagas with numerous variations. For similar accounts of belly-to-belly suplexes, see the grappling sequences described in *Svarfdæla saga*, *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfjfls*, and *Finnboga saga ramma*.

reach around and behind their opponent's back and clasp their hands together, then the defender can easily step away, aside, or prevent the aggressor from engulfing them by controlling their wrists.

We can also infer from the passage that, because the two combatants are actively wrestling (which means fighting for hand/grip position and dominance as opposed to standing apart from one another while still in the premeditative stage), that they are within the appropriate proximity of one another for this maneuver to be successfully implemented. Although no grip is specifically stated in the passage, the over-under position is one of the most common wrestling grips (across virtually all styles) and is considered an "even" position in that neither combatant is considered to have the advantage;<sup>186</sup> this would therefore be an expected position for two grapplers to find themselves in after having "wrestled" for a while.

#### 4.1.2.1. Belly-to-Belly Suplex

Once the initiator has acquired the over-under position or clasped both of their hands underneath their opponent's arms (double underhooks) and/or around their mid to lower back, they would then make sure that their center of gravity, i.e., their hips, was lower than their opponent's. This is done by bending one's knees, lowering one's hips, and making sure that one's shoulder(s) and chest are lower than/pressing into their opponent's chest (if being performed by means of an over-under position, it is important to trap the arm of the opponent within your grasp; this can prevent them from bracing their fall with that arm). The hand grips behind the opponent's back could then be used to pull and bring in the opponent's hips toward one's own hips. This combination of movements results in lowering one's own center of gravity while at the same time ensuring that one's opponent's center of gravity remains above one's own. The instigator could then straighten-out their own posture by bringing their hips forward while leaning

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<sup>186</sup> As opposed to the double underhooks, which are considered an advantage to have on your opponent, and the double overhooks, which are often considered to be disadvantageous (one's opponent can often break free from the clasp or acquire double underhooks on their aggressor).

backwards, effectively bringing their opponent upwards and towards themselves, and lifting them off the ground.

Once the opponent is suspended in such a manner, they are virtually at the mercy of the initiator, who may wish to either sweep their opponents' legs out from under them using one of their own (the instigator's) legs, while pulling the opponent sharply downwards towards the respective side that their legs were swept from,<sup>187</sup> or hurl them backwards over their own head in a maneuver called the overhead belly-to-belly suplex, which I will address later. Referring to the former of these options, if done harshly, the opponent would be slammed with significant force into the ground, with one or both of their shoulders hitting the ground first (especially if the slam is performed with the above-mentioned double-overhook technique, which would allow for both shoulders to hit the ground one after another or simultaneously) thus scraping with a great amount of friction along the ground as the slam is followed through.<sup>188</sup> It is still quite possible with a double underhook grasp to bring one's opponent down in such a fashion, although as a result of the underhooks the opponent being thrown would have a greater chance of bracing their fall with either or both of their free arms. Similarly, if performed from an over-under position, the belly-to-belly suplex *could* result in one's opponent landing on their shoulders, but it would be far more likely that they would land only on one shoulder: that belonging to their restrained arm. This maneuver could easily lead to an unconscious-like state in one of two ways: either the opponent's head would hit and bounce off the ground shortly after the initial impact ("whipping" back into the ground once the shoulders have connected with the floor), or the impact of the slam could be so

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<sup>187</sup> When performed with double overhooks, one can sweep/throw their opponent to the side of their choosing. When performed by means of the over-under position, one would sweep the legs of their opponent and throw them towards the side in which the initiator has an overhook: the overhook prevents the opponent from "bracing" their fall due to their arm being trapped. If a belly-to-belly suplex/sweep is performed at high intensity, however, even bracing oneself (the recipient of the manoeuvre) with one's own free arm could result in breaking one's own wrist or arm.

<sup>188</sup> Jóhannes Jósefsson describes this maneuver as the Inverted Split Trick, with a slight variation: Once one's opponent has been lifted up to one's own chest, one uses one's right knee to help lift and push their opponent's inner thigh to the side, which aids in tripping/throwing the opponent to one's left (20).

great as to knock the wind out of the opponent, who would become stunned and virtually paralyzed until he/she could regain his/her breath.<sup>189</sup>

It is also critical to note that the above English translation of the passage does not accurately reflect the original Old Norse passage's meaning. As opposed to the original scribe and intended contemporary audiences, whom I have argued would have had a more culturally inherent understanding of the art of grappling, many of the finer subtleties of the art of grappling can be lost on the modern translator who lacks sufficient embodied knowledge and/or familiarity with any kind of wrestling. The translation of "færði niðr" as "threw him down flat" implies to the reader that the opponent, Hrafn, landed flatly on his back, which is virtually impossible from a technical standpoint given the other details of how the maneuver was initiated and ended (with the details provided, to land "flat" on one's back while simultaneously "scraping" the skin off one's shoulders in many ways defies physical logic). "*Færði niðr*", however, simply and literally translates to "brought down", and therefore leaves the maneuver used more open for accurate interpretation. Although details like this may seem trivial to a linguistically orientated translator, the original contemporary audience, and indeed practitioners and followers of wrestling and grappling in general, would be confused by such translations. Indeed, such loose or faulty translations also take away from the perceived quality of the narrative as a whole. With one of my primary aims being to depict and help accurately visualize the many gripping grappling scenes within the sagas to readers unfamiliar with grappling techniques, the importance of having clear and accurate translations is paramount.

With the appropriate embodied knowledge and passage analysis, in conjunction with the understanding that Hrolf's opponents was "brought down" as opposed to "thrown down flat", the maneuver depicted in the above passage can be confidently identified as belonging to the belly-to-belly suplex family, and was initiated from either the over-under position or with double over or underhooks. The resulting scraped shoulders of Hrafn, however, would further indicate that he was tripped/brought down

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<sup>189</sup> For a visual demonstration of a belly-to-belly suplex see: <https://youtu.be/u2vvnTcaVPQ>. For a Classical Greek amphora depiction of the technique see: Gardiner, "Wrestling. II." 270.

harshly towards a side in which he did not have a free arm with which to brace his fall, leaving us with the likelihood of the maneuver being initiated from a double overhook position or the over–under position.

### 4.1.3. Hálfðanar Saga Eysteinsonar

Like many of the *fornaldarsaga*, *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinsonar* (*The Saga of Halfdan Eysteinnsson*) is dated to the early–to–mid fourteenth century. This saga is filled with almost comedic amounts of gore and violence, and the hero finds himself grappling with several grotesque characters and creatures. In sharp contrast to the many fantastical elements (and wrestling techniques) found within this saga are several wrestling passages that once again utilize accurate descriptions of techniques and specific terminology that evidence both a writer and audience well–versed in the nuance and vocabulary of wrestling. There are two grappling altercations in the saga, however, that are particularly fruitful to analyse. The first grappling passage from this saga that bears inspection takes place shortly after the protagonist, Halfdan, encounters a porcine and giant highwayman,<sup>190</sup> Sel, who is returning home to his hut. After craftily dealing with Sel’s monstrous yet intelligent hound, Halfdan enters a foray with Sel. Shortly thereafter the passage reads:

Greip hann þá til Hálfðanar ok kreisti svá fast at síðum hans, at blóð fell út um eyru hans ok nasir. Hálfðan lék þá Sel hælkrók, ok fell hann á bak apr. [He [Sel] grabbed at Halfdan and squeezed his side so hard, that blood came out of his eyes and nostrils. Halfdan then hit Sel with a knee–crook, and he fell backwards.] (Guðni and Bjarni, “Hálfðanar saga Eysteinsonar” 309; Hardman ch.18)

This exchange begins with the rather unrealistic depiction of our hero Hálfðan getting squeezed so hard that blood begins to flow from his eyes and nose. Despite the seemingly implausible description of this clutch, were someone strong enough to squeeze another

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<sup>190</sup> Old Icelandic: “*spellavirki*”, which can also mean a mischief–maker.

person with the appropriate amount of pressure, then this death-clutch could hypothetically be performed.

In the instance of this example the aggressor is a giant (*jötunn*), who would naturally be expected to possess the hypothetical strength necessary to perform such an otherwise fantastical maneuver. Allowing sufficient strength, he could simply wrap his arms around the center of the victim's torso, such that his own elbows are on either side of the victim, and clench his hands in what is known as the gable-grip.<sup>191</sup> Next the initiator would need to squeeze with a great amount of force while pulling his hands towards himself and trying to bring his elbows together while simultaneously using his own chest to press against that of the victim. This could in turn break the recipient's floating ribs, potentially causing death. Or, more dramatically, this could cause the victim to lose blood through their nose and ears (particularly if they had previously received a wound to/in their nose or around their eyes). The sagas frequently use the verb "*hrygg-spenna*", which means "to clasp the arms round another's back" (Zoëga 212), when describing a back-and-forth battle for dominance between two wrestlers. This term is also used to describe a specific "back hold" variant of *glíma* or can simply reflect the position in which two grapplers begin their grappling match. This grip is the same as the primary grip traditionally used in various forms of folk wrestling, such as Scottish Backhold wrestling,<sup>192</sup> and would be the basis from which a maneuver such as the "bear-hug" would be performed.<sup>193</sup> This clutch is commonly used in conjunction with putting one's chin into their opponent's chest or ribcage, which in turn causes them either to submit in excruciating pain, or more likely, to fall backwards or give up their grip or position.

From a technical standpoint, however, the latter half of this confrontation, where "*Hálfðan lék þá Sel hælkrók, ok fell hann á bak aptr/* Halfðan then hit Sel with a knee-crook, and he fell backwards", is far more pertinent to the current discourse. Here, as in the previous example from *Göngu-Hrólf's Saga*, the English translation of the passage

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<sup>191</sup> For a visual depiction of the Gable grip see: <https://youtu.be/I8-QicBZi6Y>.

<sup>192</sup> "*Hrygg-spenna*" is analogous to the over-under position referred to previously.

<sup>193</sup> A "bear-hug" technique could be performed from either the over-under grip, with two underhooks on one's opponent, or with two overhooks. Regardless of the grip variant used, it is highly improbable and unrealistic that the manoeuvre would result in bleeding orifices.

can prove deeply problematic. As seen above, this portion can be interpreted in English as “Halfdan then hit Sel with a knee–crook, and he fell backwards”, where “*læk*” is taken to mean “hit” or “performed upon”. “*Læk*” in Old Icelandic is a past tense form of “*leika*”, to play, or in this instance to perform, trick, or bewitch. “*Leika*” is also a term used both historically and in modern parlance to refer to a wide variety of wrestling trips, throws, and “moves” in general.<sup>194</sup> Although “hit” is a loose translation and does not fully reflect the grappling–specific imagery that its Old Icelandic correlate *læk* does, the more problematic issue with the translation is that nowhere is there any attestation to what a “knee–crook” is, and unfortunately the passage does not give the reader enough details about the grappling sequence to properly infer what sort of maneuver is being performed, other than the fact that he, presumably Sel, falls backwards from it. “Knee–crook”,<sup>195</sup> however, is not at all an accurate translation of “*hælkrok*”, which is a compound word consisting of the Old Norse words for “heel” and “hook”. As anyone familiar with *glíma* and its techniques would know, a “heel–hook” is a popular and attested traditional maneuver used in sport *glíma*<sup>196</sup>. One familiar with grappling may also surmise that the contextual position of the two characters, as revealed by the previous “bear–hug” technique being applied, is precisely one which would avail itself to the utilization of an inside leg–trip. This is yet another example highlighting the potential benefits of having an interdisciplinary knowledge of both Old Norse and embodied grappling knowledge.

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<sup>194</sup> *Leika* is a very versatile word and has meanings ranging from “to play” and “to perform” to “to bewitch” and “to paly a match”. For additional detail and meanings, see: Zoëga 266; Cleasby and Vigfusson, *An Icelandic–English Dictionary* 382.

<sup>195</sup> It is unusual that given the inclusion of the word “heel/ hæl” in the Old Icelandic compound–name for the technique that the translator, rather than using the given “heel” chose to rather use “knee” in his translation. I would credit this error to the possibility that the translator misunderstood “*krók*” to more closely mean its distant English derivative “crook”, as in the crook of an elbow or knee, as opposed to “hook”. Having made this (false) assumption, a heel has no crook in it, so perhaps the translator went with “knee” because it anatomically made more sense to them. There are too many variables involved in translation to confidently decipher the reason for this mistranslation.

<sup>196</sup> The maneuver is still referred to today in Icelandic as “*hælkrok*”, and Jóhannes Jósefsson even introduces the maneuver as one of the fundamental “tricks” traditionally used in *glíma* in his work *Icelandic Wrestling*, where he has translated the term into English as “heel hook”.

#### 4.1.3.1. Inside Leg-trip/“Heel-hook”

The “heel-hook” is similar to an inside leg–trip in modern grappling,<sup>197</sup> and is performed while facing one’s opponent (as Halfdan clearly would be if he were being clutched as described above) and by hooking one’s right leg around the inside or outside of one’s opponent’s left leg/heel (or vice versa), and then pulling one’s opponent’s hooked leg towards/behind oneself while pushing one’s opponent’s upper body away.<sup>198</sup> This technique’s success is very dependent on one’s being able to force one’s opponent off–balance. Therefore, keeping one’s opponent’s body close to oneself by clutching them around the waist/hips/back while performing the maneuver would also be expected: which is the precise position Halfdan finds himself in while being crushed by Sel’s powerful arms. This technique results in the opponent losing their balance, and falling away from the instigator, onto their back. This perfectly fits the Old Norse description of the confrontation. With these translation errors elucidated, I argue that Hálfðan did not “hit Sel with a knee–crook”, but rather he “performed a heel–hook” on *Sel*. This brief yet precise description would be quite clear to most contemporary readers or audience members, and through the use of the specific maneuver’s name, allows the author of the saga to explain a rather intricate altercation in easily understood terms. Moreover, the explicit use of a maneuver’s name, i.e., “*hælkrok*” further evidences that the scribe believed his/her intended audience to have an understanding of grappling to such a degree that they were expected to be able to identify and visualize grappling maneuvers done in sequences by use of their name/grappling terminology alone, with little other peripheral or contextual information.

The anonymous author of *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinsonar* further evidences, albeit indirectly, a wrestling–educated contemporary audience in another grappling passage within the same saga. Here Halfdan is healing from previous injuries while questing to find his father’s killer and avenge his death. Halfdan leaves the hut of an old couple who

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<sup>197</sup> The heel-hook, or “*hælkrok*” throw used in *glima* is not to be confused with the heel hook used in modern grappling, which is a foot-lock/submission that attacks the opponent’s knee ligaments.

<sup>198</sup> For a visual demonstration and explanation of an inside leg–trip see: <https://youtu.be/X2mWCw2keQw>. For a 430 B.C Classical Greek depiction of such a trip see: Gardiner, “Wrestling. II.” 264. For further ancient visualizations of this and similar trips see: Robins.

have healed him and is provided with a magical sword and a dog. After two days of travel Halfdan encounters a hut inhabited by the daughter<sup>199</sup> of an evil robber/highwayman, who swings her sword at Halfan's neck, only to have it shatter upon connecting with a magical necklace Halfdan was given. In response to this attack:

Hálfdan greip hana upp ok rak hana niðr fall mikít ok greip síðan í annan fótinn á henni ok reif hana sundr at endilöngu ok kastar henni síðan út fyrir dyrr. [Halfdan picked her up, and pushed her down violently, and then grabbed her other foot, and tore her apart from one end to the other, and then cast her out of the door.] (Guðni and Bjarni, "Hálfðanar saga Eysteínssonar" 307; Hardman ch.17)

In this description the audience must apply some critical thinking to the situation to make any sense of what maneuver is plausibly being described. We know that the (troll) woman is picked up, slammed down with great might, and then appears to suddenly be pulled apart by the feet. Once again, this dubious series of events may seem vague or to lack detail to the modern common observer: We are not implicitly told in which way the woman is picked up, how she is slammed down (or how she lands), or what position(s) she must have been in in order to throw while apparently having one of her feet held. With the application of embodied grappling acuity, however, a very possible and plausible technique presents itself.

#### 4.1.3.2. Single-leg Takedown

In this passage I would postulate that the only technique liable to explain this scenario is a single-leg takedown. Such a takedown is performed by "shooting-in"<sup>200</sup> and

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<sup>199</sup> It is unclear whether the woman is monstrous or not. She is the daughter of one of many bandits, several of whom, though not her father, are described as monstrous or as giants. It could be assumed from her strength in the following quoted passage that she is in fact a giantess/trollwoman of sorts, although this is not directly stated in the saga.

<sup>200</sup> To "shoot" (or "shoot in") is a wide-ranging term used in wrestling which means to lower one's level (i.e., bend one's knees and lower one's hips) and then "shoot" forward, penetrating one's opponent's defences and closing the distance between the two wrestlers. To initiate a "shot" one normally drives their leading leg forward in between or to the side of their opponent's legs, dropping down to the same lead leg's knee (briefly,

grasping either of one's opponent's legs, most often their lead leg behind the knee, with your opposite arm (i.e., grab his/her left leg with your right arm) or with both arms simultaneously.<sup>201</sup> Once this is done, one draws one's opponent's knee towards their own body in an upward motion, while straightening one's posture and bringing one's hips forward, so as to get one's center of gravity below one's hips. From here one can use one's own leg(s) and core strength, along with the aforementioned straightening-out motion, to either capture and retain one's opponent's leg or to lift one's opponent up into the air on one's shoulder. From the point of having one of one's opponent's legs captured, one has several choices regarding what one would like to do next with their opponent; from slamming them down in any number of manners to, if their opponent managed to remain on their grounded foot, jerking their captured leg sharply away from their grounded leg in a downward motion, while bending over at a 90-degree angle, forcing them to lose balance and fall to the ground. Either of these common variants would sufficiently fit this description thus far.

The term used for the throw/takedown in the passage is "*rak*", from the verb "*raka*"; to rake. I would here note that the motion used to bring one's opponent down once one has successfully captured one's opponent in a single-leg takedown, but *before* they execute the takedown, could indeed be described as a "raking" motion, as it involves sweeping one's opponent's captured leg downward and away from the opponent in order to pull them off balance and force them to the ground. This verb, "raked", not only suites the technique more accurately than the translation of *rak* as "pushed", but it would also uniquely and logically set-up the following information and positions that we are given

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when done at-speed), which results in lowering the attacker's entire body and center of gravity. From this lowered and forward-moving position, the shooter can then grip their opponent in a variety of ways (most often behind the knees or around the lower waist) and "explode" back up to their feet, hence lifting their opponent in the desired manner. Shooting is generally done in an attempt to initiate a throw or takedown, and there are several varieties and techniques of shooting dependent upon personal preference, an opponent's positioning and defences, and which throw/takedown is being attempted. There are numerous takedowns that are initiated at-range or relatively close to one's opponent that begin with a shoot/shooting in. This will be described in further detail when later discussing the grappling passages within *Hávarðar Saga Ísfirðings*.

<sup>201</sup> For a visual demonstration and explanation of shooting-in see: <https://youtu.be/khuXEnD8yQs>. For a Late Antiquity Greek vase depiction of an attempt at a single leg takedown see: Gardiner, "Wrestling. II." 276.

in the passage: the single-leg takedown would also allow the maneuver's initiator to maintain a firm hold on their opponent's leg once the opponent is on their back. This would leave Halfdan standing with one of the woman's legs still in his grasp, allowing him to then (albeit rather fantastically) grab his opponent's *other* foot and tear her apart "from one end to the other". Identifying the previous takedown technique as the common single-leg takedown would not only fit the author's description well, but would also perfectly position both of the characters involved for the execution of the following rending "technique": a maneuver that is not realistically feasible, due to the amount inhuman strength that it would require, but nonetheless wholly fits the author's description and would appease the scrutiny of any wrestling aficionados listening/reading.<sup>202</sup>

#### 4.1.4. Sörla saga Sterka

A *fornaldarsaga* that exemplifies the apparent diversity of grappling knowledge inherent in the contemporary Scandinavians' minds is *Sörla saga Sterka* (The Saga of Sorli the Strong). This saga is filled with melees and grappling, but there are particular passages that, in their detailing almost the exact same maneuver, help elucidate to the modern scholar how frequent, popular, or common the maneuver was. The technique I wish to extrapolate appears twice within the saga, and can be somewhat enigmatic at first without proper familiarity with Old Norse terminology and embodied knowledge. The first passage in question takes place during the boarding of King Halfdan's famous *dreki/drekann*, or "Dragon ship".<sup>203</sup> One of the protagonist's men, Bolverk, engages in armed battle with a fifteen-year-old warrior named Thorir. After several back-and-forth attacks against one another, the passage reads as follows:

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<sup>202</sup> For the realistic set-up to this implausible technique see: [https://youtu.be/-zL8EVd6R\\_I](https://youtu.be/-zL8EVd6R_I).

<sup>203</sup> This ship is referenced in multiple other *fornaldarsögur* including *Hálfðanar saga Brönufostra*, *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinsonar*, and *Örvar-Odds saga*. It can be understood that the grappling match upon the ship served as a sort of "set piece" whose intent was to delight the saga's intended audience: the battle aboard the famous ship could be seen as the climax to the chapter/section of the saga, and the grappling match as the climax of the battle.

Nú snerist Þórir við Bölverk, greip sinni hendi um hvárn fót á honum ok slengdi honum niðr, svá at hausinn brotnaði í smámola. [Now Thorir turned toward Bolverk, grabbed each foot with his hands, and threw him down, so that his skull broke into tiny pieces.]

(Guðni and Bjarni, “Sörla saga Sterka” 211; Hardman, “Sörla saga Sterka” ch.12)

The second occurrence of the maneuver in question happens several chapters later in the saga, where Hogni, one of King Halfdan’s sons, sees Halfdan’s aforementioned dragon-ship sailing and attempts to board the ship along with one of his knights, Svalr, and several other men. During the ensuing melee upon the ship, Svalr wrestles with Ivar in the following manner:

Spratt nú Svalr fimliga á fætr, greip sinni hendi um hvárn fót Ívari ok slengdi honum niðr, svá at haussinn brotnaði í smátt. [Svalr then sprang nimbly to his feet, grasped his hands around each of Ivar’s feet, and threw him down, so that his skull broke into small pieces.]

(Guðni and Bjarni, “Sörla saga Sterka” 216; Hardman, “Sörla saga Sterka” ch.16)

Once again the maneuver is described in a rather flamboyant fashion, complete with seemingly inhuman strength and excessive carnage; emphasizing the entertainment value of these stories. The maneuver may at first appear to be only vaguely described in both instances and may seem quite illogical or improbable at that. Even with assumed superhuman strength, it can be hard to (accurately) picture in one’s mind the particulars of how one would realistically go about grabbing a (presumably, due to context) standing man’s feet, and throw him down (or lift him up for that matter) without breaking various laws of physics. Yet, as we can see from the saga, this maneuver is performed multiple times, utilizing for the most part the same terminology and description to do so. Additionally, I would point out that it is, of course, possible to abstractly picture a cartoonish scenario in which a standing man is picked-up by his feet; yet as I have previously evidenced with specific passages and maneuvers, the authors of the sagas often showed a keen understanding of specific wrestling maneuvers in regard to their descriptions of techniques and the specific terminology they utilized when doing so.

As discussed in the “Historicity” section (2.4.) above, making–up or misrepresenting the techniques of a beloved sport would hardly go over well with one’s audience, especially if an author were trying to convey a sense of knowledgeable and authenticity. Furthermore, being a fantastical tale, *Sörla saga Sterka* would also have been primarily shared, read, and retold for entertainment purposes. Although one could argue that cartoonish or fantastical wrestling maneuvers are indeed entertaining, it is due to precisely the aspect of grappling’s popularity across Scandinavia that depicting *real* moves *accurately* would entertain an audience (particularly those with wrestling knowledge, such as farmers, chieftains, and herders) even more so.<sup>204</sup>

Despite both passages using the same language and terminology to describe the maneuver in question, I will utilize the description of the maneuver from the second passage above to interpret what grappling technique was most likely being on both occasions due to the second passage’s slight additional detail and contextual clues. It can be seen from the passage that Svalr grasps around *both* of Ivar’s feet, and summarily throws him down. It is possible here to ignore contextual clues in the text (that both men must be standing) and to discard any sense of realism, physics, or understanding of mechanics of the human body, and therefore imagine that Svalr picks up the feet of his laying (or even more implausibly, standing) opponent and slams him down in a cartoonish fashion. I would argue, however, that from a purely logical and contextual standpoint Ivar is standing, as throwing someone “down” who is already lying down is certainly not what the author could have reasonably intended the audience to imagine: this would not make tactical, contextual, or physical sense. Yet again, as is often the case, I argue that the given translation has not maintained the original text’s true meaning. It must be noted that in Old Icelandic “*fót*” can mean either “foot” or “leg” (Cleasby and Vigfusson 168). If we take the latter meaning, “leg”, and apply it to this situation, it suddenly seems much more plausible to pick a standing opponent up by wrapping one’s arms around both of his/her legs, perhaps at the knees or around the thighs, than by

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<sup>204</sup> This social phenomenon holds true for virtually all popular skilled activities or sports: the more engrossed in an activity (e.g., tennis, football, the playing of an instrument, etc.) a society is, the more fascinated with the details, minutiae, and intricacies (and the less interested in the implausibility or inaccuracies) of the activity they are.

grabbing his/her feet. Furthermore, the Old Icelandic word “*slengdi*” can indeed translate to “threw”, but also to “slung” or “swung”, either of which would more aptly describe what is happening in this sequence. With these terms in mind, the above depicted maneuver no longer seems implausible or vague, but instead almost perfectly fits the description of a double–leg takedown: a common wrestling maneuver almost any grappling sportsman since antiquity would be familiar with. A more detailed description of the double–leg takedown follows.

#### 4.1.4.1. Double-leg Takedown

In order to execute a proper/effective double–leg takedown, one must first attain a low center of gravity by lowering their hips while still maintaining an upright posture. Next, one must close the distance between themselves and their opponent by “shooting in”,<sup>205</sup> i.e., stepping their lead leg deeply in between the target’s legs. After achieving sufficient penetration, one can then wrap one’s arms around and behind the target’s legs, often behind the knees, and may choose to clasp his/her hands together to ensure a firm hold. From here, the assailant can easily lift the target up onto one of his/her shoulders, and put him/her down with varying degrees of force to the same side to which the opponent was lifted, or one could pull the victim’s legs backwards and downward thus creating a slinging–like motion resulting in the victim’s back and head to violently slam into the ground.<sup>206</sup> From the contextual clues given in the text I argue that this latter variant is what is being executed in the above passages, as suggested by the shattered and broken skulls of the victims. I would further argue that, due to the specific terminology used, the lack of supporting details given, and the fundamental nature of the maneuver, that the scribe and his/her audience and readers would for the most part also correctly infer that Ivar was not being thrown by the feet, and/or from the ground to the ground,

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<sup>205</sup> For a more detailed example of shooting for a takedown in the sagas, see the later example from *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*.

<sup>206</sup> For a visual demonstration of a double–leg takedown, with slam, see: <https://youtu.be/YK8YCQPIsAo>.

but rather that he was in an upright position and being grabbed around the legs in a double–leg takedown–like scenario.

If any of the above techniques or passages were an isolated occurrence, it could be more convincingly argued that perhaps the technique was fantastical, or meant to be interpreted as unrealistic and solely for entertainment purposes. Taken in conjunction with one another, however, I argue that the author/audience/society was familiar with wrestling and its techniques, and that the author went to lengths to insert and describe these real maneuvers in their sagas as a reflection of the broader society and its affinities. Further evidencing this are the often–detailed descriptions, the precise terminology used, the use of specific technique names, the casualness and apparent familiarity with which certain maneuvers are described in passing, and the frequency with which wrestling in general and certain maneuvers in particular appear throughout the sagas.

I would also point out at this juncture that the majority of the aforementioned moves, regardless of the level of detail in which they are described, are *grappling* and *wrestling* maneuvers, although admittedly these maneuvers do in some cases have obvious counter–parts in traditional and modern sanctioned *glíma*. Based off of the descriptions of the various grappling techniques that can be found throughout the sagas I argue that these techniques are *not* explicitly *glíma* techniques, per se, but rather that they are prevalent and customary wrestling and grappling techniques. The converse of this argument, that all of the grappling techniques described within the sagas are in fact strictly *glíma* techniques, is simply not tenable: virtually all techniques described appear in numerous other wrestling and grappling styles world–wide as evidenced throughout this thesis. More precisely, of all of the excerpts that I have analysed above, and indeed among the majority of the *fornaldarsögur* corpus as a whole, there is no explicit mention of either traditional *glíma* attire or grips. The throws and techniques from the *fornaldarsögur* that can be attributed to the sport of *glíma* find, without exception, counterparts in the broader world of grappling (i.e., even the techniques that appear in modern and traditional *glíma*, such as the inside–leg trip/*hælkrok*, are not unique to *glíma* and indeed predate the sport’s conception). Likewise, as would follow from these conclusions, more often than not the description of these techniques better fits those of wrestling and grappling techniques, in both context and in details, than they do traditional

or modern *glíma* techniques. I find this pertinent to mention in regard to the claims made by some *glíma* “traditionalists”, such as Þorsteinn Einarsson and Lars Magnar Enoksen,<sup>207</sup> that modern *glíma* reflects a continuation of the same techniques that heroes of old used in the sagas and Scandinavia’s distant past. I argue instead, citing the examples and passages above, that more often than not the saga authors were simply utilizing and describing traditional and fundamental wrestling techniques whose creators’ names have long since been forgotten by history.

Indeed, in my research regarding the various grappling techniques found within the sagas I have found little that would indicate a unique or particularly *Norse* or *Scandinavian* combat system (see previous footnotes in sections 4.1.2., 4.1.2.1. and 4.1.3.1. on Classical and Late antiquity Greek and Ancient Egyptian depictions of such techniques). To the contrary, I would argue that the techniques displayed in the sagas reflect a rather broad knowledge of wrestling and its principles. Embodied knowledge once again, as discussed in the “Embodied Knowledge and Reconstruction” section (3.5.) of this thesis, also supports this argument: tens of thousands of grapplers the world-over, myself included, have practiced and honed various grappling skills and acquired a specific grappling-oriented habitus. This habitus, necessarily built upon the repeated testing and re-testing of which positions and techniques are practical or possible in which positions and according to what one’s opponent is doing and how they are responding, reveals that the techniques identified within the sagas aren’t unique to or specifically *Norse* or *Viking*, but rather that they are *practically effective*.

These practical techniques are not unique to *glíma* in the same way that they are not unique to Scottish Backhold and Cumberland wrestling, ssireum, judo, sumo, and various other wrestling and folk wrestling styles. Scandinavia certainly enjoyed, practiced, and celebrated their own unique form of wrestling, but what made it unique was not its catalogue of generic (i.e., ubiquitous) techniques from which to choose from, but rather the specifically agreed-upon or codified rules, regulations, and accessories implemented while wrestling; just as with the rest of the aforementioned wrestling styles. These rules, as I have noted (and will continue to discuss in the following sections), are

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<sup>207</sup> See “Invented Tradition and Previous Research on Glíma” section (3.2.).

rarely seen and often neglected in many of the grappling examples found in the primary texts. Further universal and familiar techniques will now be identified and analysed from passages taken from the *Íslendingasögur*.

## 4.2. *Íslendingasögur* Grappling Passages

Unlike the legendary sagas examined above, which most often took place in Scandinavian pre–history and far–off mythical lands, the events narrated in the *Íslendingasögur*, or sagas of Icelanders, take place from roughly 870, when colonization of Iceland had begun, to the year 1000 and shortly thereafter, when Iceland was officially converted to Christianity.<sup>208</sup> Not only do the sagas of Icelanders take place more locally (both temporally and geographically speaking) than their legendary counterparts, but the narratives generally focus on farmers rather than kings, and on local land disputes and family feuds as opposed to international adventures and the conquering of kingdoms. This more prosaic aspect of the sagas of Icelanders is also reflected in their depictions of Icelanders’ daily pastoral life and in particular in their depictions of grappling. As I will show, the sagas of Icelanders integrate wrestling sequences more fully into their narratives, depict the wrestling sequences in a more public or social setting, and often use the sequences to either drive the plot or to flesh–out the character of the protagonist or antagonist. In conjunction with this, the *Íslendingasögur* also generally describe their wrestling techniques with more detail and tend to avoid the fantastic and over–the–top depictions of maneuvers that can more readily be found in the legendary sagas.

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<sup>208</sup> Further details and references on Iceland’s conversion to Christianity can be found in: Berend; Winroth.

### 4.2.1. Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu

In the late 13<sup>th</sup> century *Íslendingasaga Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* we are treated to a rather intricate grappling scene that serves as a microcosm of some of the hallmarks of grappling within the larger corpus of *Íslendingasögur*: realistic and more fully detailed grappling sequences, as well as the use of wrestling to further drive the saga's plot and promote character development. *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* relates the story of two court poets, Gunnlaug and Hrafn, and is an Icelandic take on the classic “love triangle” often found in medieval European literature. The excerpt in question takes place immediately following a warning from one of Gunnlaug's friends and travelling companions, Hallfred, that Gunnlaug will “need to have better dealings with Hrafn than I did” (Attwood 322). Shortly thereafter Gunnlaug's ship comes ashore in Melrakkasletta where he encounters a farmer named Thord:

Hann gekk í glímur við þá kaupmennina, ok gekk þeim illa við hann. Þá varð komit saman fangi með þeim Gunnlaugi. Ok um nóttina áðr hét Þórðr á Þór til sigrs sér. Ok um daginn er þeir fundusk tóku þeir til glímu. Þá laust Gunnlaugur báða fœtrna undan Þórði og felldi hann mikit fall, en fótrinn Gunnlaugs stókk ór liði, sá er hann stóð á, og féll Gunnlaugr þá með Þórði. [He was always challenging the merchants at wrestling, and they generally came off worst against him. Then a bout was arranged between him and Gunnlaug, and the night before, Thord called upon Thor to bring him victory. When they met the next day, they began to wrestle. Gunnlaug swept both Thord's legs out from under him, and his opponent fell down hard, but the ankle of the leg Gunnlaug's weight was resting on twisted out of joint, and he fell down with Thord.]  
(Sigurður and Guðni 86; Attwood 323)

This scene, though relatively brief, is ripe with intricate and important details whose understanding and interpretation is essential to the identification of what grappling maneuver is being performed. Furthermore, we notice right away that the scene does not follow the simple equation of “hero meets monster, grapples against monster, and defeats/slays him/her” as was frequently found in the legendary sagas. Rather, the scene

is better integrated into the flow of the saga, and, despite still being an anecdotal incident in the larger story, we are given some situational and circumstantial details that lend credibility to both the grappling exchange and to the merit of the protagonist. First of all, we notice that Thord is a human being, that he has a reputation for being aggressive and challenging merchants to wrestling, and that he generally wins these challenges. Already his character is fleshed out for us somewhat (i.e., that he is a farmer, that he is potentially aggressive, that he is devoted to Thor, in at least as much as Thor can help him defeat his opponents in wrestling) as opposed to simply being told that he is strong and powerful. From these few details it can be inferred that he is a skilled and knowledgeable wrestler, if not also a scoundrel. We even learn that he calls upon Thor for victory, a detail whose primary purpose may be to lend depth and credibility to the grappling sequence, and saga as a whole, that is to follow.<sup>209</sup> This example, however, is by no means an outlier, as these sorts of small credence-lending details are quite commonplace in the *Íslendingasögur* and served to flesh out and lend colorful details to the narrative.

With these contextual subtleties pointed out, let us now look at the more technical grappling aspects of the passage. We can read “*tóku þeir til glímu*/they took to wrestling” and understand that, in particular because of the use of the term “*glímu*” that the two men did not randomly grab or throw one another, but rather that they began fighting for “grips” or for positional control over their opponent; much like any form of traditional, folk, or modern wrestling match would begin. Although this could be inferred by the terminology used, the contextual information that Thord was a frequent and (ill-) renowned wrestler would further suggest that the two men are engaging in an at least somewhat codified form of wrestling (as opposed to simply brawling or clashing with one another). As a result of this it must therefore also be concluded that the two men are facing one another while engaging in grappling.

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<sup>209</sup> Calling upon a god for help was perhaps relatable to the intended audience as an act performed by someone serious about their current undertaking and could therefore lend gravity and potential doubt as to the protagonist’s victory in the upcoming wrestling match. Thor was also renowned as a great wrestler himself and was furthermore seen as the protector of mankind. See above “Elli” myth referenced in the “Invented Tradition and Previous Research on Glíma section (3.2.) and see: Snorre Sturluson’s *The Prose Edda*. For additional information on Viking Age myths and beliefs see also: Davidson; Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society*.

We then read: “Þá laust Gunnlaugur báða fæturna undan Þórði og felldi hann mikið fall”, which is described in quite loose terminology. As can be seen from the above translation, “*laust*” has been read as “swept”, but could just as easily, or perhaps more appropriately, be understood as “freed”, “loosened” or “removed”. With this understanding, Gunnlaug “frees” or “sweeps” both of Thord’s legs from beneath him (Thord), causing Thord to be on the receiving end of a great fall. Virtually all “falls” require the recipient’s legs to be removed from beneath them, so this leaves the listener/reader with several possibilities as to how to envision the precise way in which Thord was felled. Þorsteinn Einarsson, in his book *Þróun glímu í íslensku þjóðlífi*, states that the maneuver being described here is either a *leggjarbragð* (outside leg–trip) or *hælkrokur* (inside or leg–trip; see *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnssonar* section 4.1.3. above)(84). Although I agree with Þorsteinn that these two maneuvers are possible candidates for the technique being described, it does not appear that he took into account the remainder of the passage in his analysis of the situation.<sup>210</sup> Although (particularly when taking potential uneven terrain into account) one could plausibly twist one’s ankle in any number of ways, the tripping techniques suggested by Þorsteinn are unlikely to put either of one’s ankles at risk, and neither suggested technique would plausibly result in one sweeping his/her opponent’s feet to the side, then/while twisting their own ankle and falling *with* their opponent (as opposed to after). Furthermore, Þorsteinn seems to take for granted that these two combatants are using proper, rather modern, *glíma* grips, and are wearing the appropriate attire to utilize such grips, which seems like a stretch of one’s imagination considering that there is no such mention of either grips or grappling–specific attire (e.g., a belt or special jacket) in the passage. It also of note that, along with no grips being mentioned or specified, Thord is also not mentioned as pulling Gunnlaug down or on top of him, implying that it is Gunnlaug’s movements (and injury) that trigger him to fall down, as opposed to any active action performed by Thord.

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<sup>210</sup> Interestingly, a similar tripping technique is described in Lucian’s *Ocypus*, wherein Ocypus states that “I hurt my foot trying the [tripping technique].” No further details regarding how or which technique were used are given, but it is of further interest to note that Ocypus states this “among various excuses for his lameness” and is suffering from gout (Gardiner, “Wrestling II” 265). I therefore maintain that the claim that either Gunnlaug or Ocypus twisting their ankle during such a trip–technique remains somewhat dubious.

As alluded to above, the key to understanding and interpreting this otherwise enigmatic exchange is perhaps revealed to us in the remainder of the sentence, in which we learn that while performing the thus far vague maneuver, Gunnlaug twists out of joint the ankle of the leg on which his weight was resting, and proceeds to fall down *with* Thord. Although this may seem at first to be a detail that only serves to relate an injury acquired by the hero during the altercation (and perhaps it is merely that), an astute grappler can use this information to accurately visualize a very plausible grappling scenario, and therefore identify the maneuver being performed by Gunnlaug.

Assuming, as previously discussed and based on the given contextual evidence (both written and inferred), that Gunnlaug and Thord are facing each other and have “taken to grappling”, we can now determine that, whatever maneuver Gunnlaug used to fell Thord, one of Gunnlaug’s feet was firmly planted on the ground. This fact alone vastly limits the possibilities of potential maneuvers being performed. For example, the vast majority of single–leg takedowns, hip throws, and slams require both feet to be firmly planted most of the time, and those hip throws which leave the initiator on one foot do so in a manner such that the foot is firmly rooted, and unlikely to slip or twist (as it is supporting their own and often much of their opponent’s weight). We can therefore surmise that the action being performed by Gunnlaug is more of a trip involving a sweep–like movement, or maneuver that requires a “shooting–in” action in which one’s own weight is put primarily on one foot. With this information in mind, there are only a few plausible possibilities for which maneuver is likely being described. I find Þorsteinn’s suggestion of the *hælkrokur* to be reasonable, but I posit, as evidenced by Gunnlaug’s twisted ankle, that a more likely identification of the maneuver being performed is a variation of the double–leg takedown.<sup>211</sup>

During the execution of this technique there are several opportunities in which the assailant could potentially slip and/or twist their ankle. First, when the assailant “shoots in”, he/she puts all of their weight onto their own lead foot while driving forward. If this first step–in is done improperly, i.e., the foot is not firmly planted, the ankle is not locked

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<sup>211</sup> See detailed description of the “double–leg takedown” above (section 4.1.4.1). For a visual demonstration with a plausible explanation of the ankle–twist see: [https://youtu.be/zL38bW71j\\_4](https://youtu.be/zL38bW71j_4).

in a straight position, the ground is not level etc., the ensuing addition of the entirety of the assailant's own body weight could easily cause a very damaging self-inflicted ankle-twist. Furthermore, assuming that the "shoot-in" is successful, it often happens that the defender will try to maintain balance and/or escape the takedown in what is known as a sprawl <sup>212</sup>. It can be reasonably assumed that Thord would attempt to sprawl, as it is a common and natural defensive maneuver in various forms of grappling, and Thord himself is described as a well-practiced grappler ("Hann gekk í glímur við þá kaupmennina og gekk þeim illa við hann").

When one's opponent attempts to sprawl, especially during a double-leg takedown scenario, the primary countering maneuver is to clasp one's arms around the opponent's lower waist, thighs, or knees, plant one's outside foot firmly, and drive and turn sharply to one's left (if one's head is on the right side of one's opponent), thus circling somewhat to the side of or behind the opponent (known as "turning the corner"), while knocking them off-balance sideways as opposed to backwards, thus preventing their feet from supporting them if they attempt a sprawl. During this driving movement it is neither difficult nor implausible for the initiator of the double-leg (Gunnlaug in this example) to twist or sprain their "driving leg" while trying to drive the opponent to the ground, because the outside leg that is posting off of the ground is pushed out sideways rather than in a forwardly fashion, and therefore quite susceptible to a lateral twist or sprain: particularly if one is grappling on uneven terrain or outdoors. Twisting one's ankle while performing a wrestling technique is never common, *per se*, so there are no moves that are *likely* to result in such an injury. Taking into account the description and context of the grapplers, however, it is reasonable to assume that the technique used that resulted in Gunnlaug's twisted ankle was one that involved a driving force, such as is seen during an aggressively defended double-leg takedown, as opposed to a tripping technique which lacks such twisting movements and force.

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<sup>212</sup> As mentioned above, the sprawl is a wrestling/martial arts defensive technique that is done to defend oneself from various takedown attempts, most often single or double-leg takedowns. To sprawl, one tries to scoot/push their own legs backwards and away from their opponent, who is trying to grasp them either around their waist or their thighs/knees/legs, resulting in the defender landing on the upper back of the opponent attempting the takedown. An example can be seen here: <https://youtu.be/6Bk1fs-HE-g>.

Regardless of whether or not the initiator of the double-leg takedown twists their ankle, if the takedown is successful, as it was in Gunnlaug's case, then the initiator will end up either standing at or between their opponent's feet, or falling on top of or simultaneously with their opponent, resulting in the initiator having the advantageous position. The latter is what would surely happen in a scenario in which the instigator of the takedown snaps their ankle asunder, which fits the passage's description nicely. If one were to perform an inside or outside leg trip as Þorsteinn suggests above, even with the twisting of one's ankle it is unclear why or how one would fall on top of one's opponent without further descriptions (such as grips taken or attire being worn and grabbed) by the author. In the double-leg takedown scenario I have described (with the inclusion of the likely sprawl attempt) we have the two combatants facing one another, a double-leg takedown attempt being successfully attempted, the opponent falling in a harsh manner, along with the takedown instigator, and a severely twisted ankle being acquired on the side of the initiator of the takedown: all of which can be reasonably surmised from the details given to us in the original text. We can then safely assume that this (or a reasonably similar) common sequence of grappling events is what was narrated between Gunnlaug and Thord.

Admittedly, it is of course possible that the grappling sequence described was either written in an intentionally vague manner, or that the scribe describing the scenario was not well versed in grappling and therefore penned some vague grappling account of no technical import. This perfectly plausible scenario, however, would not alter the fact that a contemporary Icelandic audience assumedly knowledgeable or passionate about grappling would still "fill in the blanks" on their own, and come to a conclusion about the grappling scenario similar to the one which I have posited. I would also add to the analysis that, immediately following the wrestling altercation and Gunnlaug's ankle injury, Thord ominously warns Gunnlaug that "Maybe your next fight won't go any better", referring to Gunnlaug's impending confrontation with the antagonist Hrafn. Although minor, this detail lends additional context to the narrative and grappling match, foreshadowing that Gunnlaug is likely to cause himself injury in the climactic final encounter of the saga. In doing so, the overall grappling sequence is better woven into the

surrounding text, giving the sequence greater narrative meaning and more prominently displaying the ways in which wrestling is used as a vehicle to advance the narrative.

#### 4.2.2. *Bárðar Saga Snæfellsáss*

*Bárðar Saga Snæfellsáss*, or *Bard's saga*, is an unusual *Íslendigasaga* which contains several accounts and descriptions of grappling. This saga was first written around the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century making it one of the latest sagas of Icelanders. Like many of the legendary sagas with which it was written contemporarily, it is replete with supernatural occurrences and clashes with monsters. In these regards it is somewhat of an outlier amongst its fellow sagas of Icelanders, yet it still maintains much of their mundane settings and conflicts. Among the seven significant grappling encounters (and one poetic recounting) found within the saga, there is one passage in particular that proves fruitful to analyse. In this example, we are given a couple of precise details during the grappling encounter that can be interpreted as evidence that, once again, the scribe and/or original intended audience were expected to have a certain level of inherent grappling-acuity in order to accurately comprehend and appreciate the intricacies of the maneuver being performed. The protagonist of the latter half of the saga, Gest, and his companions are chased down by a family of trolls seeking vengeance for a slight they suffered at the hands of one of Gest's companions. Gest's entourage split up and are each assigned their respective troll to deal with. Soon thereafter Gest singles-out one of the trolls, Gljúfra-Geir, and a wrestling struggle ensues:

Gestur ok Gljúfra-Geir gengust fast at, ok lauk svá, at Gestr leiddi hann á mjöðm og brá honum á lopt með svá miklu afli, at höfuðit kom fyrst niðr á honum svá hart, at hausinn brotnaði í smán mola ok var dauðr innan lítils tíma. [Gest and Gljúfra-Geir went at it at once, and it happened that Gest got him across his hip, raising him aloft with such great force that he came down head first so hard that

his head broke into small bits; he was dead a short time later.]

(Þórhallur and Bjarni 157; S. Anderson 259)

Echoing its legendary saga counterparts, this passage portrays the wrestling sequence in a fantastical light: the combat is against a superhuman adversary (a troll), the maneuvers result in bones shattering, and the wrestling sequence itself is sparsely detailed and rather abruptly begun and resolved: there is very little character development involved and the entire display seems to have been used to highlight Gest's physical prowess as opposed to serving as a driving force of/behind the narrative. Despite the passage's brevity and lack of detail, it is still apparent to the reader that Gest used his hips to somehow violently throw Gljufra–Geir to the ground, in a similar fashion to the earlier description I have given about the way in which the hero in *Gríms Saga Loðinkinna* fells his foe (also a troll) during a wrestling match. In this example “*Gestur leiddi hann á mjöðm*” can be most probably read as “Gest laid/dragged/pulled him across (his) hips”, which nicely fits the fundamental description of most hip throws. Gest then proceeds to throw, or move, Gljufra–Geir into the air so powerfully and violently that upon returning to the ground Gljufra–Geir's head hits the ground before the rest of his body and shatters. Þorsteinn Einarsson once again plausibly identifies the maneuver being performed and argues that it was any one of the following traditional *glíma* hip throw variants: the *lausamjöðn*, the *mjaðmarbragð*, or the *loftmjöðn* (“Þróun Glímu Í Íslensku Þjóðlífi” 75).

Once again, however, in order to perform these maneuvers Þorsteinn conveniently assumes that the combatants performed and had access to proper grips, and that the grapplers were wearing the appropriate traditional *glíma* attire: an assumption which cannot be inferred from the passage or surrounding saga. Furthermore, as with many of the legendary sagas, the opponent here is a monstrous troll, and the reader cannot reasonably be expected to infer that such a monster (as opposed to a human opponent such as the previously mentioned Thord the Wrestler) would be wearing the appropriate trouser–grips or harness used for the aforementioned *glíma* maneuvers as they are described in Þorsteinn's work. Þorsteinn also makes no mention of the latter portion of the selected passage in his identification of the maneuver at hand, wholly leaving out any mention of Gljufra–Geir's head shattering upon the ground: a key

contextual detail that can be used to accurately and plausibly identify the technique being performed.

#### 4.2.2.1. Hip Throw (With Wrist Control)

Although I agree that the above described technique is indeed a hip throw of sorts, much can be deduced by the fact that Gjlufra–Geir lands on his head first, as opposed to either his shoulders or his back: A detail that, according to the list of plausible moves he has suggested, Þorsteinn seems not to have taken into account. The fact that Gljufra–Geir lands head–first doesn’t simply serve as an excuse for the author to describe some explicit gore, but also functions as a critical detail in revealing the precise maneuver being performed (and how this “umbrella technique” was performed) by the saga protagonist’s son, Gest. With Þorsteinn’s suggested maneuvers, particularly if they were performed using “proper” *glíma* grips and attire, there is no tenable reason that Gljufra–Geir wouldn’t brace his landing with either or both of his arms and/or hands. Rather, I argue that Gest, while facing his opponent, should be understood to have had an underhook on one of Gljufra–Geir’s arms, while holding/trapping either Gljufra–Geir’s wrist or elbow with his other arm/hand. From this positioning, Gest could then have performed the conventional hip throw movements, as previously described, with the added detail that while pivoting and bending his own body at a 90–degree angle in order to raise Gljufra–Geir off of the ground. Gest would in this instance simultaneously pull Gljufra–Geir’s arm and wrist that he (Gest) has a hold of downwards and towards himself. This sharp pull of Gljufra–Geir’s arm would, in conjunction with the swivel of Gest’s own hips and the turning motion of his torso, cause Gljufra–Geir’s head to be pulled sharply downwards by the momentum of the throw and the weight of his own body, while simultaneously preventing him from intentionally or instinctively breaking his fall with what would otherwise have been his free hand. The result of this technique, a hip throw variant where Gljufra–Geir’s would–be bracing–arm is controlled firmly at the wrist or elbow by Gest, is that the defender’s head would be slammed into the ground with the force of the throw and the two combatants’ combined body–weight behind it,

easily culminating in a fractured skull as described in the saga passage.<sup>213</sup> This understanding of the technique being performed also avoids having to presume that particular clothing or harnesses were being worn by either of the combatants; details that are nowhere mentioned in the text.

Another alternate, although similar, interpretation of this very passage is that Gest performed what is commonly referred to as a head throw,<sup>214</sup> which replicates almost all the movements of the hip throw as described above with the difference that Gest's arm that was underhooking Gljufra-Geir's arm would instead be around the neck of Gljufra-Geir. Once again, it is possible here to imagine that the original scribe did not, in fact, have any grappling background or knowledge. Yet considering the precise terminology used, the amount of wrestling that appears throughout the saga (as a reflection of the sport's social popularity), and the social nature of the sagas themselves (i.e., that they were often read aloud to an assorted audience), it seems unlikely that the scribe or author would have *no* understanding of grappling: indeed, I would argue that someone with little-to-no knowledge of grappling would not explicitly describe a hip throw when detailing a fatal grappling maneuver. Furthermore, the scribe or transcriber's lack of knowledge regarding grappling would change neither the kinetics involved in the technique nor the inevitability that, in order for Gljufra-Geir to land as he did, the technique performed in the passage would have to have been either identical or similar to the hip throw technique I have described.

Immediately after the above passage takes place, within the very same larger altercation, there is another passage of some grappling interest. Due to both the nature of the technique being described, and in particular the scribe's choice of vocabulary, I find the following passage to bolster, rather than detract from, the idea that the initial scribe did indeed have at least some functional knowledge and understanding about grappling. While Gest has defeated his foe, as detailed above, his comrades are still struggling with their monstrous adversaries. The passage in question then reads as follows:

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<sup>213</sup> For a visual demonstration of an arm-in hip-throw see: <https://youtu.be/QX6Pekxmu00>.

<sup>214</sup> See "Head Throw" link referenced above in "Embodied Knowledge and Reconstruction" section (3.5.), or view here: <https://youtu.be/IUeRxK1PYPM>.

Í því kom Gestr at ok þreif í hjassann á Kolbirni, en setti knéin í baki svá hart, at þegar gekk ór hálsliðinum. [At that moment Gest came, grabbed the hair of Kolbjorn, and put his knees into his back so forcefully that his neck was dislocated as a result.]

(Þórhallur and Bjarni 157; S. Anderson 259)

From Anderson's English translation of this passage, we can surmise that Gest plants his knee in Kolbjorn's back, pulls Kolbjorn's head back by the hair, and breaks his (Kolbjorn's) neck. Anderson, however, seems to have translated the Old Icelandic "*hjassann*" as "(the) hair", whereas I would argue from both a linguistic and logical standpoint that "*hjassann*" is more likely an alternate form of "*hjarsi/hjarsann*", which means "the top of the head" (Zoëga 199). In conjunction with the use of "*hjassann*" as the top of one's head, the saga also uses the uncommon verb "*þreif*", from the verb "*þreifa*", to describe the motion by which Gest "grabs" Kolbjorn's head. This term, "*þreifa*", does not, however, simply mean to grab, but is instead a vaguer term meaning "to feel with the hand", or "to grope along", as a blind person searching for something on a table would (Cleasby and Vigfusson 744). To the grappler's mind, the motion of "feeling" or "groping" along someone's head or body immediately conjures up the image of searching for and/or tightening a grip on one's opponent. In this particular case, as the human head does not have many natural crevices on which to grasp onto (excluding the eye sockets), and considering the author's specific use of "*hjassann*" "top of the head", I argue that Gest, who has already shown the reader/audience that he is a veteran grappler (the movements involved in executed a hip throw against a resisting opponent do not come easily or naturally), used a grip of sorts to secure Kolbjorn's head before putting his knee into Kolbjorn's back and pulling or twisting his neck until it was dislocated.<sup>215</sup> Furthermore, in order to grab someone's (presumably long, due to the fact that it is grabbed and pulled) hair, one would not "grope" around or "feel" for the hair: they would simply grasp it by the handful.

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<sup>215</sup> The grip described would most likely be a Gable-grip (see: <https://youtu.be/I8-QicBZi6Y>) or done by interlacing one's fingers.

#### 4.2.2.2. Neck–Crank (Rear Chinlock)

With the definition of the aforementioned key terms clarified, we can see that rather than Gest’s barbarously pulling on the hair of Kolbjorn, he more plausibly (and no less barbarously) grasped around the top of Kolbjorn’s head, used his knee to maintain leverage and firmly ensnare Kolbjorn’s body to the ground, and performed a variation of what is known in grappling as a spinal lock or rear–chinlock.<sup>216</sup> These difficulties in translation also serve as fine examples of how one or two mistranslated words can misrepresent the author’s (and term’s) meaning or drastically alter the reader’s understanding of a passage, and can also have the power to render particular grappling maneuvers indecipherable. Once again, the very use of such specific terminology as seen in the above example lends credence to the supposition that the saga writer, writing for his/her intended audience, would be expected to have a certain level of grappling acuity and be able to accurately understand and visualize the techniques being described.

#### 4.2.3. Hávarðar Saga Ísfirðings

In contrast to the previously discussed saga of Icelanders, *Bárðar Saga Snæfellsáss*, with all of its seemingly legendary saga–esque qualities, *Hávarðar Saga Ísfirðings* (*The saga of Hávarður of Ísafjörður*) is another of the *Íslendingasögur* in which it can be seen that the grappling sequences are more protracted, detailed, realistic, and play a more important narrative role.<sup>217</sup> That being said, the saga is somewhat younger than many of its fellow *Íslendingasögur* in that it was written in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, which is perhaps why, unlike its counterparts, much of the later portion of the saga

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<sup>216</sup> “Spinal lock” is a broad–spanning blanket term for any submission hold that is applied to the spinal column, and which results in any part of the spine being extended beyond its normal range of motion. A forcefully applied spinal lock has the potential to cause severe damage to the vertebrae, and can result in paralysis or death. A video demonstration can be seen here: <https://youtu.be/izlL97i6Yco>.

<sup>217</sup> This is exemplified in the previously mentioned *Finnboga saga ramma* (*Saga of Finnbogi the Mighty*) as well as in the later discussed *Grettis saga* (*The Saga of Grettir the Strong*), sections 3.1. and 4.2.2. respectively.

“smacks of hyperbole, burlesque, and pastiche”(Heinemann 313). Despite the outlandish second half of the saga, the first four chapters of the narrative depict straightforward scene–setting and characterization of the key players. In chapter three the protagonist’s son, Olaf, is tending to his sheep when a friend comes to him in distress, requesting that Olaf aid him in driving his own scattered herd back to his farmstead. Olaf agrees to help, and the two companions shortly find out that there is a man intentionally scattering the sheep whenever Olaf or his companion attempt to drive them back to their home. Olaf recognizes this man as a former wrestling partner of his, Thormod, and after a brief discussion with his companion decides to confront the wrestler Thormod on behalf of his companion. The ensuing passage that I will analyse is particularly revealing in that it is replete with intricate grappling details and actually plays out as an entire grappling contest, rather than as a single deathblow or rapid foray otherwise detached from the rest of the saga’s narrative.

The back and forth nature of the encounter, especially when viewed in conjunction with the specific terminology and intended inferences written within, further bolsters the notion that both the scribe and his/her audience would by necessity need a certain level of grappling knowledge to logically follow the events. The altercation, viewed in the broader context of saga’s plot, is also clearly used as a narrative tool to characterize not only Olaf, the protagonist’s son, as an upstanding man, but also to help characterize the antagonist and later slayer of Olaf as a villain, thereby lending the passage an important narrative role. The passage reads thus:

Ólafur rann þegar upp á bakkann að Þormóði en hann gefr honum rúm. Ok er Ólafur kómur á upp rennr Þormóðr þegar undir hendr honum. Ólafur tekr ok við eptir megni. Gangast þeir at lengi. Þykkir Ólafi hann ekki raknat hafa eptir hnyskingina. Þar kómur, at þeir falla báðir senn fram á bakkann, ok er svá er komit, veltir hvárr qðrum, þar til er þeir tumba báðir ofan fyrir fonnina. Eru þá ýmsir undir þar til er þeir koma í fjruruna. Þá bar svá til, at Þormóðr varð neðri: neytir Ólafur þá þess og braut í sundr hrygginn í honum . [Olaf suddenly ran up the ridge towards Thormod, who gave way to him. When Olaf arrived at the top, Thormod suddenly ducked under his grasp and clutched him around the waist.

Olaf countered with all his might, and they struggled a long time. Olaf found Thormod no more tractable after his beating. Finally, they both fell down the slope, and they turned over and over as they tumbled through the snow. First one, then the other, was on top until they reached the beach. Then it chanced that Thormod was on the bottom. Olaf took advantage of this, and broke his back.] (Björn and Guðni 301; Heinemann 318)

In this rather intricate sequence the reader is given a colorful description of the back–and–forth grappling encounter that Olaf and Thormod are engaged in. Due to the somewhat vague wording and arcane vocabulary, this sequence of events and the precise meaning of parts of the passage remain open to interpretation. We can see, for example, that the above line “Þykkir Ólafi hann ekki raknat hafa eptir hnyskingina” has been roughly translated to “Olaf found Thormod no more tractable after his beating”. Although contextually this seems to fit the scenario adequately, I suspect that for several reasons the original meaning of this sentence is rather more sophisticated in terms of its wrestling vocabulary than is the English translation.

The verb “*rakna*” can mean “to be unwound”, but can also mean “to loosen one’s grasp of” (Zoëga 328). Cleasby and Vigfusson go into further detail, offering the definition: “to recover from a stunning blow” (482). Interestingly, the later term “*hnyskingina*”, rather than broadly meaning “a beating” seems to be derived from the word “*hnykkir*”, which Cleasby and Vigfusson define as “a wrestling term, a certain bragð in the Icel. *glima*” (277).<sup>218</sup> Unfortunately I have not been able to find a precise description or definition as to what this grab/throw would look like, and the source description above simply does not lend enough details or context to further help in the identification. Regardless, this definition of the word fits the context of the sentence extremely well and would further evidence that the authors of these sagas were writing using specific wrestling terms and techniques (some of which have perhaps been permanently lost to time), most probably to entertain and impress their equally–knowing audiences.

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<sup>218</sup> “*Bragð*” is a common term often used to describe quick throws, trips, or “tricks” in *glima*.

With these loose definitions in mind, I argue that the above sentence, rather than meaning “Olaf found Thormod no more tractable after his beating”, was instead meant to be interpreted more closely to: “Olaf does not think he has loosened his grip after [a particular *glíma* technique]”. Due to the grammatical and terminological issues at play in this sentence there are several slightly different potential interpretations as to what is taking place, but it is nonetheless clear that the original author of the text had a more grappling–detailed scenario in mind than what we see in the above English translation.

Continuing on in the passage we read in the above English translation that “Olaf suddenly ran up the ridge towards Thormod who gave way to him. When Olaf arrived at the top, Thormod suddenly ducked under his grasp and clutched him around the waist”. With this interpretation, it remains somewhat unclear as to when Olaf reaches the top of the ridge, and exactly how the two combatants are spatially arranged. For example, one could logically assume that when Thormod “gave way” to Olaf, that he did so because Olaf was near him, yet the next sentence then seems to illogically begin with “when Olaf arrived at the top”.

There is a logical interpretation of these lines, however, that not only solves this conundrum but also serves to better illustrate some of the passage’s finer grappling details. To start with, forms of the common and versatile verb “*renna*” are used to describe both Olaf’s ascension of the ridge/charging of Thormod (“*Ólafur rann þegar upp á bakkann að Þormóði*”), and his “ducking” under Thormod’s arms (“*Og er Ólafur kemur á upp rennur Þormóður þegar undir hendur honum*”). Although both of these English interpretations are individually viable, combined they leave the reader with a slight sense of confusion as to precisely how and where the two combatants are interacting with one another. “*Renna*”, as mentioned, is a versatile verb, and I would therefore argue that the scribe used it in a different sense than the way in which it has been popularly interpreted. “*Renna*” is a verb that most commonly means “to run”, but in the context of grappling and the specific scenario above, it can also mean “arise/rise”, particularly when used with “*upp*”, which, not coincidentally I argue, it is in both of these instances (Zoëga 336). It could therefore be interpreted that Olaf either ran up the ridge at Thormod, who gave him space/a wide berth (“*rúm*”), or that Olaf ascended the ridge, and Thormod dodged his attempts at initiating grappling. I would argue that the former

interpretation would be both more likely, as it is common practice in most forms of grappling to “make space” and make sure that both opponents are on equal footing before initiating a contest. Considering Olaf and Thormod were stated to be former wrestling partners, Thormod’s allowing Olaf some space and time to adjust himself upon reaching the crest of the ridge seems a likely scenario.<sup>219</sup> I argue that this could also be interpreted as the two grapplers beginning to circle one another, as is commonly done in *glima* and most other forms of wrestling.

More importantly for the understanding of the grappling sequence, however, is perceiving that the use of “*rennur*” must explicitly mean “rise”, as opposed to “run”, if we are to have any semblance of a realistic or sensical grappling encounter. In consequence, Thormod does not “run” under Olaf’s arms, but can be understood to “rise up” under Olaf’s arms, and then grasp him around the waist. Not only does this lexically make sense, but it also better follows the principles of wrestling engagement (and is a movement/technique that could be expected from those with past wrestling experience such as that which the two described characters have, i.e., explicitly being described as former wrestling partners). If Thormod literally were to “run” under Olaf’s arms, what strange position would he have to be running in in order to be both running *and* “under” Thormod’s arms, or, conversely, how much of a height difference would there have to be between the two combatants for one to literally run under the other’s arms? It could be argued that Thormod tried to tackle Olaf while running, but that interpretation does not fit the ensuing description of the grappling confrontation, nor does it seem likely that the scribe would use such a vague term for “tackle” when various other terms would be both more appropriate and descriptive. What suits the situation much better, and fits perfectly with the vocabulary used, is to interpret the passage as Thormod “rising up” under Olaf’s arms, which could only be realistically done if Thormod were attempting to “shoot” on Olaf, as the latter half of shooting in is to raise one’s own center of gravity once they’ve

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<sup>219</sup> It is also interesting to note that, derived from “*renna*”, “*rennast at (á)*” means “to attack one another” or “to begin a fight” (Zoëga 336). This would indicate that in its vernacular usage the verb “*renna*” was already linked to fighting or engaging in an attack.

neared and grasped their opponent. This understanding also goes much more closely with Heinemann's "ducking" inference, although it is more precise.

#### 4.2.3.1. Shooting-in

Shooting-in, as opposed to running-at, is a far more likely and becoming behavior for two combatants who are, once again, (as previously mentioned in the saga) each other's "*glímufélagi*", or wrestling partners. There are a variety of ways to shoot-in on an opponent, although most of them generally involve either attacking one's opponent's legs or securing at least one underhook on one's opponent. In simplified terms, to successfully perform a "shoot" you first must lower your level, i.e. get your hips and/or center of gravity lower than your opponents, and then propel yourself forward and upwards, driving your opponent either backwards, or lifting them up.<sup>220</sup> With this somewhat simplified definition in mind, we can see that this is exactly what Thormod did, and indeed would have to do to Olaf in order for the next progression of events to occur: "*Ólafur tekur og við eftir megni*". After being shot-in on by Thormod, Olaf instinctively does what any well-versed wrestler or grappler would do, and "catches" (*tekur*) Thormod, which can most identifiably be interpreted as a sprawl attempt, and their struggle proceeds to ensue in somewhat of a stalemate.<sup>221</sup>

At this point in the passage the two grapplers tumble and roll down the ridge, rotating between who is on top, in the dominant position, and who is on bottom. We learn at the end of their tumble that it comes about that Thormod is on the bottom, with Olaf on top of him, and that Olaf utilizes his dominant position to swiftly end their encounter. Unfortunately, in what is otherwise an interesting back-and-forth well-documented (if loosely translated) grappling encounter, we are told only that Olaf "makes use of this"

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<sup>220</sup> Once again, for a visual demonstration and explanation of shooting-in see: <https://youtu.be/khuXEnD8yQs>.

<sup>221</sup> For a visual example of a sprawl see: <https://youtu.be/6Bk1fs-HE-g>. For Classical and Late Antiquity Greek amphora and vase depictions of simultaneous shooting-in/sprawling see: Gardiner, "Wrestling. II." 281, 283-84.

(i.e., his dominant position) and breaks Thormod's back. I would argue that there is no realistic potential of breaking a man's back from this position, and can only surmise how the author would have intended his audience to visualize this finishing maneuver.

#### 4.2.3.2. Neck-Crank from Mount

I argue that because of the fact that "*hrygginn*" can also be interpreted as "the spine" rather than only "the back" (Cleasby and Vigfusson 288), then one very real possibility to consider is that Olaf performed a neck-crank on Thormod, while resting either on top of Thormod's torso, or in between his legs. Olaf would do so by resting his weight down upon Thormod while straddling his chest with his thighs and buttocks (thus keeping Thormod's shoulders and torso trapped against the ground), and locking his hands behind Thormod's head, one over the other, and pulling Thormod's head sharply towards his own chest while leaning backwards. This maneuver could still be performed (and perhaps more easily) if Olaf were to be in between Thormod's legs, although in this case Olaf would have to keep downward pressure on Thormod's chest using his own elbows in order to keep Thormod's chest/back planted to the ground while pulling his head towards himself. Either of these variants of the neck-crank could be interpreted from the language and scenario described in the saga.<sup>222</sup> I would also add that, without additional details as to how Thormod's back was broken, I cannot picture any plausible alternative ways in which the intended audience was supposed to imagine this scenario (i.e., if not via a neck-crank variant, I struggle to imagine how else the audience would be expected to imagine someone's back being broken given the available description and positioning of the combatants).

Through its multiple techniques, particular terminology, and explicit emphasis that both men involved were not only wrestlers but former wrestling partners, this passage further bolsters my argument that the saga author, his/her intended audience, and indeed the medieval Icelandic society at-large were familiar to varying degrees with the

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<sup>222</sup> For understandable reasons this move is banned from virtually all modern wrestling practices, including mixed martial arts (MMA). For a visual demonstration of neck-cranks from the guard and full mount see: <https://youtu.be/RYH02rz1dz8>.

intricacies of grappling. In addition to this insight, this saga also lends credence to the importance of many of these scenes to the overall narrative value of the saga. Not only is this grappling scene given prominent attention within the saga narrative, but it is also used to underline the saga protagonist's son Olaf's qualities of character and body and social capital: Olaf lends aid to a friend in need while at the same time proving himself a skilled wrestler (a skill not without merit in an agrarian warrior-society). Additionally, this grappling altercation is used by the author to further highlight the villainous qualities of the saga's antagonist, Thorbjorn, and his minions, who eventually kill Olaf. Shortly following this passage both Thorbjorn and one of his subordinates ridicule Brand, Olaf's companion in the above passage, for praising Olaf's skills and deeds. This juxtaposition of Olaf's qualities as both a fighter and companion against Thorbjorn's jealousy and ridicule of his feats not only emphasizes the characters' respective traits but also foreshadows the growing enmity between the two men and their families.

#### **4.2.4. Grettis Saga**

Perhaps the most renowned *Íslendingasaga* to be analysed in this thesis is *Grettis saga*, or *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, written around 1400. The hero, Grettir, shows off his physical prowess throughout the saga via various feats of strength and by grappling and wrestling with various enemies, both human and monster. Like many other *Íslendingasögur*, *Grettis saga's* grappling sequences not only display an acute knowledge of various different wrestling techniques, but also, perhaps more so than any other saga, showcase grappling's important place in saga society. In conjunction with this, *Grettis saga* also utilizes its grappling scenes to further flesh out characters' qualities and drive the narrative. As a result of the saga's having several in-depth and narratively important grappling sequences, I have chosen two wholly separate grappling passages to analyse and interpret in order to display grappling's prominence in the contemporary society while at the same time further evidencing that through embodied knowledge these very real techniques can be accurately identified.

The first passage from this saga that I wish to take a look at takes place towards the beginning of the saga during Grettir's childhood. The passage is one of the first impressions we get of the hero's physical prowess and ever-growing bodily capital. The first scene takes place during the winter at "the games", where a specific ballgame was often played, emphasizing the social aspect of the altercation.<sup>223</sup> The protagonist Grettir is only fourteen at the time, although already considered strong well-beyond his years. This passage gives the reader one of their first major insights into the personality of Grettir. While playing a ballgame together, an older boy named Audun hits the ball over Grettir's head, who interprets this action as meant to intentionally embarrass or insult him. Grettir loses his temper, and a grappling altercation quickly ensues:

Tókust þeir þá á fangbrögðum og glímðu. Þóttusk menn þá sjá, at Grettir var sterkari en menn ætluðu, því at Auðunn var rammr at afli. Áttust þeir lengi við, en svá lauk, at Grettir fell; lét Auðunn þá fylgja kné kviði ok fór illa með hann. [Then they grappled with each other and started wrestling, and everyone could tell Grettir was stronger than they had imagined, because Audun was very powerful. After they had fought for a long time, Grettir lost his balance in the end, and Audun jumped on him and kned him in the groin.] (Guðni 43; Scudder 68)

This passage serves to elucidate several explicit points in reference to the fundamentals of grappling, reflecting a clear understanding of grappling by the author. The passage also provides us with what I have found to be a unique example of a particular grappling position/technique found nowhere else in either the *Íslendingasögur* or *fornaldarsögur*. In regard to grappling fundamentals, this passage reveals a couple of truths to the reader: Firstly, despite Grettir's being acknowledged as the obviously stronger of the two participants, his strength does not guarantee him victory in what is explicitly referred to as "wrestling/grappling".

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<sup>223</sup> This ballgame is analysed and further detailed by Thurber, who interestingly goes on to note that these games, which were frequently used as the focal point of social gatherings, were often interrupted by or resulted in wrestling matches between disgruntled players (Thurber 169–174).

The terms “*fangbrögð*” and “*glíma*” (Tókust þeir þá á *fangbrögðum* og *glímdu*) are both used to describe various forms and styles of “wrestling” and “grappling” somewhat interchangeably. In later centuries, however, the term “*glíma*” became more and more synonymous with what is now the recognizable modern sport of *glíma*: a distinction certainly not made by the scribes of the sagas, their intended audience, nor by the characters and heroes the sagas depict. These terms were used quite particularly in regard to grappling, which leads me to argue that the above translation quite understood this nuance: “Then they grappled with each other and took to wrestling”. In this translation it can be understood that the two combatants first engaged one another, probably fighting for grips or “settling in” and embracing one another in preparation to wrestle, and then, only after these preparatory actions, do they begin to wrestle each other in earnest. It is clear to me from this description (and in particular by the original Old Norse terminology used) that the author had a clear understanding of how realistic grappling exchanges are initiated.

In conjunction with these previous observations, Grettir is several years the younger of his opponent,<sup>224</sup> and in a refreshingly realistic fashion is therefore less experienced and practiced in grappling than his opponent.<sup>225</sup> This combination of Audun’s age and skill advantage and Grettir’s inexperience leads to the inevitable conclusion that any grappling aficionado would arrive at: that the younger, lesser experience grappler, despite being stronger, may well lose to the older, more veteran grappler. As the saga goes on to describe, this is exactly how the scenario plays out; even when a fledgling hero of legendary strength is involved. Details such as this in conjunction with the context of the altercation give weight to my argument that the scribe had a solid understanding of the principles of grappling and combat, and his/her intended

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<sup>224</sup> “When Grettir was fourteen years old he went to the games at the insistence of his brother Atli” (Scudder 68).

<sup>225</sup> Saga heroes have the tendency to show almost supernatural strength, grappling prowess, and physical abilities at a very early age, usually 12 or younger. It is very common for saga heroes in their formative years to handily defeat fully-grown men and champions in combat and grappling exchanges. In *Grettis Saga*, however, we are told that Grettir is already fourteen years old and stronger than his opponent, yet he still manages to be defeated by him. Within such contexts this level of realistic plausibility is somewhat of a rarity in saga literature, as these scenarios are most often used to simply embellish the protagonist’s strength and prowess.

audience would have been familiar with such grappling displays and the social environment within which they took place.

From a narrative perspective, it is important to also point out that the description of these grappling exchanges was not merely meant as a hollow embellishment of a hero's abilities (or lack thereof), but rather used as a realistic culturally familiar way in which to display certain aspects of the hero's temperament, such as his being quick to anger and overconfident in his strength. In this vein, it is also compelling to read that, after the altercation is broken-up by onlookers (further attestation to the social aspect and commonplace occurrence of such games and their resulting wrestling feuds), Grettir tells those who have taken hold of him that there is no need to restrain him, because "Only a slave takes vengeance at once, and a coward never" (Scudder 68). Foreshadowing statements such as this, taken into account within the broader context of the narrative, lend depth to character development and further emphasize the key narrative role that grappling exchanges such as this can play in the overall plot of the saga. It is also made clear from this example, as well as by Grettir's continuing struggles with/against society throughout the remainder of the saga (and his ensuing outlawry), that there were expected modes of comportment when partaking or competing in public, social events: to break these modes of behaviour could often result in a loss of social capital (as can be seen in the above passage by the crowd's rushing in to break up the wrestling match once things take an ugly and unsportsmanlike turn). Certain behaviours were simply not approved of or considered societally acceptable.<sup>226</sup>

#### 4.2.4.1. Knee-on-Belly Position

The above passage bears relevance to my arguments not only for its subtle insights into both grappling and its prevalence place within saga society, but also for its mention and description of a particular grappling technique that is not recorded in any other saga. Using Scudder's English translation (see above), we read that "Grettir lost his

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<sup>226</sup> For an additional example of such conduct see the previously discussed examples in the "Glíma" section (3.1.) regarding *Finnboga saga ramma*, where Jokul and his comrade Bersi run for their weapons after a wrestling match gone sour only to have the situation deescalated by onlookers.

balance in the end, and Audun jumped on him and kneed him in the groin”. This translation, once again, does neither the saga nor the grappling accounts therein proper justice. Although at first reading this may seem like a perfectly normal, if not sportsmanlike, occurrence in a fight between two teenaged boys, I will argue that there once again seems to be a poor translation at play and that the original meaning of the passage, as dictated by the original Old Icelandic terminology used, reflects a far more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of grappling techniques. From the Old Icelandic versions of the text, we can read “*Lét Auðunn þá fylgja kné kviði og fór illa með hann*”. From this we can clearly determine that Audun, after Grettir has fallen, decides “to guide” (*fylgja*) his knee onto Grettir’s “*kviði*” (from *kviðr*), and then proceeds to deal with Grettir badly. Here “*Kviðr*” does not mean groin but rather means “belly”, “womb” or “abdomen” (Cleasby and Vigfusson 364). If Audun’s knee is on Grettir’s belly, we can be assured that Grettir must have fallen on his back, and is facing upwards, on the ground. Audun is therefore using his knee to apply pressure to Grettir’s chest or stomach in order to maintain control of his opponent, and to keep Grettir pinned to the ground. This technique and position are referred to in various martial arts as “knee–on–belly” or “knee–on–stomach”.

The knee–on–belly technique, although deceptively simple at first, is actually a very effective technique often utilized by advanced grapplers to incapacitate, maintain control over, or submit their opponent. The top assailant is not only in a dominant position and maintaining control over his/her opponent’s movements, but can also easily disengage or escape from his/her opponent if necessary. Furthermore, although this is primarily a technique used for control, positioning, and stability, the grappler in top–position has a variety of potential submissions at his/her disposal, and can even submit their opponent beneath them by applying excessive downward pressure and compressing the recipient’s sternum, ribs, lungs, stomach, and torso in general. This, in turn, can cause severe pain and even asphyxia. It is therefore not surprising that the author of the saga

gives the reader the additional detail that Audun “*fór illa með hann*”/“treated him badly” or harmed him (Cleasby and Vigfusson 318).<sup>227</sup>

From his dominant knee–on–belly position, Audun would have had the opportunity to either strike Grettir from above (one possible interpretation), or to simply apply great amounts of pressure to his chest/abdomen. Whichever way he chose (I would posit that he simply used the position to apply pressure to Grettir’s abdomen, as there is no evidence in either this saga or others that strikes were thrown in such situations), whenever one’s opponent is dominated in such a fashion the audience should not be surprised when they read/are told that several people come to break up the fight. I find it pertinent to add here that this kind of grappling (ground fighting) does not exist in any form in modern *glíma*, lending further support to my argument that the sport *glíma* of today is not, in fact, the “wrestling of the sagas” or “how the Vikings fought”, but rather a modern construct that features only some of the grappling maneuvers and techniques found within the sagas. The previous belly–to–belly technique (as described in the above “*Göngu–Hrólf’s Saga*” section 4.1.2.) would have no place in the modern sport (there is not ground fighting of any kind in modern *glíma*), while the following (and far more common) technique, the overhead belly–to–belly suplex, would also be illegal or counterproductive (it is not only too violent of a technique to be used in modern sport *glíma*, but would also essentially result in your throwing yourself to the ground along with your opponent).

Much later in *Grettis saga* Grettir attends an assembly (the Hegranes Assembly) where regional disputes were settled and law councils took place. Grettir has already been outlawed at this point in the narrative, so he attends the assembly in disguise and under the pseudonym *Gestr*, or “Guest”. Further evidencing the widespread popularity of wrestling in medieval Iceland, as well as its socio–cultural importance and its prominent place in saga literature, the following scenes of the saga unfold during an extended celebration centered around wrestling. We read that “Some young men said that the

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<sup>227</sup> For a video demonstration and explanation of the knee–on–belly position see: <https://youtu.be/Wyhx44u8wJU>.

weather was fine and pleasant, and that it would do them good to arrange wrestling matches and entertainment. Everyone agreed that this was a good idea and went to sit down near the booths” (Scudder 161). Passages such as this emphasize the frequency and indeed casualness in which such wrestling gatherings were planned and executed: when the weather is nice, it is not unusual for young men to gather and specifically arrange wrestling matches. The fact that these impromptu wrestling matches take place during an otherwise serious legal assembly also implies that they were extremely social events and could easily be used as a distraction and form of social cohesion, or chance to gain/display social or body capital, for the community. Considering that this particular wrestling event was held at such a high-profile gathering also suggests that, as Huizinga echoes, valuable social status was at stake and on display during these matches (50). After the wrestling has begun in earnest we are treated to another revealing passage:

When most of the men had wrestled apart from the very strongest, the farmers talked over who would be prepared to wrestle with either of the brothers called Thord mentioned earlier, but no one was willing to. They went up to various men and challenged them, but the harder they were pressed, the more reluctant they became.

(Scudder 161)

This passage further bolsters my argument that wrestling contests were enjoyed by a large portion of the society: the wrestlers were paired by strength, many of the men in attendance at the assembly partook in the wrestling, and although organized by boys, as stated earlier, both men and boys partook in the festivities. Furthermore, the passage specifies that it was the farmers that “talked over who would be prepared to wrestle”, indicating that whoever else at such an assembly (the young men, chieftains, servants, etc.,) might enjoy the matches, it was the lower/common class of farmers that drove the event. This socio-cultural insight should not be overlooked as it indicates to the reader that wrestling was clearly a sport popular among and of “the people”. In addition to these important socio-cultural insights, the wrestling scene is further used, as I have argued earlier, to contextualize the narrative and flesh out the now familiar character of Grettir. The protagonist doesn’t simply wrestle and defeat a foe; rather, the entire scene at the

assembly and the wrestling matches included therein are used by the author of the saga as a tool to emphasize both Grettir's strength and bravery (as "no one was willing" to challenge the brothers Thord) as well as to add an air of gravitas to the situation: Grettir is in disguise and on the run as an outlaw, yet finds himself lured into a highly public, suspenseful, and potentially dangerous situation in which much more is at stake than if he were simply wrestling another man in private or at a single farm.

As well as highlighting wrestling's social importance to the reader, this section of the saga also provides us with a vivid description of a technically and physically impressive, as well as rare, grappling maneuver (rare due to the very skill and strength required to execute it). This maneuver is not found in any other sagas, although potential variants of it are, and further demonstrates the author's keen familiarity with not only wrestling's social functions and importance but also with its physics and technical maneuvers. In this particular passage the maneuver in question is depicted with some alluring additional details that can aid us in identifying it with certainty:

Grettir stóð fyrir rétt, en hinn hljóp at honum sem snarast, ok gekk Grettir hvergi ór sporum. Grettir seildisk aptr yfir bak Þórði ok tók svá í brækurnar og kippði upp fótunum ok kastaði honum aptr yfir höfuð sér, svá að hann kom at herðum niðr, ok varð þat allmikit fall. [Grettir stood there firmly, and Thord took a swift run at him, but he did not budge. Then Grettir reached over Thord's back, took hold of his breeches and lifted him off his feet, and threw him backwards over his head so that he landed on his shoulders, suffering a considerable fall.]

(Guðni 235; Scudder 163)

Here we have a well-detailed and realistic description of a grappling contest between two men. The original author's grappling knowledge is shown here in a twofold manner: Firstly, he describes a realistic maneuver, and situates the characters for the audience. Secondly, the author also gives the audience vital details that not only allow them to determine the precise maneuver that is being done, but which also eliminate other possible interpretations as to what maneuver has been performed.

We start by learning that Grettir has a firm stance and solid footing, and that he cannot be budged by his opponent. Here it is important to note that in the English

translation above, “*hljóp að honum*” is translated to mean “[he took] a swift *run* at him”. Not only does this interpretation not make any grappling–sense in a saga replete with accurate and detailed grappling sequences and established wrestlers, but the translation simply does not hold up to further inspection. In Old Icelandic “*hljóp*”, from “*hlaupa*”, most frequently means to jump, hop, or leap. However, alternative uses of the word include “to start/move suddenly” or, either regarding water or poetically, “to rise” (Cleasby and Vigfusson 263). Most of these possible definitions would make more contextual and practical sense than “to run/ran at”, but all would suffice in logically setting up the next position the two grapplers are described to find themselves in. Interestingly, Cleasby and Vigfusson state, with regard to the noun form of “*hlaup*”, that only in modern usage is the word interpreted to mean “running”, “but seldom so, or not at all, in old writers” (Cleasby and Vigfusson 269).

With this terminology clarified we can understand that Thord is advancing upon Grettir, either trying to “jump” or “shoot–in” (I would argue the latter) at Grettir or otherwise engaging him with forward pressure, and that the two combatants must therefore be facing one another. These are the first clues that indicate to the mindful reader what kind of grappling maneuver is to be expected. Next, we read that Grettir reaches back over Thord and grabs him by the breeches. Here it is plausible (although not sensical) to imagine that that Grettir is literally reaching over a bent–down Thord’s back and grabbing his breeches from above. Realistically, however, it is far more likely and common that by reaching “over”, or “*yfir*”, Thord, Grettir is actually reaching *around* Thord, or *over* the sides Thord’s arms, and enveloping him in a “bear–hug”–like hold, while grasping his breeches at the waist, along the small of Thord’s back. This is certainly the way in which the reader is meant to interpret the scenario thus far, in particular because of the way in which Thord lands. Any other interpretation as to how Grettir would manage to throw Thord from such a position would be farcical at best, and impossible at worst. With my interpretation in mind, Grettir then throws Thord over his own head, behind him, in such a manner that Thord lands on his shoulders. If one were not familiar with grappling then it is possible that one may imagine the sequence to be implausible and almost absurd, but the maneuver being described is nonetheless a well–

attested wrestling maneuver most commonly referred to in modern parlance as the belly-to-belly suplex.

#### 4.2.4.2. Belly-to-Belly Overhead Suplex

The particular variation of the belly-to-belly suplex that Grettir performs in the above passage on Thord is specifically referred to as an “overhead belly-to-belly suplex”, due to the recipient’s being thrown over the head of the initiator. To “throw” Thord, Grettir would clutch Thord close to himself and simultaneously lift/throw Thord upwards and backwards, directly over his own head or over one of his own shoulders (as specifically stated in the saga passage), while arching his own back and falling backwards. Grettir would then, as an audience familiar with grappling might automatically assume, release his hold on Thord while falling backwards, resulting in Thord doing a full 180-degree arc-rotation over Grettir’s head. If done properly, the recipient of the overhead belly-to-belly suplex would land on their shoulders, a detail further emphasizing the grappling acuity of the author.<sup>228</sup> This technique requires great amounts of strength to execute, making Grettir’s nickname “the Strong” all the more appropriate.

From detailed and intricate descriptions such as the above-mentioned examples from *Grettis Saga*, it can be clearly inferred, particularly by those with sufficient and relevant embodied knowledge, that both the author and audience were well-versed in the finer points of the art of grappling, or at least that the author of the saga assumed his/her contemporary audience to intrinsically have such knowledge. If neither the saga author nor the audience had thorough familiarity with grappling and wrestling maneuvers, the grappling sequences described within these sagas would therefore have to be the result of staggeringly implausible coincidence, a possibility I find most unlikely.

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<sup>228</sup> For a visual demonstration of the belly-to-belly overhead suplex see: [https://youtu.be/IHv\\_tRfm1Jo](https://youtu.be/IHv_tRfm1Jo).



# Conclusion

I hope to have shown that given the appropriate level of embodied knowledge in conjunction with a deep understanding of the relevant socio-cultural norms of a society, it is possible to accurately and confidently identify martial techniques found within pre-modern written texts. To argue my points I have used as a case study Old Norse grappling passages taken from the *Íslendingasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*. In doing so I have married the disciplines of Old Norse Studies and Martial Arts Studies, while simultaneously communicating between the two. The result of this union is a multi-pronged thesis that, although focussing on the over-arching question of the plausibility of accurately identifying grappling passages found within historical texts, also necessarily contends with various other academic issues ranging from problems in translation (specifically when a translator lacks pertinent embodied knowledge), to issues of historicity, to the plot and narrative functions that grappling sequences serve, to the practicality of utilizing alternate modes of media (such as film) to further explain a physical phenomenon, to differing understandings of the relationship between the body and mind. It is my hope that these issues, although all containing merit in their own rights and to their own respective fields, can be viewed communally as one intertwined, multi-faceted argument that illuminates the various potential discoveries and conclusions that can be drawn by integrating a truly interdisciplinary and embodied approach into one's research.

Retracing my argument and its conclusions, we must start at the beginning: wrestling and grappling have been universally omnipresent throughout human society and culture since pre-antiquity. Whereas many martial arts have far more recent inceptions and far narrower regional and cultural ties, wrestling predates our written record and can indeed be seen as a natural part of mammalian social development in the natural world. This primordial aspect to wrestling, in conjunction with the fact that wrestling only requires two human bodies and a relatively flat space in which to compete, has allowed humanity-at-large to try, test, create and maintain effective grappling

techniques and maneuvers over several millennia. Whether for sport or survival, different wrestling techniques have been created, spread, and practiced throughout the world not merely because of their social or cultural popularity, but because of their practical efficacy. For this reason many of the techniques that would have helped and been utilized by a prehistoric warrior grappling a rival are much the same as those techniques that were used by an ancient Egyptian or Nubian wrestler, a Classical Greek wrestler or pankration competitor, or a modern-day Olympic or folkstyle wrestler. This ubiquity of wrestling is evidenced in the strikingly similar styles and shared maneuvers that continue to be seen between various (folk and otherwise) wrestling styles from around the world.

Despite humanity's massive strides and advancements in knowledge and technology, the best way for one person to force, throw, or trip another to the ground has not changed, perhaps at all, in thousands of years: the skills taught in wrestling were (and in many instances remain) far too practical, efficient, and necessary to not be almost universally trained, drilled, and passed-on pan-culturally. In conjunction with wrestling's practical and martial value to humanity, I have also shown that it has a long and distinguished history as a means to acquire and maintain both bodily and social capital.

With this historical backdrop of wrestling in mind, I argue that due in large part to the historical prominence of Cartesian mind-body dualism, in conjunction with various biases and trends within broader academia, that the body, and therefore sport and grappling, have been largely overlooked and understudied within the confines of academia until recently. In light of this I have argued that grappling was not only popular in medieval Scandinavia, but that it also played an often overlooked narrative and literary role in many of the sagas of Icelanders and legendary sagas. Despite previous saga scholarship's having for the most part ignored the importance of the sagas' many wrestling passages, often dismissing them as fantastical or merely inserted for entertainment purposes, I argue the opposite: From the frequency of its mention, to its many detailed descriptions, to its functions as a common plot device, not only was wrestling an important, entertaining, and functional part of the saga corpus, but the techniques depicted were often accurate, effective and very much *real* wrestling techniques, the great majority of which are still in use today. I further evidence these claims by pointing to the saga author's familiarity with the different techniques and the

context in which he/she applies them, the details and context within which many of the techniques are described, and the fact that the anonymous authors often used very specific terminology that only an intended audience familiar with wrestling and its specific technique names would be able to meaningfully interpret and fully appreciate. Add to this that the sagas repeatedly depict wrestling matches as being a highly social gathering and an opportunity for grapplers to improve their perceived social standing and it is clear that the majority of wrestling passages in the legendary sagas and sagas of Icelanders were written by an author familiar with wrestling for an audience/society knowledgeable and passionate about the sport.

Specific to the particular case study I have chosen, in discussing, interpreting, and analysing the many grappling passages that are found within the sagas I found it necessary to confront some seemingly widely held beliefs about the relationship between the wrestling techniques that are represented in the sagas and the modern folkstyle of wrestling currently practiced in Iceland, *glíma*. Primarily, in having analysed the depictions of grappling within the sagas through the dual lenses of embodied knowledge and literary/cultural understanding I have concluded that contrary to some previous scholarship and research on the subject, the majority of the wrestling contained within the sagas is indeed *not* a folkish-style of unique Scandinavian or Icelandic wrestling, such as *glíma*, and much more often portrays broader, more universal wrestling techniques. While there certainly is evidence of a traditional folk-style ancestor to *glíma* in the sagas, it is depicted rarely and almost exclusively in a sporting sense rather than in the context of combat. Contrasting sharply with this, I show that the vast majority of grappling passages in the sagas revolve around martial combat and life-and-death struggles.<sup>229</sup> Such a style of wrestling, and the maneuvers and techniques that make it up, are better categorized as a more universal form of combat wrestling: a style that explicitly *does not* follow the traditional rules of *glíma* and other folkstyles such as the requiring of specific

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<sup>229</sup> Even many of the “cordial” wrestling matches that occur in the sagas, such as the previously mentioned passages within *Grettis Saga*, are rife with powerful, violent manoeuvres (such as the overhead belly-to-belly suplex) that bear little to no resemblance to the manoeuvres allowed and performed in the form(s) of *glíma* practiced today.

grips, beginning matches having already engaged with your opponent, the use of belts and/or harnesses, and the promotion of gentle, sportsmanlike techniques.

As I have contended, in order to accurately analyse and identify the grappling maneuvers found within the legendary sagas and the sagas of Icelanders it is not necessary to have a deep familiarity with Iceland's modern sport *glíma* (although such knowledge would be useful in many instances, such as when identifying particular terminology or identifying shared maneuvers). Rather, I argue that embodied knowledge and experience with more aggressive, less regulated (e.g., no required starting stances, no grip restrictions, no harnesses, belts, or other accessories, etc.) styles of grappling is preferred. Moreover, I argue that due precisely to wrestling's primordial and universal nature, in conjunction with its relatively low barriers to accessibility, that it has not fundamentally changed over time; just as our bodies, physics, and the human instinct to compete and dominate one another for the sake of social and bodily capital have not.

For these reasons, I argue that someone with the proper embodied grappling knowledge can accurately identify specific grappling techniques based off written historical descriptions, given they have the appropriate academic and socio-cultural background expertise (in this case of my study expertise and familiarity with the Old Norse language and medieval Icelandic culture).

Unlike the more traditional academic understanding of "expertise", having the appropriate "embodied expertise" is critical to this kind of martial analysis as anyone could theoretically understand an expert's explanation or analysis of a written historical technique; but it is often only those with an embodied knowledge structured upon years of specific habitus acquirement who can know with certainty that this-or-that technique *had* to be performed in a particular manner due to various contextual factors such as hand/body placement, physics/kinesiology, the difficulty of the move being performed, the influence of either the attacker or defender's strength, the ease in which the technique can be defended against, etc., This level of embodied knowledge is not only essential in order to accurately and confidently identify particular maneuvers and their nuances, but is also essential in regard to translation. As I have argued regarding several examples, there are many instances where a translator's having the required embodied knowledge could have greatly improved the accuracy and quality of their translation. That is not to say that

I urge translators working with texts containing marital arts to necessarily take it upon themselves to acquire years' worth of embodied knowledge in an area of otherwise peripheral interest to them, but rather that I suggest any translator consult other academics or martial artists who do have the particular embodied knowledge necessary in order to accurately and confidently identify the (not necessarily martial) techniques, movements, or skills in question.

I further argue that grappling is in somewhat of a unique position as to the reconstruction and identification of techniques found in historical writings. The “equation” of grappling is relatively simple compared to many other martial arts: you have two combatants, either clothed or nude, attempting to bring their opponent to the ground and dominate them in a controlled fashion. Although there are no doubt near–endless variations and possibilities as to *how* one attempts to bring their opponent to the ground, as with swimming, history has greatly narrowed–down the vast majority of possible techniques on the basis of their tried and tested efficacy. Given the appropriate level of embodied knowledge and a sufficiently detailed historical description of a wrestling maneuver, the confines of physics and the human body dictate that there are only *so many* ways to, for example, force one's opponent to the ground from a given positioning of combatants (and far fewer ways still if the opponent is skilled and/or resisting). These ways may seem esoteric to a non–participant academic, and indeed they are. With a proper grappling habitus and its resulting embodied knowledge, however, unique insights into the various possibilities of how a particular move was or could have been performed are often revealed.

Another related critical attribute that I argue grappling has in comparison to many other martial arts is that it is wholly dependent upon executing a maneuver on another participant. Unlike martial arts that contain any kind of striking, weaponry, armour, or gear, where a description of the movements may appear more vague or abstract due to the lack of relativity, any wrestling technique can always refer back to the positioning of the human body: either or both the attacker's or the defender's. This facet of “relativity”, i.e., proprioception and the body schema, allows for the author (or interpreter) of a grappling passage to explicitly place their actors in particular contexts with the knowledge that an audience with the appropriate level of embodied grappling knowledge and familiarity

with grappling will not only be able to understand what the author intends to portray, but that the audience will also be able to intuit what the author *must* be portraying due to the very real physical restraints of grappling (often further aided by the author's use or addition of specific technique names). In this light, I argue that many other martial arts with additional variables in their equations (armour, weaponry, specific clothing materials, ranged-combat, partnerless martial arts, martial arts with multiple adversaries, etc.,) can and do have their own unique difficulties and challenges. My argument has revolved specifically around grappling and its unique characteristics, and therefore may only be applicable to varying degrees regarding other martial arts and forms of combat.

Within the budding field of Martial Arts Studies I specifically hope that my research has shed light on some of the different ways in which techniques within a particular martial art, in this case wrestling, can be accurately identified through textual description. As an extension of this, it is a primary goal of this thesis and case study to show that it is plausible for other researchers with embodied knowledge of wholly different martial arts to be able to couple their embodied knowledge with the relevant socio-cultural and linguistic knowledge needed to accurately analyse and interpret martial techniques whose descriptions are found in pre-modern written texts from various cultures around the world. I therefore hope that my conclusions can be used or adapted to analyse other martial (arts) texts from different historical, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds, as well as to provide a framework within which aspects of expertise, both academic and embodied, can be consulted (and how) when attempting to analyse such texts. Such discourses could be particularly fruitful with regard to other cultures' and nations' various wrestling styles, but should not be restricted to only grappling: fields such as historical European martial arts (HEMA) could perhaps constructively apply such frameworks. Broadly speaking, it is also my hope that this thesis both bolsters the necessity of interdisciplinarity within modern academia as well as sheds additional light on the potential of integrating aspects of the Digital Humanities into Martial Arts Studies and Old Norse Studies, such as video references with depictions of a physical technique with simultaneous verbal explanations. In a similar vein, when trying to portray historical cultures and modes of combat the film and related industries could benefit from further consulting relevant embodied experts to ensure various aspects of historical accuracy.

During my analysis I have also shown that the *glíma* of the sagas has much less to do with modern sport *glíma* than our contemporary experts would have us think. Rather, modern Icelandic wrestling may have *evolved* from the style of wrestling found in the sagas but does not replicate it. As a result of this evidence I hope to have underlined the importance of identifying and removing cultural, social, or personal bias from one's work with historical martial arts, so as not to inadvertently reflect one's modern (mis)conceptions of a sport back onto a perceived/desired past practice: This practice of identifying and discussing "invented tradition" is already well underway with regard to many of the "traditional" martial arts as evidenced by articles in journals such as *Martial Arts Studies*, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, and (regarding primarily historical European martial arts) *Acta Periodica Duellatorum*.

In light of my research, although far beyond its scope, I would also be interested in further trying to identify or trace the possible geographical spread over time of particular wrestling techniques. Although I have argued many various and geographically distant wrestling styles share various techniques and fundamentals, due to their inherent practicality, it would still be interesting, if at all possible, to trace how, where, and in which order certain techniques spread. Admittedly, it would also be interesting if such an endeavour merely served to further bolster the argument that, indeed, there was no dissemination of techniques and that most cultures simply developed their equally practical wrestling techniques in parallel with one another. I suspect that the truth lies somewhat in between these two possibilities (i.e., that many cultures did develop their similar wrestling techniques separately and parallelly, but that certain specific, effective or novel ways of executing techniques may have spread through physical cultural interaction). Regardless, this would be a massive and complicated undertaking, but with resources and help from scholars and historians of other "cultural" martial arts such as *glíma*, *ssireum*, judo, Scottish Backhold, sumo, etc., I believe that an important exchange of knowledge could take place and that the endeavour would yield some interesting new conclusions and discoveries within the broader field.

It would not be possible to engage in such an interdisciplinary study without impacting multiple areas of research. In the case of the present thesis, although my primary aim was to show the plausibility of accurately identifying pre-modern martial

techniques through a combination of embodied knowledge and specific socio-cultural knowledge, in using as a case study grappling passages found within various Old Norse sagas I have necessarily drawn from and contributed to the field of Old Norse studies as well. In this regard, I hope to have shone some light on the problem of translators working on texts that they do not have the appropriate embodied knowledge to meaningfully and accurately translate. I also hope that my work may show future academics within the field the social, cultural, literary, and practical importance of treating the wrestling passages found within the sagas of Icelanders and the legendary sagas with the same circumspection and seriousness that virtually every other major (and often minor) facet of the sagas and other literature have received. Perhaps most straight-forwardly, I have also evidenced through my research which specific, practical wrestling maneuvers were *en vogue* and in use by medieval Icelanders. In doing so I have filled-in a small yet previously empty and under-studied social, cultural, and linguistic space within the broader field of Old Norse Studies. Furthermore, having specifically identified various techniques, confronted and corrected certain academic and popular translation issues, and shown, both in writing and through video, what these techniques looked like and how they were performed, I hope that I have diligently allowed scholars and laymen alike to accurately understand a hitherto often overlooked and misunderstood facet of the culture and literature of medieval Scandinavia.

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