

Háskóli Íslands
Hugvísindasvið
Íslensk miðaldafræði

What did they sound like?

Reconstructing the music of the Viking Age

Ritgerð til MA-prófs í íslenskum miðaldafræðum

Chihiro Tsukamoto

Kt.: 250493-3209

Leiðbeinandi: Þórir Jónsson Hraundal

Janúar 2017

Abstract

There has been much scholarship over the years regarding Scandinavian culture during the Viking Age (c. 793–1066 CE). However, often missing from these discussions is the study of music. This paper attempts to fill that gap by offering a reconstruction of Viking Age Scandinavian music. Archaeological evidence, literary records, and medieval music theories were used as the basis of this study. Archaeology indicates that Scandinavians played wind, string, and percussion instruments, while later Old Norse literary accounts detail the many circumstances wherein music was performed, and suggest the likely existence of different musical genres. I have consulted Arabic, Greek, and Latin accounts for contemporary sources, as the Scandinavian people did not have a written culture during this time. Marking a departure from typical historical analyses, I have also conducted a cross-cultural comparison of medieval Arabic, Greek, and Western European music theories in order to recognize what Scandinavian music could not have resembled. By combining archaeological, literary, and musical evidence, it is possible to propose a highly educated hypothesis on how Viking Age Scandinavian music may have sounded.

Ágrip

Mikið hefur verið rætt og ritað í gegnum árin um Skandinavíska menningu á Víkingaöld (um 793–1066 e.Kr.). Hins vegar er tónlist viðfangsefni sem oft virðist vanta í þessar umræður. Þessi ritgerð mun reyna að fylla það skarð með því að leggja fram tilgátu um endurgerð Skandinavískrar tónlistar frá Víkingaöld. Fornleifar, bókmenntir og kenningar um miðaldatónlist voru notaðar sem grundvöllur fyrir þessa rannsókn. Fornleifafræði bendir til þess að Norðurlandabúar hafi leikið á blásturs-, strengja- og slagverkshljóðfæri. Einnig lýsa norrænar bókmenntir mörgum tilvikum, þar sem tónlist var spiluð, og benda til þess að það voru sennilega margar tónlistarstefnur. Ég leitaði einnig til arabískra, grískra og latneskra texta eftir samtímaheimildum, þar sem Skandínavar höfðu ekki skriflega

menningu á þessum tíma. Ólíkt venjulegum sögulegum greiningum, hef ég gert menningarsamanburð á kennningum um arabíska, gríska, og Vestur-Evrópska tónlist til að bera kennsli á hvernig Skandinavísk tónlist hefði ekki geta hljómað. Með því að sameina heimildir um fornleifar, bókmenntir tónlistar, er hægt að leggja fram tilgátu um hvernig Skandinavísk tónlist kann að hafa hljómað á Víkingaöld.

Acknowledgements

First, I am grateful to my advisor, Þórir Jónsson Hraundal, for his kindness and truly wonderful conversations. I am indebted to his help and open-mindedness. I give my thanks to the lovely faculty and staff of the University of Iceland, in particular to Haraldur Bernharðsson, Torfi Tulinius, and Geir Þórarinn Þórarinsson, whose support and teachings were a tremendous help.

I owe my gratitude to the Leifur Eiríksson Foundation, whose fellowship generously funded this research. Thanks also to Sigurður Gunnar Magnússon, for making sure that my modern Icelandic is not stuck in the 13th century.

Finally, I must thank my family and friends, whose names are too numerous to list here. Special thanks to my parents, Hironori and Akiko Tsukamoto, without whom I would have no idea what microtones are, and to my sister, Kay Tsukamoto, for raiding and pillaging every library in the Greater Boston area for any book on Scandinavian music. Your herculean efforts were truly appreciated.

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A Note on Spelling

This paper contains numerous non-English words and names, namely Arabic, Greek, Latin, and Old Icelandic/Old Norse. I have endeavored to keep the transliteration systems for each language as consistent and as close as possible to the original language, with exceptions to names that are overwhelmingly used in their Anglicized forms (e.g. Constantine VII instead of Konstantinos VII). With this in mind, I have chosen to use the original accent markings when applicable. In regards to spelling Greek and Arabic words, I have used the American Library Association – Library of Congress systems of transliteration. All Byzantine Greek present in this paper has been transliterated like Ancient Greek, and not Modern Greek. With Old Icelandic, I have kept “ð” and “þ” instead of using the Romanized “d” or “th.” For languages that do not use the Latin alphabet, I have included only their English translations for block quotations.

Unless otherwise specified, all translations in this paper are my own.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The Vikings were not the dirty, violent raiders that they are so often depicted as being. Not only were most so-called “Vikings” farmers who went trading--or raiding--during the summers, but the archaeological record indicates that they were highly artistic. Intricately carved swords, captivating runestones, and highly decorated daily artifacts, such as combs, tools, and the like, have all been unearthed over the past few decades. For such an artistically inclined people, there is one genre that is noticeably absent from discussions concerning the Viking Age: music.

It has often been said that where there is man, there is music. Indeed, it would be quite the challenge to name a single major civilization or people without some form of music. Yet, music has often been missing from discussions about Viking Age Scandinavians. Part of the reason for this is no doubt due to the relatively low number of instruments that have been discovered, but perhaps no small part is also due to the nature of music itself. Music, more so than any other art form (except perhaps dance), is ephemeral, making it exceedingly hard to recreate or capture in words.

What is music?

At first glance, there may seem to be little need to define the term “music.” Music is such a given and so ubiquitous in our modern consciousness that it feels odd to even question its nature. Yet, “music” is much more elusive than it may first appear. *The Oxford Dictionary* defines music as “Vocal or instrumental sounds (or both) combined in such a way as to produce beauty of form, harmony, and expression of emotion.”¹ This is a vague definition. Words such as “beauty” are clearly subjective, and what might be considered beautiful in one culture might sound hideous to another. As it stands, while there is little question that the Norse

¹ *Oxford Dictionary of English*. 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 1168.

people had music in their societies, the matter is complicated by the fact that there appears to have been no strict category of music for its own sake. Music was not the most important art form in Norse culture--that throne was reserved for poetry. Poetry was the artistic medium of choice for the Norse people, often being recited aloud to an audience, and thereby being a performing art. Oral poetry has a cadence and rhythm of its own that is not unlike music, and the incorporation of music into another art form may have relegated it to the sidelines. This non-primary status of music in Viking Age Scandinavian culture is reflected by the fact that, unlike in many societies, the Norse people did not have a designated deity for music. There is no Æsir or Vanir equivalent of Apollo; instead, the major deity Óðinn presided on poetry. This preoccupation with poetry and its crossover into a theater-esque performing art further blurs the line between music, chants, and poetry. To make matters more difficult, music without a notation system--such as Scandinavian music during the time--is far more vulnerable to extinction than poetry, which enjoyed a rather better survival rate due to the existence of written records. It is thus understandable that the combination of ambiguity and lack of abundant materials on music, in contrast to the relative plethora of materials for poetry, has led to a proliferation of scholarship on Old Norse poetry, with far less attention being paid to Old Norse music. In response, it is the purpose of this thesis to bring much-needed attention to the latter.

Music of the Germanic Scandinavians

The Norse people had curious relations to music. Despite holding music in high regard, they did not seem to have held this view for musicians. While it is not unheard of for musicians to be considered servants of kings and aristocrats (this was indeed the case for most Baroque and Classical composers and musicians in the 1600s and 1700s) it is rather unusual for them to be regarded with outright disdain, as they seem to have been in Old Norse-speaking societies. As Nils Grinde speculates, this may have been because instrument players had virtually no legal

rights in law statute books.² Musicians tended to be an “international group whose job it was to entertain at celebrations of various kinds”³ for various audiences, and were often grouped together with jesters and other “low” forms of entertainment. As they frequently traveled from place to place, they may have been looked upon with suspicion. Furthermore, musicians were often foreigners at the location where they were performing, which certainly did not help their case.

Before delving into a discussion of Norse music, it would be prudent to first define the people about whom I am speaking. Regarding terminology, I will refer to the Germanic Scandinavians when writing Norse people, as opposed to the Saami or Finno-Ugric peoples. Despite using the term “Norse people”, it is always kept in mind that they were not a monolithic block, and I am simply alluding to those who spoke some variety of Old West or Old East Norse. I will only use the term Vikings to refer to the Old Norse-speaking people who went abroad. In the case of the *Rus'*, I mean only to refer to the Germanic Scandinavians who went to Byzantium or to the East, as opposed to Slavic peoples, or those in Slavic settlements whose ancestors were Scandinavian. I may use the term *Rus'* or *Varangian* interchangeably in this paper, but I recognize that views of these words likely differ according to the school of thought that a particular scholar subscribes to, and that there is on-going debate regarding the definition of these terms. Defining music is likewise a difficult task, but here I shall be following the lead of *The Oxford Dictionary*, and will consider vocal and/or instrumental singing, chanting, and playing as music for the purposes of this paper.

² Nils Grinde, *A History of Norwegian Music*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991) 12.

³ Ibid.

Chapter 2

Music in Viking Age Archaeology

The matter of writing a *Stand der Forschung* for Viking Age music is complicated by the fact that the number of excavated instruments is few and the scholarship relatively lacking. For all the mentions of singing, chanting, and music in Old Norse literature, the archaeological record offers less support. Nevertheless, the variety of instruments found in archaeology do illuminate a few tantalizing hints. In general, the instruments that have been found in excavations can be categorized into wind, string, and percussion instruments.

Wind Instruments

By far the most common type of instruments that have been excavated is wind instruments. A wind instrument is any musical instrument that creates a sound by the vibration of air. Such instruments typically include a mouthpiece and a resonator. The player blows air into or over the mouthpiece, which moves into the resonator, which is often some sort of tube. The pitch is determined by the length of the resonator and/or by manually modifying the column of air by pressing keys or covering holes. Wind instruments are further classified into the woodwind and brass families. Calling some of the Viking Age instruments “woodwinds” and “brass” might seem a bit of a misnomer, as many of them are made of bone or some other material not suggested by the name of their categorization. In actuality, the classification of wind instruments is dependent not upon the material of its composition, but by how the sound is produced. In other words, woodwinds need not be made of wood, nor brass instruments made of brass. Historically, this was often the case (and hence their names), but what determines whether a wind instrument is woodwind or brass is what vibrates in order to cause the sound. In woodwinds, the air vibrates because the player causes a reed to vibrate (e.g. modern clarinet, oboe, bassoon, etc.), blows against a fipple mouthpiece (e.g. recorder), or

blows across the edge of a hole (e.g. flute). For brass instruments, it is the player's own lips that vibrate, which causes the air to vibrate in turn.⁴

***Lur* horns**

Horns of various types have been found in excavations, yet perhaps the most famous of these are the *lur* horns. There tends to be some confusion regarding *lur* horns, as the same name applies to both the bronze horns that date to the Scandinavian Bronze Age (c. 1500–500 BCE) and to the wooden, trumpet-like horns from the Middle Ages (c. 400–1400 CE).

Bronze Age *lur* horns date from c. 1000 BCE.⁵ It is rather ironic that the older bronze *lurs* are more famous than the wooden ones, as the former were named after their more recent cousins. Cast in bronze, Bronze Age *lurs* are remarkably well crafted, consisting of a decorated bell, precisely fitting resonator, and a mouthpiece that is startlingly similar to that of the modern trombone (see fig. 1). The bell at one end of the instrument is an ornamented plate with six to ten round depressions, with the average being eight.⁶ These depressions do not serve an acoustic purpose and is solely for decoration. Some *lurs* also have small rattling plates attached to the bell or the mouthpieces, also for decoration. The body of the instrument is made up of cylindrical pieces that create the resonator. Each piece of the tubular resonator has been constructed to fit exactly so that they cannot slide when fit together. The mouthpiece greatly resembles that of modern brass instruments and is well designed for good tone production. It tapers from the blowing end, which curves outward, to the narrower, cylindrical end that inserts into the resonator piece. Bronze Age *lurs* most closely resemble a modern tenor trombone in pitch and

⁴ Anthony Baines, *Musical Instruments Through the Ages* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1961).

⁵ "The lurs of the Bronze Age," National Museum of Denmark, accessed July 15, 2016, <http://en.natmus.dk/historical-knowledge/denmark/prehistoric-period-until-1050-ad/the-bronze-age/the-lurs-of-the-bronze-age/>.

⁶ "The lurs and their music," National Museum of Denmark, accessed July 15, 2016, <http://en.natmus.dk/historical-knowledge/denmark/prehistoric-period-until-1050-ad/the-bronze-age/the-lurs-of-the-bronze-age/the-lurs-and-their-music/>.

timbre. Modern playing techniques allow the instrument to produce eight to ten of the first partial tones, in some rare cases even going up to the twelfth.⁷ It is unknown whether ancient players were able to produce such a range, but the highly sophisticated acoustic design of the mouthpiece indicates that they were certainly skilled and competent. Bronze Age *lurs* are often curved, likely for purposes of easier carrying, much like the modern sousaphone.⁸ Some have carrying chain attachments just for this purpose. They often come in pairs, and almost certainly had religious functions, as nearly all were found in bogs as offerings. Images of *lurs* are found in rock carvings depicting religious scenes in Tanum, Sweden, further indicating a religious function.⁹

In contrast to Bronze Age *lurs*, those of the Viking Age (Anglo-centric dates: 793–1066 CE) and the High Middle Ages (c. 1001–1300 CE) are largely composed of wood, particularly birch (see fig. 2). The earliest written mentions of *lur* horns are in the Icelandic sagas, where they are said to have had military functions, being used in battles to marshal troops and to intimidate opponents. These wooden *lurs* are straight in shape, and aside from times of war, were used for mundane purposes such as shepherding and signaling cattle. One such *lur* may have been found during the Oseberg excavation. Dating between 834–850 CE, the Oseberg *lur* is wooden and nearly a meter long. It is straight in form, and has many similarities to modern herding *lurs*, though unlike the latter, they are not covered in birch bark or anything of the kind.¹⁰ An instrument very close to the wooden *lur* is the birch trumpet, the oldest of which dates to the 10th century and which were used in Scandinavian societies (particularly in Norway and Sweden) until as recently as the 19th century.

⁷ A partial tone for a brass instrument is one of the series of notes that can be produced given a setting of slides, valves, or holes.

⁸ A sousaphone is a type of tuba that was designed to be in a ring shape that the player may hoist onto one shoulder. This allows them to be used in marching bands in the place of the more unwieldy concert tuba.

⁹ "Vitlycke Rock Carvings, Tanumshede," Tanum Museum & Tanum World Heritage, accessed December 30, 2016, <http://www.vastsverige.com/en/tanum/b/49992/Vitlycke-Rock-Carvings-Tanumshede>.

¹⁰ Nils Grinde, *A History of Norwegian Music* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991) 11.



Fig. 1 Bronze Age *lur* horn. (Photo: National Museum of Denmark. Copenhagen.)



Fig. 2 Modern *lur* horn made from birch. This style is far closer to the *lur* horns of the Viking Age and Medieval Era. (Photo: Thuen, "Neverlur," July 24, 2006.)

Cow horn recorder

Various types of recorders carved from cow horn have been found. An excavation in Västerby, Sweden, has recovered one such instrument. The Västerby recorder has a mouthpiece at the small end of the horn, and has four small finger holes (see fig. 3). A similar horn recorder was discovered in Konsterud, Värmland, Sweden, but with five finger holes and measuring around 27 cm. Other types of recorders have been found where the mouthpiece is at the wide end of the horn; such horns have a wooden stopper that plugs the space around the mouthpiece. Called the *gemshorn*, it is uncertain whether these horns were known to the Vikings, as the earliest extant record of one is from 1511, well after the Viking Age.

Another type of horned instrument is worth mentioning in this section. This is the two Golden Horns of Gallehus (c. 400 CE) that were found in Gallehus, Southern Jutland, Denmark. However, as the Gallehus horns date to the Germanic Iron Age, centuries before the Viking Age, they will only receive a passing mention here. Composed of pieces cast in double sheet gold, the horns were stolen and melted down in 1802.¹¹ Despite the early dating of the Gallehus horns, using horns for drinking and music is not unique to them alone. Rudolf Simek observed that the Germanic people have a long history of using horns for aesthetic purposes, and speculated that they may have kept sacred horns solely for religious use since the early Germanic Iron Age (400–800 CE).¹²



Fig. 3 Reconstruction of a cow horn found in Västerby, Sweden. (Photo: Mogens Friis, "Kopi af "Västerbyhornet," Levende Musikhistorie.)

¹¹ R I. Page, *Runes*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987).

¹² Rudolf Simek. *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2007) 110–111.

Bone flutes

Bone flutes have been found throughout Scandinavia, variously dating from the 800s to the 1200s CE. Typically carved from the bones of cows, deer, large birds, or branches of the easily hollowed elder tree, these flutes range from a simple whistle to a longer flute with multiple finger holes. All of the flutes that have been found thus far produce sound via a wooden fipple or an inert bone when blown into. They are quite short in length, usually having around three finger holes, but may have become longer and more elaborate over time. Those found in the Swedish trading city of Birka, dating c. 800–900 CE, have two holes (see fig. 4), while a later flute found in Aarhus, Denmark dating to the 13th century contains seven holes. The small number of holes is undoubtedly explained by the small size of the bones (often sheep bone) out of which the flutes were made. Longer flutes, naturally, tend to have more finger holes, and can therefore produce more notes.



Fig. 4 Bone flute found in Birka, Sweden. (Photo: Swedish History Museum, Stockholm.)

Panpipes

A curious instrument found in the Coppergate excavations in York, UK, is a set of panpipes. Made out of boxwood, it resembles a slab of thin, rectangular wood that has had five holes drilled into it alongside its vertical length, following the grain of the wood (see fig. 5). Only one set of this instrument has been found in Coppergate, and has been dated to the 10th century. The player's lips rest upon a

slightly beveled hole carved at the top of the instrument, and the various depths of the holes bored into the wood create different pitches. Also called a syrinx, each hole of the panpipes produces one note, from A to E.



Fig. 5 Panpipes found in the Coppergate excavation in York, UK, dating to the 10th century CE. (Photo: “Pan Pipes.” Jorvik Artefact Gallery, York Archaeological Trust, York.)

Falster pipe

A fragment of a wind instrument was found during an excavation at Fribrødr river in Falster, Denmark. This so-called “Falster pipe” is a woodwind instrument that dates from the latter half of the 11th century.¹³ The recovered section is a wooden tube with finger holes, and may once have been part of a bagpipe-like instrument; however, this theory is unconfirmed. A modern reconstruction attached a wooden mouthpiece and a bell-like piece at either end, creating a kind of hornpipe.¹⁴

¹³ “Falster-pibe,” The Viking Network, last modified February 21, 2001, <http://www.viking.no/e/life/music/instruments/e-falsterpibe.html>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

String Instruments

String instruments are a major category of musical instruments that produce sound via vibrating strings, which may be bowed or plucked. Modern examples include the violin, harp, guitar, and dulcimer, to name a few. To change the pitch, the player manipulates the length, tension, and linear density of the string. Various types of string instruments have been excavated from Germanic settlements, including both plucked and bowed instruments.

Harps & Lyres

There are several string instruments that are featured in Norse literature. Of these, the harp and the lyre are undoubtedly the most ubiquitous, indicating their solid presence in Norse culture. However, despite this fact, few have survived in the archaeological record. One famous early instrument that has survived is the Sutton Hoo round lyre (see fig. 6). Archaeologists were able to reassemble the damaged fragments and numerous reconstructions have since been created. A rather thin plank of wood with rounded corners, there is an oblong hole in the middle, over which six strings are stretched. The strings are wound around pegs at the top of the instrument and taper toward the opposite end, where they are gathered over a bridge (see fig. 7). Although the Sutton Hoo instrument is Anglo-Saxon, its shape matches that of other lyres that were outside England and in continental Europe at the time.

Most lyres that have survived are from later periods, such as the Kravik lyre, dating to the 13th century. Found in northwest Oslo, the part that has been recovered is incomplete, and is somewhat different from the other depictions of lyres from the era, but appear to be a related type of instrument. It evidently had seven strings that were played by plucking. There has been no discovery to date of a three-cornered harp (e.g. like modern harps) from the Viking Age, but this type of harp has been in use in Norway from at least the Late Middle Ages until the 19th century, and although the oldest extant one only dates to the 1600s, it is believed that this model followed previous models from earlier times.

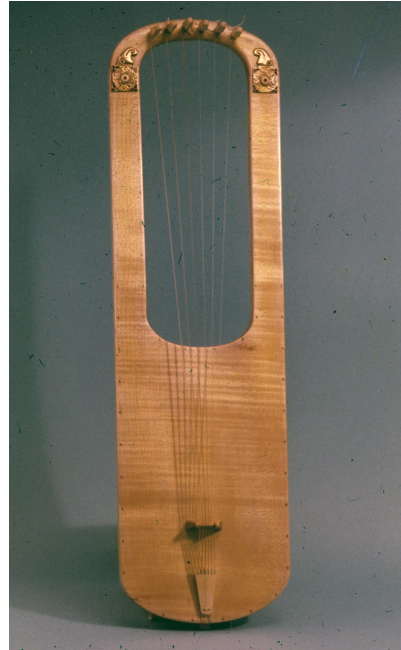


Fig. 6 & 7 Sutton Hoo lyre (left) alongside a replica (right). (Photo fig. 6: “Fragments of a Lyre from the Ship Burial at Sutton Hoo.” The British Museum, London. Photo fig. 7: “Sutton Hoo, Harp Replica.” Sutton Hoo. Furman University, Greenville.)

Though most of the instruments themselves may not have survived, there are quite a few depictions of harps and lyres on manuscripts (see fig. 8) and from other archaeological sources. The harp is the most frequently depicted instrument in stone carvings, almost all of which depict the famous scene from *Völsunga saga* where Gunnar tames the snakes in the snake pit. Despite the fact that the written source names a harp, many of these illustrations show a lyre-like instrument with arms that extend outward from the sound box instead of the typical corners that harps have. This is the case for the wooden carving of Gunnar on the Uvdal stave church in Norway, which was originally built around 1168 CE,¹⁵ and the wood carving on the Hyllestad stave church, also in Norway, from c. 1200.

¹⁵ As parts of the church were torn down and rebuilt in later centuries, however, this does not mean that this particular carving was made in 1168.



Fig. 8 Illustration from MS Junius 11 of Jubal of Genesis playing a lap harp, c. 1000CE. This is likely the oldest depiction of a triangular closed frame harp in England. (Photo: MS Junius 11, folio 54. Artstor, Bodleian Library, Oxford.)

Fiddle & Gigje

These two instruments are mentioned together so often in Old Norse sources that it is hard to write about one without mentioning the other. Both the *fiðla* (fiddle) and the *gigje* were most certainly foreign imports, and not indigenous to Scandinavia.¹⁶ Unfortunately, it is not known what the *gigje* looked like, as there are none that have been discovered from the Viking Age period. It has been speculated that a fiddle had a straighter back (much like the modern violin) while a *gigje* had a domed back (like the Neapolitan or round-backed mandolin), but it is impossible to know for certain.¹⁷ Although no fiddles from the Viking Age have been found, they

¹⁶ The Hardingfele, or Hardanger fiddle, on the other hand, was unique to the Scandinavian region for having sympathetic strings (understrings) that resonate under the other strings, unlike violins and continental fiddles. However, the earliest known one dates to 1651, well after the Viking Age.

¹⁷ Grinde, *A History of Norwegian Music*. 12–14.

presumably resembled the fiddles that were in use in continental Europe during that time.¹⁸

Miscellaneous string instruments

Despite not having an extant string instrument, there is a stone sculpture on the Nidaros cathedral (built from 1070–1300 CE) in Trondheim, Norway, of a musician playing a stringed instrument (see fig. 9). The stringed instrument depicted here resembles a wooden plank with three strings that the performer is bowing. Some scholars have theorized that this might be a type of *jouhikantele*, a bowed harp originating in Finland, yet this is all pure speculation.¹⁹ Finland has a rich musical heritage, including its famous string instrument, the *kantele* (Sami: harppu)—a plucked string instrument belonging to the zither category.²⁰ However, there is little evidence to suggest that the Germanic Scandinavians played such an instrument. The closest might be a type of zither called a *langeleik* in Norway, yet the oldest one known is inscribed with the year 1524.²¹



Fig. 9 Stone sculpture of a man playing a bowed string instrument on the Nidaros cathedral in Trondheim, Norway. (Photo: *A History of Norwegian Music*, p. 14.)

¹⁸ As no archaeological evidence of fiddles and *gigjes* are known at this time, I will discuss them further in the Old Norse literature section in chapter 4.

¹⁹ Grinde, *A History of Norwegian Music*. 14.

²⁰ A category of stringed instruments that consist of a thin, flat body over which strings are stretched and are then plucked.

²¹ “Instruments,” Dark Ages Re-Creation Company. December 4, 2007. Accessed July 15, 2016. <http://www.darkcompany.ca/articles/NorseMusicBInstruments.php>.

Percussion Instruments

Under the umbrella of the percussion family are all instruments that produce sound by being struck or scraped. Aside from the human voice, percussion instruments are likely to be the oldest type of instruments in human history. Broadly speaking, there are two types of percussion instruments: pitched and unpitched percussion. As their names imply, the former produce an identifiable pitch (e.g. marimbas, xylophones, timpani, etc.), while the latter does not (e.g. snare drum, cymbals, cow bells, etc.).

Rattle

Archaeological excavations of the Oseberg ship in Norway have found five rattles buried among the many artifacts. Several theories exist as to their purpose: they may have been items used during religious rituals, used as sleigh “bells”, or simply played as musical instruments. The first of these is a particularly elaborate theory: supposedly, the lady of high rank buried in the Oseberg ship²² was a *völva*²³ who may have used the metal rattle (see fig. 10) in some form of ritual. The metal rattle in question was attached to a post of the ship that was topped by a carved animal head and covered with intricate knot work.²⁴ Additionally, several rattle-like instruments have been found elsewhere in Norway, including in Stövernhaugen (dating 800–1000 CE) and Akershus (dating 800–900 CE). These consist of a series of iron rings that have been linked onto a large oval ring, with the former attached to a long stave and the latter possibly created to accompany a horse-drawn sleigh or

²² The Oseberg excavation found the remains of two women buried in the ship, one aged between 60–70 while the younger was around 50–55. See Per Holck, “The Oseberg Ship Burial, Norway: New Thoughts On the Skeletons From the Grave Mound,” *European Journal of Archaeology* 9, no. 2-3 (August 2006); doi:10.1177/1461957107086123.

²³ A seeress.

²⁴ “Viking Ship Cannabis Conundrum.” The Norwegian American. January 27, 2016. Accessed July 15, 2016. <http://www.norwegianamerican.com/heritage/viking-ship-cannabis-conundrum/>.

sledge.²⁵ However, the purpose of these iron rings is still open to interpretation and it is unknown if they were indeed used as sleigh bells; if they were, whether that would qualify as music, *per se*, would be open to debate.

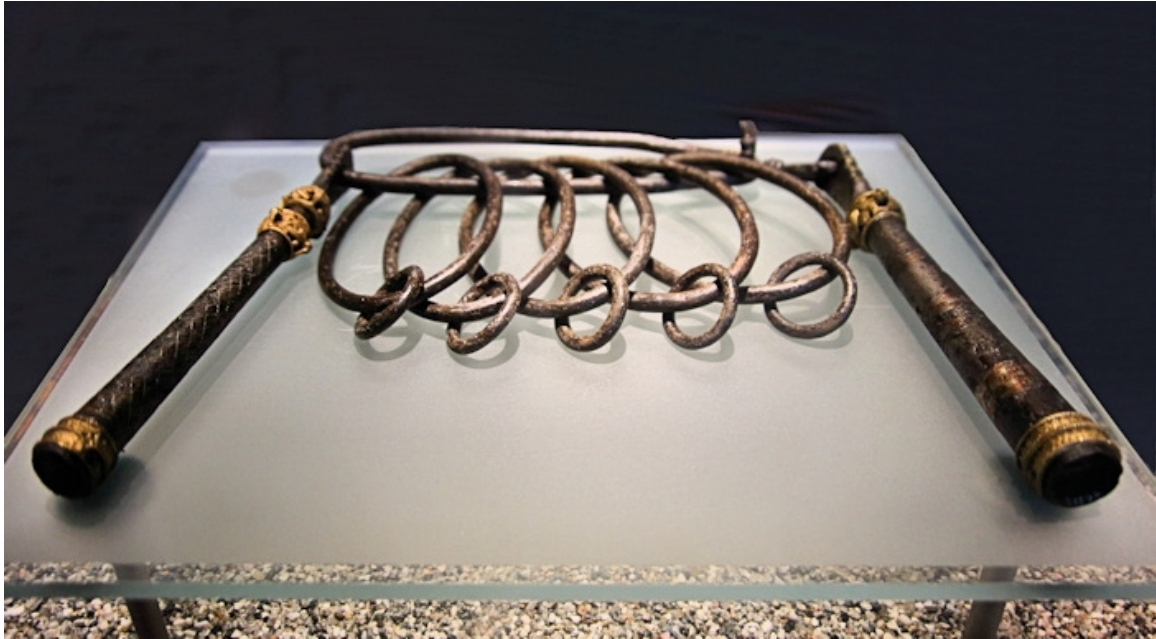


Fig. 10 One of five rattles found in the Oseberg ship discovered in Vestfold, Norway. (Photo: Thorguds, "Oseberg metal rattle." 2008 Oslo.)

Drum

Thought to be one of the oldest sources of sound production, surely few instruments are as universal as the drum. Norse people during the Viking Age almost certainly knew of the instrument, as their neighboring peoples had a plethora of drums, including the Celtic *bodhrán* frame drum, the northern Saami *goavddis* bowl drum, and the southern Saami *gievrie* frame drum, to name a few. Thus, it appears quite strange that there have been no drums found belonging to the Germanic Scandinavians. There is some evidence to suggest that Vikings may have used their shields as drum substitutes during certain rituals, as is indicated in Ibn Fadlan's account. His report in the *Risala* ("Epistle") is a shockingly graphic

²⁵ "Instruments," Dark Ages Re-Creation Company.

description of a funerary ritual wherein a slave girl is killed to be burned with her master. During the moments of her death, at the height of her agony, the “Northmen” are said to beat their shields in order to cover up her screams:

At this moment the men began to beat upon their shields, in order to drown out the noise of her cries, which might deter other girls from seeking death with their masters in the future.²⁶

It goes without saying that banging on shields to cover up screams is the farthest possible thing from music; that said, it is not impossible that shields may have been struck like drums during pre-battle rituals or during other occasions that merited sound. If such was the case, it may partly account for the lack of drums found in excavations. Other reasons for their lack of survival may be due in part to their natural composition; thin pieces of wood and animal hides--the most frequent and important materials for drums--easily decompose. Of course, other wooden instruments have also undoubtedly suffered the same fate (and, indeed, may be part of the reason why archaeologists have found so few wooden instruments in general). Literary references to drums, on the other hand, are more plentiful, which will be addressed in the next two chapters.

Conclusion

While music has oft been overlooked as a fruitful sub-category of Viking Age studies due to a perceived lack of information, the actual amount of evidence offered by the archaeological record is far from nothing. Granted, the number of instruments found in excavations may not be prodigious, but those that have survived demonstrate a variety that cannot be easily dismissed. From woodwind and brass wind instruments to strings and percussion, the sheer diversity of musical instruments demonstrates that the Scandinavians during the Viking Age lived among a myriad of sounds. We may safely say that the Norse people played musical instruments.

²⁶ Aḥmad ibn Fadlān, “Mission to the Volga,” in *Two Arabic Travel Books*, translated by James E. Montgomery (New York and London: New York University Press, 2014), 85.

Chapter 3

External Accounts of Viking Age Music

Although Scandinavians had runes as a form of writing, during the Viking Age, they did not yet have the writing culture that would later proliferate in the region after the arrival of Christianity. Due to this rather unfortunate historical fact, we must turn to the writings of non-Scandinavian peoples for contemporary sources. Obviously, this presents several problems. The first, and perhaps most significant, is the lack of cultural awareness and detail; foreigners who are not intimately acquainted with the peoples about whom they are writing are inevitably not able to write with as much knowledge as an insider who had been raised in that cultural environment. The second is the problem with bias. It may be that history is written by the victor, but only the empowered can write at all, and this was even more true in the distant past, where those who wrote about other cultures were generally well-educated people from more powerful social groups, kingdoms, or empires. As such, many writers of early history had the unfortunate tendency to regard other societies, particularly those that were less politically unified, as having been inferior. This was certainly the case with Scandinavia, which was first viewed as a troublesome 'fringe' society by the Roman Empire, and also later by the emerging Christendom. Of course, writers within the culture have their own bias as well; this is obvious in cases of propaganda or self-laudatory writings where an insider seeks to promote his or her own society. In the ideal scenario, then, there would be detailed sources from both within and outside the culture under study in order to attain the most even-handed whole picture. Unfortunately for historians, this scenario is not always possible.

Writers from diverse cultural backgrounds have written about the Norse people, particularly about the far-traveled (and infamous) Vikings and *Rus'*. Among this number were those from three distinct empires: the Roman and Byzantine Empires, and the Abbasid Caliphate. To be sure, these three were not the only ones who wrote about Scandinavians: the Vikings and *Rus'* are mentioned in the Irish

Annals of Ulster (*Annála Uladh*) and the *Primary Chronicle* (*Повѣсть временныхъ лѣтъ*), for example. However, here I will focus on Arabic, Greek, and Latin sources, as these three are the only ones that mention anything noteworthy about Germanic music. Each of the three has distinct histories with Germanic peoples. Arabic writers were often travelers or merchants (or, in the case of some later writers, armchair historians) who were outside observers of Germanic culture in Germanic territory. Arabic sources have been historically underutilized in Scandinavian and Viking Age studies, no doubt due to linguistic and perceived cultural barriers. Greek sources have fared better, but tended to be at the mercy of outdated translations and the availability of Byzantine texts. The number of Greek accounts is not great, and of these, almost all of them (with the possible exception of Strabo) concern the Scandinavians who are on the writer's own, Greek soil, as opposed to Arab writers, who occasionally wrote about Scandinavians in Scandinavian lands. While seemingly minor, such nuances matter, for there is a significant demographic difference (most notably in gender and age) between the Scandinavians who went seafaring abroad versus those who did not. This significantly changes the kind of people with whom the writers would have gotten into contact, and therefore written about. Latin sources are the most numerous, and while it is certainly possible to classify them in multiple ways, chronologically speaking, they fall into two broad categories: polytheist or Christian. Unfortunately, despite the number of sources available, most of them give no clear indication as to what 'Viking' music sounded like, and if they do, it is overwhelmingly likely to have been an unfavorable string of insults because the writer found it repulsive.

Arabic Sources

In Chapter 1, I mentioned the elusiveness of what may be considered music when discussing its definition. Nowhere is this more evident than in at-Tartushi's descriptions of Germanic music in what is now Denmark. The 10th century traveler and merchant Ibrahim ibn Ya'qub at-Tartushi (also known by the name Abraham ben Jacob), had this to say about the music of the Northmen whom he encountered in the Danish trading center of Hedeby around the year 950:

I have not heard an uglier singing than Shalshaweeq people [people from Schleswig]. It is a humming coming from their throats that's worse than dogs barking.²⁷

At-Tartushi was originally from the Andalusian city of Tortosa, Spain (hence his name "at-Tartushi", i.e. "from Tortosa"). Andalusia was the region where many Near and Middle-Eastern instruments were carried into Europe, including such recognizable ones as the *rebec* (ancestor of the violin), guitar, and bass drum. As the city of Tortosa itself was at the crux of multiple civilizations, at-Tartushi would have been exposed to a wide variety of music, among them Moorish, Roman Catholic (from the Christian minority in the north), and Jewish (as Jewish culture was surprisingly thriving during this time in the Iberian Peninsula). Thus, given this assumption, his description of the music at Hedeby to have been the ugliest he had ever heard is not just an unfortunate opinion, but is also revealing, as it suggests that it was unlike any he had ever come across before in the very cosmopolitan cities of Iberia. This point becomes relevant when reconstructing Norse music, which will be discussed later.

There is another Arab writer from the 10th century who was noticeably less opinionated in his descriptions. Ahmad ibn Fadlān, an ambassador of the Abbasid Caliphate from Baghdad, also mentions singing and music in his famous account of a funeral for a Viking chieftain in the late 900's:

...they consume [intoxicating drink] in the course of ten days, uniting sexually with women and playing musical instruments. After that, the group of men who have cohabitated with the slave girl make of their hands a sort of paved way whereby the girl...mounts onto the ship...She was given a cup of intoxicating drink; she sang at taking it and drank. The interpreter told me that she in this fashion bade farewell to all her girl companions. Then she was given another cup; she took it and sang for a long time while the old woman incited her to drink up and go into the pavilion where her master lay.²⁸

²⁷ Translation provided by Rawia Azzahrawi, Professor of Arabic Language, University of Manitoba in Noel Braucher, *Throat Singing in Old Norse Culture?* (University of Manitoba. March 1, 2016).

²⁸ Ahmad ibn Faḍlān, "Mission to the Volga," in *Two Arabic Travel Books*, translated by James E. Montgomery. (New York and London: New York University Press, 2014).

Compared to at-Tartushi's scathing report of Danish songs, Ibn Fadlān's account is tamer, and is the more subjective of the two; his writing is more detached report than opinion. Yet ironically, at-Tartushi's is the more helpful of the two when reconstructing Norse music because he provides a description of the singing, rather than just a general statement that songs were sung. Obviously, this is not to suggest that the songs in Hedeby must have literally sounded like canines. Still, a surprising amount of information can be gathered from his unfavorable notes. We can gather, for instance, from his description of "humming", that the sound was probably guttural and produced from the back of the throat; from "their throats" it can be guessed that perhaps more than one person could have been singing at once, although this is speculation. Finally, the adjective "barking" suggests that the melody—or melodies if there were multiple singers—was not of a harmony that the far-traveled at-Tartushi was familiar with. This Scandinavian style of singing was, in fact, probably closer to throat-singing, or what western listeners might associate with Saami or Native American chanting, rather than the melodic type of singing that is more commonly heard today. Further analysis of what at-Tartushi may have heard is possible by comparing Scandinavian oral poetry to the music and style of Islamic chants popular during the Abbasid Caliphate, which will be the purpose of chapter five.

Greek Sources

There are a number of Greek sources detailing the Norse people of the Viking Age. These writers variously referred to the latter as the "Rus" (Ρως),²⁹ "Varangians" (Βάραγγοι),³⁰ or those from "Thule."³¹ However, not all such accounts will be referenced here. Many commonly referenced Greek writers, such as Patriarch

²⁹ Photius I, *The Homilies of Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople*, translated by Cyril Mango (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), Homilies III & IV.

³⁰ Michael Psellus *Chronographia*, translated by E. R. A. Sewter (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953).

³¹ Anna Komnene, *Alexiad*, ch. 9. Thule was an often used, vague term for a northern or Scandinavian country.

Photios (c. 810–893) and Michael Psellos (1017/8–ca. 1078), were on the receiving end of Viking attacks and, rather understandably, their writings reflect a less-than-stellar view of their Scandinavian invaders. Such chroniclers did not mention music as they were unlikely to have known their attackers closely enough to have observed their musical customs and, as such, their writings are not helpful for the purposes of this thesis.

One of the earliest Greek descriptions of the Germanic peoples and their sound is from the Greek historian Strabo (64/63 BCE–c. 24 CE), far before the time of the Vikings. He hints that the latter had a type of drum, “ἐν δὲ τοῖς ἀγῶσιν ἔτυπτον τὰς βύρσας τὰς περιτεταμένας τοῖς γέρροις τῶν ἀρμαμαξῶν, ὥστ’ ἀποτελεῖσθαι ψόφον ἐξαίσιον.”³² (“And during the battles, they would beat on the hides that were stretched all around the wicker-bodies of the wagons, and in this way produce noise.”) As was stated in the previous chapter, despite the lack of extant archaeological evidence, it is likely that the Norse people had some type of drum-like instrument composed of stretched animal hides. Although they may not have had wicker wagons of the aforementioned type during the Viking Age, it is entirely possible that they had stretched animal hides over other wicker frames with which they produced a beat.

Another early Greek writer who mentions music is Priscus, a Byzantine who visited the court of Attila in 448. Although his account describes a feast given by the Huns, who were an Altaic people, the poetry recited therein may have been similar in character to Germanic ones. According to Priscus, at Attila's feast were two skalds who recited the exploits of those who were present. Their songs were apparently so moving that listeners burst into tears.

When evening fell torches were lit, and two barbarians coming forward in front of Attila sang songs they had composed, celebrating his victories and deeds of valor in war. And of the guests, as they looked at the singers, some were pleased with the verses, others reminded of wars were excited in their souls, while yet others, whose bodies were feeble with age and their spirits compelled to rest, shed tears.³³

³² Strabo. *Geographica*. Edited by August Meineke. (Leipzig: Teubner, 1877). VII. 2. 3.

³³ R. C. Blockley, *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire*.

The feast-time ritual celebration depicted here was probably similar to those performed during Scandinavian celebrations. During Norse *blót* (sacrifice-celebration) it was customary to drink a *minni* (a toast of remembrance). At the beginning of these toasts, stories of warriors' exploits and deeds were typically told in their honor. Priscus' account parallels the many descriptions of feasts and *blóts* that are illustrated in *Beowulf* and in later Icelandic sagas.

Among the Greek sources from the Viking period is *De Ceremoniis*. Written by Emperor Konstantinos Porphyrogennetos (Constantine VII, 905–959), *De Ceremoniis aulae Byzantinae* (Greek: "Ἐκθεσις τῆς βασιλείου τάξεως, *Explanation of the Order of the Palace*) describes ceremonial protocols at the Byzantine court and is invaluable for its descriptions, as they illuminate the existence of Scandinavian culture among the Varangians. Here, the Scandinavians who composed the Varangian Guard are referred to (rather oddly) as *Γοθικά* ("Gothika").³⁴ Members of the Varangian Guard are said to have performed "Gothic dances" and danced in wolf skins.³⁵ Such depictions are strongly reminiscent of berserkers, who are typically glorified in Old Norse literature as being fearless in battle and immune to pain or injury, and who were known to dance in wolf or bear skins.³⁶ The combination of fearlessness and affinity for wolf-skin rituals is particularly evocative of berserkers, and it is intriguing that the term Constantine uses to describe their ritual is *μέλος* ("song", "melody"),³⁷ which suggests some type of musical accompaniment.

Another source for Vikings in the east is *The Alexiad* (*Ἀλεξιάς*), which is unique equally for its detailed descriptions of the Varangian Guard as it is for being a historical work written by a woman. Written by Princess Anna Komnene around 1148 CE during the Komnenid dynasty of the Byzantine Empire (1081–1185 CE), *The Alexiad* describes the political and military conditions of the Byzantine Empire

Vol. II. Liverpool: Francis Cairns Publications, 1981, 286.

³⁴ Constantine VII, *De Ceremoniis*, Book I, ch. 83.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, Book I, ch. 83; Book II, ch. 52.

³⁶ Hilda R. Ellis Davidson, *Pagan Scandinavia*. New York: F.A. Praeger, 1967, 100.

³⁷ Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott. *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1889.

under the reign of her father, Emperor Alexios I Komnenos (c. 1056–1118 CE). Although it is a fairly late document and describes events that occurred slightly before 1148—past the standard Anglo-centric dates for the Viking Age (793–1066)—*The Alexiad* is one of the few sources that gives clues regarding the reputation of Scandinavians who were well established in Constantinople. While Anna Komnene does not write about music in particular, she does write that the Varangians adhered strongly to tradition and handed down their customs. “The Varangians,” she writes, “regarded their loyalty to the Emperors and their protection of the imperial persons as a pledge and ancestral tradition, handed down from father to son, which they keep inviolate.”³⁸ Clearly, handing down tradition was important to these Northmen. If such was the case, it is not unreasonable to suppose that they may have passed down their musical traditions as well.

Latin Sources

The extant Latin sources on the Scandinavians tend to be even less positive than the Arabic accounts, as a substantial number of Latin accounts were written by Christians who either experienced the horrors of their own monasteries and cities burning by Norse hands, or were Church clergy debating ‘how to deal with the pagan problem.’ Such accounts tend to be variations on the theme of how the northern barbarians shrieked while they raided villages and sacked cities—hardly useful information for understanding Scandinavian music.

Some of the earliest, non-Christian Latin writings we have of the Germanic peoples and their customs is from Cornelius Tacitus (c. 56–c. 117 CE). Although Tacitus lived far before the Viking Age, we can surmise from later literature that the Germanic custom of singing about battles and heroic deeds is a long one, extending to far before the Vikings:

Fuisse apud eos et Herculem memorant, primumque omnium virorum fortium ituri in proelia canunt. Sunt illis haec quoque carmina, quorum relatu, quem barditum vocant, accendunt animos futuraeque pugnae fortunam ipso cantu augurantur. Terrent enim trepidantve, prout sonuit acies, nec tam vocis ille

³⁸ Anna Komnene, *Alexiad*, ch. 9.

*quam virtutis concentus videtur. Adfectatur praecipue asperitas soni et fractum murmur, obiectis ad os scutis, quo plenior et gravior vox repercussu intumescat.*³⁹

They say that Hercules also visited them; they sing of him, first of all men in strength, when going to battle. They have, too, those songs of theirs—which they call "baritus"—by the recital of which they rouse their spirits and from their song, augur the fortune of the approaching fight. For they inspire confusion or fear as their line shouts; it is not so much an articulate sound, as a general cry of valor. They aim principally at a harsh note and shattering roar, putting their shields to their mouth so that, by reverberation, it may swell into a fuller and deeper sound.

Although Tacitus writes in the *interpretatio romana* that was common for Romans in his time—translating Germanic terms to their closest Roman equivalents and turning what was probably Þórr into Hercules—the heroic subject matter of the singing is clear. Also interesting is his mention of the Germanic people's practice of putting shields around their mouths to amplify their voices.⁴⁰ That the Scandinavian Vikings and *Rus'* used their shields to produce sound is also attested to in later writings such as those of Abbo of St. Germain and Ibn Fadlān.

Two centuries later, when the Goths attacked the Roman Empire around 375 CE, the Roman soldier and historian Ammianus Marcellinus (325-330–post-391 CE) wrote that the Goths sang songs of their forebears:

³⁹ Tacitus, Cornelius. *de Origine et Situ Germanorum Liber*. Edited by Henry Furneaux. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900), III:1-2.

⁴⁰ It would be interesting if any helmet or mask had changed the sound of the wearer's voice or amplified the sound, much like the theater masks did in Classical Athens, which projected the voices of the actors. It is not inconceivable, as archaeologists have found many sophisticated helmets with extra features, such as the famous Sutton Hoo helmet that causes the wearer to look as if he had one glittering eye, mimicking Óðinn. There has been speculation that another Sutton Hoo-era helmet, that of King Raedwald of East Anglia, amplified the voice of the wearer. As it stands, however, it appears that the effect was more psychological than caused by the helmet itself—the impressive helmet causes the wearer to feel more powerful and therefore use a louder voice. See Neil Price and Paul Mortimer. "An Eye for Odin? Divine Role-Playing in the Age of Sutton Hoo." *European Journal of Archaeology* 17, no. 3 (2014): 517-38.

*Et Romani quidem voce undique Martia concinentes, a minore solita ad maiorem protolli, quam gentilitate appellant barritum, vires validas erigebant. Barbari vero maiorum laudes clamoribus stridebant inconditis, interque varios sermonis dissoni strepitus, leviora proelia temptabantur.*⁴¹

And the Romans in unison sang of Mars [battle-cry], as usual rising from a lower to a louder tone, of which the national name is barritus, and raised themselves to mighty strength. But the barbarians praised their forefathers with harsh disorderly shrieks, and amid this dissonant clash of different languages, skirmishes were first tried.

In fact, singing of their ancestors appears to have been a common theme throughout Germania. In the 6th century, the Roman bureaucrat Jordanes mentions music of the Gothic tribe several times in his well-known work, *De origine actibusque Getarum*, or *Getica* (c. 551 CE). The majority of these references highlight the historic content of these songs:

*Ex hac igitur Scandza insula quasi officina gentium aut certe velut vagina nationum cum rege suo nomine Berig Gothi quondam memorantur egressi...Quemadmodum et in priscis eorum carminibus pene storico ritu in commune recolitur.*⁴²

Then from the island of Scandza, as from a hive of races or as a womb of nations, with their king, named Berig, the Goths are said to have went forth long ago...And in this manner [the story] is generally recalled in their ancient songs in an almost historic fashion.

*reliquam vero gentem capillatos dicere iussit, quod nomen Gothi pro magno suscipientes adhuc odie suis cantionibus reminiscunt.*⁴³

but he bade them call the rest of their race Capillati, which name the Goths accepted [and prized] greatly, and they still recall it to this day in their songs.

Elsewhere in *Getica*, he mentions that these songs were accompanied by a cithara—a string instrument related to the guitar:

Ante quos etiam cantu maiorum facta modulationibus citharique canebant, Eterpamara, Hanale, Fridigerni, Vidigoiae et aliorum, quorum in hac gente

⁴¹ Ammianus Marcellinus. *Rerum Gestarum*. Edited by John C. Rolfe. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935-40) XXXI.7.11.

⁴² Jordanes. *De origine actibusque Getarum*, IV: 25, 28.

⁴³ Ibid., XI: 71-72.

*magna opinio est, quales vix heroas fuisse Miranda iactat antiquitas.*⁴⁴

In earliest times they sang of the deeds of their forebears in strains of song accompanied by the cithara; chanting of Eterpamara, Hanala, Fritigern, Vidigoia and others whose fame among them is great; such heroes as admiring antiquity scarce proclaims its own to be.

From Jordanes' writings, we are told that the Goths sang about their ancestors and history. This is not a far-fetched notion, as this same theme is present in the poetry and stories of Germanic people elsewhere--in Germany, Norway, and Iceland in particular--centuries later during the High Middle Ages, well after the region's conversion to Christianity.

Later accounts in Latin from the Viking Age are from the Christian perspective. In 797 CE, Alcuin, an advisor to the Frankish Emperor Charlemagne, wrote a letter to Speratus, the Bishop of Lindisfarne. His letter warned against his priests singing songs in the vernacular or conducting pagan-ish activities:

*Verba Dei legantur in sacerdotali convivio. Ibi decet lectorem audiri, non citharistam; sermones patrum, non carmina gentilium. Quid Hinieldus cum Christo? Angusta est domus: utrosque tenere non poterit. Non vult rex caelestis cum paganis et perditis nomine tenus regibus communionem habere.*⁴⁵

Let the Word of God be heard when the priests eat together. They should listen to the lector, not the *cithara*; to sermons of the (Church) Fathers, not to songs in the vernacular. What has Ingeld to do with Christ? Narrow is the house: it is not wide enough to hold both. The king of heaven wants nothing to do with damned pagans holding the title of king.

Meanwhile, Paulus Diaconus (Paul the Deacon) wrote about the heroic content of Germanic songs once again in his *Historia Langobardorum* (c. 700 CE). The Langobards were a Germanic people residing in large swaths of the Italian Peninsula shortly before the Viking Age (c. 568–744 CE). The *Historia* relates how the Langobardic king Alboin (c. 500 CE) became included in the historical songs:

Alboin vero ita praeclarum longe lateque nomen percrebuit, ut hactenus etiam tam apud Baioariorum gentem quamque et Saxonum, sed et alios eiusdem

⁴⁴ Ibid., V:42.

⁴⁵ Alcuin. *Epistolae*. Edited by Ernst Dümmler. 2nd ed. Vol. 4. (Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Berlin: Weidmann, 1895) p. 183.

*linguae homines eius liberalitas et gloria bellorumque felicitas et virtus in eorum carminibus celebretur.*⁴⁶

Alboin, meanwhile, won such reputation and was known so widely in name, that still today the Baioares as well as the Saxons, and other folk with the same language, celebrate his generosity and glory, and his success in war and honor in their songs.

Among the most referenced Latin accounts of the traditions of the Germanic Scandinavians is that of Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* (c. 1073–1076 CE). He tells of how the heathens sung many “obscene” songs during ceremonies in his description of a heathen temple at Uppsala, Sweden: “Ceterum neniae, quae in eiusmodi ritu libationis fieri solent, multiplices et inhonestae, ideoque melius reticendae.”⁴⁷ (“Furthermore, of the dirges, it is said that those usually sung in this manner during the libation rites are cruel, numerous, and shameful, and so it is better to say nothing about them.”) It is important to note that Adam of Bremen himself never went to Uppsala, and was writing this account from his native Germany. All of his writings are compilations of (mostly Christian) accounts he had gotten elsewhere, which inevitably affects accuracy.

Two of the earliest chronicles written by Scandinavian authors are the Danish *Chronicon Roskildense* (the Roskilde Chronicle, c. 1138–1140 CE) and *Gesta Danorum* (History of the Danes, c. 1200). These two are notable for both being early Scandinavian sources written somewhat close to the Viking Age, but as they were written firmly within the Christian tradition and in Latin, cannot be categorized as Old Norse sources. Both are written with a solidly euhemeral perspective. The priest and historian Saxo Grammaticus (c. 1150–1220 CE) wrote the latter while in the service of the archbishop Absalon. In *Gesta Danorum*, Saxo writes that ringing, jingling objects called *crepitacula* (some type of bell or rattle) accompanied fertility rites in Uppsala during heathen times:

Sueonum fines ingreditur. Ubi cum filiis Frø septennio feriatus ab his tandem ad Haconem Daniae tyrannum se contulit, quod apud Upsalam sacrificiorum

⁴⁶ Paulus Diaconus. *Pauli Historia Langobardorum*. Edited by Georg, Waltz. (Hannover: Impensis Bibliopoli Hahniani, 1878) I:27.

⁴⁷ Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, IV:27.

*tempore constitutus effeminatos corporum motus scaenicosque mimorum plausus ac mollia nolarum crepitacula fastidiret. Unde patet, quam remotum a lascivia animum habuerit, qui ne eius quidem spectator esse sustinuit. Adeo virtus luxui resistit.*⁴⁸

He went into the land of the Swedes. With the sons of Freyr he lived at leisure for seven years; at last he left them and conferred himself to Hakon, the tyrant of Denmark, as when stationed at Uppsala at the time of the sacrifices, he was disgusted by the effeminate gestures and the clapping of the mimes on the stage, and by the unmanly clatter of the bells. Hence it is clear how far he kept his soul from lasciviousness, not even enduring to look upon it. Thus does virtue resist debauchery.

Most curiously, Saxo also writes at length of an incident wherein a lyre-player who played for King Erik Ejegod induces madness in the latter:

*Cuius prima specie praesentes veluti maestitia ac stupore complevit. Qui postmodum ad petulantio rem mentis statum vegetioribus lyrae sonis adducti, iocabundis corporum motibus gestiando dolorem plausu permutare coeperunt. Postremo ad rabiem et temeritatem usque modis acrioribus incitati, captum amentia spiritum clamoribus prodiderunt. Ita animorum habitus modorum varietas inflectebat. Igitur qui in atrio melodiae expertes constiterant, regem cum admissis dementire cognoscunt irruptaque aede furem complexi comprehensum continere nequibant. Quippe nimio captu furoris instinctus eorum se valide complexibus eruebat; naturae siquidem eius vires etiam rabies cumulabat. Victo itaque colluctantium robore, procursum nactus, convulsis regiae foribus arreptoque ense, quattuor militum continendi eius gratia propius accedentium necem peregit. Ad ultimum pulvinarium mole, quae undique a satellitibus congerebantur, obrutus, magno cum omnium periculo comprehenditur. Ubi vero mente constitit, laesae primum militiae iusta persolvit.*⁴⁹

First he performed various pieces so that everyone was filled with grief and stupor. And afterwards the sound of the lyre forced them to an impudent and lively state of mind, [then] jesting tunes that made them eager to move their bodies and they commenced to exchange anguish for applause. Finally it incited them to madness and rashness; seized by madness, they gave great cries in utter fury. Thus the state of their minds was changed variously; they saw that the king was driven to madness and rage when the music in the hall came to an end, so that they were unable to restrain him. Thus they were seized by excessive madness and powerfully overthrown by fury; according

⁴⁸ Saxo Grammaticus. *Gesta Danorum*. Edited by Jørgen Olrik and Hans Ræder. (Copenhagen: Det Kongelige Bibliotek, 1931) VI.5.10.

⁴⁹ Ibid., XII.6.2.

to their natures the men's madness increased. And so overcome by the strength of the struggle, the king broke their hold and darted forward, wrenched open the door and seized a sword and killed four of his warriors, and none could come near enough to restrain him. At the end his courtiers took cushions and from every side approached, throwing them over him until at great danger they all were able to seize him. When he regained his wits, he paid the just weregild for the warriors' injuries.

Of all the accounts seen thus far, this last one is unique in its depiction of the effects of music. Nowhere else is music said to induce such a notable Bacchic-like frenzy in the listener.⁵⁰

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have focused on Arabic, Greek, and Latin accounts that mention Germanic music or sound. Each has distinct relations with Germanic peoples. In general, Arabic accounts contemporary to the Viking Age are about Scandinavians living in their own settlements, exemplified by Ibn Fadlān and at-Tartushi writing as travelers. This increased the likelihood of them encountering non-military songs, and there is far greater chance that some of the “ugly” songs that at-Tartushi had heard were domestic in nature, as he was observing regular people in Hedeby living everyday life; it would be strange indeed if the majority of songs he had heard at a trading city were war songs. In contrast, with the exception of the ambassador Priscus, Greek authors were writing from their lands about Germanic expatriates. As the majority of Scandinavians abroad were young to middle-aged men, this skewed the demographic that these writers encountered. Expatriates of the ‘warrior class’ were naturally more likely to perform rituals concerned with war and battle as opposed to the peaceful weaving songs of women, lullabies, or other domestic songs of the like, and the extant Greek sources reflect this with their descriptions of battle-related customs. Finally, the remaining accounts are all in Latin, which can be divided into polytheist or Christian accounts. The former are from pre-Viking Age times and describe Germanic people out of military and

⁵⁰ There may be a possible exception in depictions of *berserkers*, but music is not said to have been a mandatory component in inducing their battle frenzy (*óðr*).

political interest, while the latter have a significantly religious bent. With the exception of the Danish Saxo Grammaticus, both types of accounts generally regard Germanic tribes and customs as being less civilized than the author's own society. The majority of these accounts offer disappointingly little in the way of describing what Germanic music actually sounded like; however, a surprising amount may still nevertheless be gleaned from these relatively anemic descriptions, as will be demonstrated later in chapter five.

Chapter 4

Music in the Old Norse Written Record

The previous chapter examined sources that describe Old Norse music with languages and perspectives from outside of the tradition. In contrast, this chapter will discuss sources from within the Old Norse cultural tradition, describing Old Norse music in its own language. There are several types of Old Norse written sources. The ones that will be focused here will be: runic writing, skaldic and Eddic poetry, and sagas. Runes are a Scandinavian alphabet system with a debated origin, but most likely borrowed from the Etruscan alphabet during the early centuries CE. Runic inscriptions are few in number, with even fewer that concern music in any way, with one important exception, as will be discussed later. Following runes, I will discuss both the *Poetic Edda* and the prose writing of the *Snorra Edda* in the same section, despite there being significant differences between them, as almost all of their references to music are related to the same figures in Old Norse religion and mythology. The most numerous and diverse of the extant sources are sagas, many of which were written during the golden age of Icelandic literature in the 13th century when literary activity particularly flourished. Of all the genres, the sagas are the most abundant with references to music, the most common type of which involves singing.

Given the sheer number of sources in just the saga genre alone, it is impossible to cover every single instance of music being mentioned in the entirety of Old Norse literature in this short section. That said, music is surprisingly not a common topic in Old Norse literature, making sources that contain a reference that is more than a passing mention relatively rare. This whittles down the number of sagas that could be mentioned here. Of course, even with this selectivity, it is still impossible to note every single saga that contains music, and it is inevitable that some will be overlooked. In selecting the sources to include in this chapter, I have considered several criteria. First, I have tried to include sources from among those that are the most studied; second, to include as many different genres of written

material as possible. Needless to say, any source where music plays a pivotal role is included. Sagas that concern people and events long after the Viking Age, however, will not be discussed, as they are outside the time frame of this study.

Runes

To my knowledge, there are no runic inscriptions dating from the Viking Age (c. 793–1099 CE) that concerns music. Ironically, although the use of runic script in Scandinavia pre-dates the use of the Latin alphabet, the one famous example of runes being used to notate music is from circa 1300. Aptly named *Codex Runicus*, the entire codex is written in medieval futhark, where each rune corresponds to a letter of the Latin alphabet. The *Codex Runicus* mostly concerns Danish Scanian Law (*Skånske lov*) and early Danish history. Interestingly, the last leaf of this manuscript contains a verse with musical notations. The lyrics of this song, which is written in Old East Norse, goes as follows:

*Drømde mik en drøm i nat um
silki ok ærlik pæl⁵¹*

Dreamed I a dream last night of
silk and fine fur



Fig. 11 Musical notations in the *Codex Runicus*. (Photo: “Codex Runicus.” Arnamagnæan Digitization Project, Denmark.)

The above lines (see fig. 11) are the only musical fragment in the manuscript, and have no relation to the writing preceding it. They are very likely the opening

⁵¹ *Codex Runicus*, AM 28 8vo (Copenhagen: The Arnamagnæan Institute).

two lines to a medieval ballad. A few notes, or neumes, as they are called in medieval musical notation, continue after the runes. These continuing single *virga*⁵² neumes begin with the same sequence of notes as the beginning, before breaking from the precedent with a *porrectus flexus*⁵³ series of notes; thus these notes are very likely the beginning of a variation on the preceding main theme. Medieval ballads frequently contain a refrain that repeats multiple times in a set pattern (e.g. the Norwegian Medieval ballad “Margjit Hjukse”), and this series of notes is consistent with that pattern.

The Eddas

While the Nordic people did not have a god of music (e.g. Apollo) among their deities, there is one god who is particularly associated with sound: Heimdallr. Heimdallr is said to have hearing so excellent that he is able to hear grass growing on the earth and wool growing on sheep,⁵⁴ and possesses the horn *Gjallarhorn* (“yelling horn”), which he will blow when marking the coming of Ragnarøk. *Gjallarhorn* is mentioned in *Völuspá*⁵⁵ (*Codex Regius* c. 1270) and in *Gylfaginning*⁵⁶ of Snorri Sturluson’s *Prose Edda* (c. 1220). In addition to this musical mention, in *Völuspá*, the shepherd Eggþér is said to sit on a mound and happily play his harp at the beginning of Ragnarök.

Sat þar á haugi
og sló hörpu
gýgjar hirðir,
glaður Eggþér⁵⁷

Sat there on a mound
and struck a harp
giant herdsman
glad Eggþér

⁵² The name of single neumes in medieval musical notation, equivalent to an 8th note in modern notation; also called a *punctum*.

⁵³ A *porrectus* is a series of three notes consisting of a high, low, and another high note, respectively. A *porrectus flexus* adds to this sequence by ending with a low 4th note.

⁵⁴ Snorri Sturluson, “Gylfaginning,” *The Prose Edda*, 27.

⁵⁵ “Völuspá,” *The Poetic Edda*, stanza 46.

⁵⁶ Snorri Sturluson, “Gylfaginning,” *The Prose Edda*, ch. 14, 25, 51.

⁵⁷ *Völuspá* 41. The translation is my own.

While it does not contain mentions of instruments, *Hávamál* also has various cryptic allusions to singing. In it, Óðinn is described as knowing *galdr*⁵⁸—a word close in meaning to the English “enchantment.” Both words indicate a specific type of magic, but also share an etymological root with a verb closely associated with singing: *gala*, “to chant” or “to sing” in *galdr*,⁵⁹ and obviously *chant* in *enchantment*. In stanza 160, in the *Ljóðatal* section of the poem, there is a mention of a certain Þjóðrerir who knows sorcerous singing:

160. Þat kann ek it fimmtánda
er gól Þjóðrerir dvergr fyr Dellings durum:
afl gól hann ásum en alfum frama,
hyggju Hroftatý.⁶⁰

160. I know a fifteenth,
which sang Þjóðrerir dwarf before Dellings’ door,
power he gave to the gods and fame to the elves,
foresight to Hroftatý [Óðinn].

Two of the heroic poems within *The Poetic Edda*, *Atlamál* and *Atlakviða*, also include mentions of music, i.e. Gunnar playing harp with his toes.⁶¹ This subject, which is also featured in the *Völsunga saga*, is a common one throughout the Norse world during the Viking Ages and succeeding Middle Ages. The heroic poem *Oddrúnargrátur* likewise mentions harp-playing and furthermore includes a depiction of sorcerous singing.⁶² Meanwhile, Hjálmar H. Ragnarsson argues that the entirety of *Grottasöngur*, which is preserved in Snorri’s *Prose Edda*, as well as *Darraðarljóð* in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, are in fact working songs.⁶³ According to his theory, *Grottasöngur* is the mill song of two girls ordered to produce wealth for the king by grinding a magic stone. While this is not proven, one notices that the title of

⁵⁸ *Hávamál*, stanza 152.

⁵⁹ Geir T., Zoëga, Richard Cleasby, and Guðbrandur Vigfússon. *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), s.v. “gala.”

⁶⁰ *Hávamál*, stanza 160.

⁶¹ *Atlamál*, verse 31; *Atlakviða*, verse 66.

⁶² *Oddrúnargrátur*, stanza 29.

⁶³ Hjálmar H. Ragnarsson, “A Short History of Icelandic Music to the Beginning of the Twentieth Century” (MFA diss., Cornell University, 1980), Introduction.

the poem indeed calls it the *Song of Grotti*, and not the *Poem of Grotti*. If this is true, then it would imply that working songs, the majority of which belong to oral tradition and many of which are believed to have been lost, could have survived in some form within the existing written records.

Sagas

By far some of the most important sources we have for music are the famed sagas. Sagas are some of our best literary sources toward understanding the Viking Age and later medieval period, as they provide some of the most detailed accounts of Scandinavian society during or shortly after that time. Sagas encompass a broad variety of styles and subjects, ranging from realistic to fantastic, heathen mythology to Christian hagiography. The many genres of sagas include: *Íslendinga sögur* (sagas of Icelanders), *fornaldarsögur* (legendary sagas), *riddarasögur* (chivalric sagas), *konungasögur* (kings' sagas), *samtíðarsögur* (contemporary sagas), *heilagra manna sögur* (saints' sagas), and *biskupa sögur* (bishops' sagas). *Íslendingaþættir* (short tales of Icelanders) are also often included in discussions about sagas. Unlike Eddic and skaldic poetry, sagas are generally written in prose.

For all their merits, one must use caution when using sagas as historical documents. Their biggest disadvantage lies within the fact that most sagas were written down a century or more after the events that they describe. This understandably raises questions about their accuracy, especially concerning religious customs that were no longer performed during the time of the writer. The second caveat is the question of bias, which is the case for any literary source. Naturally, any interpreter would be concerned about any personal or political bias on the part of the scribe or author, but as most sagas were written anonymously, it is often difficult to discern specific bias the scribe or author may have had, making it sometimes impossible to distinguish between fact and fiction. Further complicating the situation is how different scribes changed some details when copying manuscripts, not infrequently resulting in several versions of the same saga. Unfortunately, as many manuscripts have been lost, the extant manuscripts may not represent a holistic picture of the saga. Lastly, there is geographic bias. The

overwhelming majority of sagas were written in Iceland and concern events in Iceland and Norway. While this is fantastic for Icelandic scholars, they are less useful when studying, for instance, Eastern Sweden. Keeping these points in mind, both the longer sagas and the shorter *þættir* will be noted in the following section.

Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda

One of the most famous *fornaldarsögur*, or legendary sagas, in existence is surely the *Völsunga saga*. It illustrates a scene with a harp that became a popular source of artistic depiction around the time of the Viking Ages (see fig 12). One of the heroes of the saga, Gunnar, is thrown into a snake pit, where he plays a harp with his feet to charm the snakes. This works save for one large adder, which bites and promptly kills him.⁶⁴ The image of Gunnar strumming a harp with his toes is a recurrent one, appearing in many decorative carvings.



Fig. 12 Wood carving of Gunnar playing a harp with his toes on the left door plank of Hylestad stave church in Setesdal, Norway. (Photo: Jeblad, “Gunnar in snakepit Hylestad.” Setesdal, Norway.)

Bósa saga ok Herrauðs is remarkable not only for actually describing a harp in detail (a regrettably rare and precious occurrence) but also for mentioning what songs were played on it:

⁶⁴ Guðni Jónsson, and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, eds., *Völsunga saga* (Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan Forni, 1943-4) ch. 39.

Konungr spyr nú, hvárt hann kann nokkut fleiri slagi, en hann segir eptir vera nokkura smáleika ok bað fólkit hvílast fyrst. Settust menn nú til drykkju. Sló hann þar Gýgjarslag ok Drömbuð ok Hjarrandahljóð. Því næst kom inn Óðins minni. Þá lauk Sigurðr upp hörpunni. Hún var svá stór, at maðr mátti standa rétt í maganum á henni; hún var öll sem á gull sæi. Þar tók hann upp hvíta glófa gullsauaða. Hann sló nú þann slag, sem Faldafeykir heitir, ok stukku þá faldarnir af konunum, ok léku þeir fyrir ofan þvertréin. Stukku þá upp konurnar ok allir menninir, ok engi hlutr var þá sá, at kyrr þoldi.⁶⁵

The king now asked, whether he knew any more tunes, but he said that there were certain small ones and bade the people to rest first. Then sat the men down to drink. He played the “Ogress-tune” and “The Dreamer” and “Plundering-song.” Next came a toast to Óðinn. Then Sigurðr took up the harp. It was so big, that a man could stand upright in its middle, and it was all set in gold. Then he took up a white glove embroidered in gold. He now struck a tune, which “Coif-Tosser” hight, and the coifs jumped off the women, and they danced around above the crossbeams. Then jumped up the women and all men, and nothing remained in its place.

From this passage we learn three important things: 1) the potential size and value of a harp, 2) that music was played as entertainment, and 3) there were indeed “dance music”, insofar as there was dancing with musical accompaniment. As no large harps have yet been found in the archaeological record, this description of a harp where a man could “stand upright in its middle” is striking, even if the writing were slightly hyperbolic. That music was played as entertainment may seem obvious for us today, but as skalds and poetry were clearly held in higher esteem than were musicians before the later Middle Ages, and as there are relatively so few descriptions of music in general, this account is valuable for confirming the existence of commonly known “popular music” in early Germanic culture. Of course, *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs* was written centuries after the mythic time with which it is concerned, but it does not seem unreasonable that there were musical entertainment within the drinking halls of times long past.

⁶⁵ Guðni Jónsson, and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, eds., *Bósa Saga Ok Herrauðs*. 2nd ed. Vol. 3. Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda (Reykjavik: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1954) ch. 12.

Ynglinga saga credits Óðinn as the one who brought singing to Scandinavia. “Hann ok hofgoðar hans heita ljóðasmiðir, því at sú íþrótt hófst af þeim í norðrlöndum.”⁶⁶ (“He and his temple-priests were called song-smiths, for that art came from them into the northern lands.”) It also mentions a king, Huggleikr, as having had many instrumentalists at his court, among them harpists, fiddlers, and other string players, “Hann hafði mjök í hirð sinni allskonar leikara, harpara ok gígjara ok fiðlara; hann hafði ok með sér seiðmenn ok allskonar fjölkunnigt fólk.”⁶⁷ (“He had many in his court all sorts of players: harpists and *gígja*-players and fiddlers; and he had with him magicians and all sorts of witchcraft-folk.”) While Óðinn is commonly described as the god of poetry, it is not often that he is said to have introduced Scandinavians with the art of song, and the euhemeral *Ynglinga saga* is notable in this regard.

Norna-Gests þáttr is a *þáttr*, or a short story, and therefore not a saga, but will be mentioned in this section as its content is most alike a *fornaldasaga*. It mentions harp playing twice: the first when the king asks Gestr whether he had any skills, to which the latter answers, “Hann kvaðst leika á hörpu eða segja sögur, svá at gaman at”⁶⁸ (“He said he plays the harp or recites sagas, so that people are pleased.”). The second is of Gestr playing the harp:

Tekr Gestr hörpu sína ok slær vel ok lengi um kveldit svá at öllum þykkir unað í á at heyra, ok slær þó Gunnarsslag bezt. Ok at lyktum slær hann Guðrúnarbrögð in fornu. Þau höfðu menn eigi fyrr heyrt. Ok eptir þat sváfu menn af um nóttina.⁶⁹

Took Gest up his harp and played well and long into the evening, so that all were delighted to hear it, and he played Gunnars-tune the best. And at the end he played the ancient Guðrúnarbrögð [Guðrún’s trickery]. They had not heard that before. And after that, the men went to sleep for the night.

⁶⁶ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, ed., *Snorri Sturluson, Heimskringla, Ynglinga saga I*. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1979) ch. 6.

⁶⁷ Ibid. ch. 25.

⁶⁸ Sigurður Nordal, *Norna-Gests þáttr*. In *Flateyjarbók I* (Akranes: Flateyjarútgáfan, 1944) ch. 1.

⁶⁹ Ibid. ch. 2.

This passage, like the one from *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*, is useful for its description of what the harpist played. The names “Gunnar” and “Guðrún” are strongly indicative of the characters from *Völsunga saga*, although it is possible that the songs were referring to other people who happened to share those names. If the songs did concern the events of the saga, however, it would imply the existence of a genre of music regarding legends and epics.

Konungasögur

Konungasögur, or Kings’ sagas, are sagas about the lives of (sometimes legendary) Scandinavian kings, often composed between the 12th to 14th centuries, many years after the kings’ deaths. *Morkinskinna*, named after the rotting manuscript parchment on which it was preserved, is one such Kings’ saga. In the section detailing his exploits, King Haraldr harðráði claims to have mastered harp-playing and poetry:

Íþróttir kannk átta	Accomplishments have I eight
Yggs fetk líð at smíða	Ygg’s wine[skaldic poetry] can I forge
föerr emk hvasst á hesti	skilled am I at travelling swiftly on horseback
hefk sund numit stundum:	I have practiced swimming on occasion
skríða kannk á skíðum	slide can I on skis
skýtk ok ræk svát nýtir	I shoot and row so that it counts
hvártveggja kannk hyggja	both can I understand
harpslátt ok bragþáttu. ⁷⁰	harp-playing and poems.

In *Orkneyinga saga*, Earl Rögnvaldr Kali Kolsson likewise claims to have mastered music and verse, and gives a near identical boast to that of Haraldr harðráði:

Tafl emk qrr at efla,	Ready am I to play chess,
íþróttir kank níu,	accomplishments have I nine,
týnik traudla rúnum,	rarely do I forget runes,
tíð erum bók ok smíðir,	books I read and do smith,
skríða kank á skíðum,	slide can I on skis
skýtk ok ræk svát nýtir;	I shoot and row so that it counts

⁷⁰ *Morkinskinna*, U 16.

hvárttveggja kank hyggja, both can I understand
harpslátt ok bragþáttu.⁷¹ harp-playing and poems.

These boasts give the impression that playing the harp was held in enough esteem that it was worth bragging as an accomplishment. However, instrument players and entertainers themselves seem to have been regarded in a low light. In *Saga Sverris konungs*, the Icelandic skald Máni has a competition with two jesters whose entertainment included various instrumental playing and low buffoonery.⁷² Máni's victory symbolizes skaldic poetry's place as having a higher rank than instrumental playing in West Norse society at the time. (This trend will reverse itself during the Late Middle Ages, when music and jesting become more popular in courts than skaldic poetry.)

Íslendingasögur

True to its name, *Íslendingasögur*--sagas of Icelanders--narrate the lives and events of Icelandic history that generally took place between the 9th to early 11th centuries. As has been noted previously, *Brennu-Njáls saga*, one of the most famous Icelandic sagas in history, contains the skaldic poem *Darraðarljóð*.⁷³ It is an eleven-stanza poem describing twelve valkyries weaving and choosing the fates of warriors in battle. Hjálmar H. Ragnarsson argues that it might in fact be the remnants of an old weaving song.⁷⁴ Aside from this possible musical material, *Brennu-Njáls saga* illustrates Christian mass being sung.⁷⁵ While singing mass is unquestionably Christian, other sagas often mention chanting, sometimes for divination. *Eiríks saga rauða* has the famous scene where Guðriður Þorbjarnardóttir helped a völva by singing the appropriate chant:

⁷¹ Finnbogi Guðmundsson, *Orkneyinga saga* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1965), ch. 49.

⁷² Þorleifur Hauksson, *Sverris saga* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2007) ch. 85.

⁷³ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed, *Brennu-Njáls Saga* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1954) ch 157.

⁷⁴ Hjálmar H. Ragnarsson, "A Short History of Icelandic Music", Introduction.

⁷⁵ *Brennu-Njáls Saga*, ch. 124.

Sú kona var í bygð, er Þorbiörg hét; hon var spá-kona; hon var kölluð lítil-völua...Bað hon fá sér konur þær, sem kynni froeði þat, er þyrfti til seiðinn at fremia ok Varðlokkur heita. Enn þær konur funduz eigi. Þá var at leitat at um boeinn, ef nökkur kynni. Þá svarar Guðríðr: hvárki em filkunnig né vísenda-kona, en þó kendi Halldís, fóstura mín, mér á Íslandi þat fræði, er hon kallaði Varðlokkur. Þorbiörg svaraði: þá ertu fróðari enn ek ætlaði. Guðríðr segir: þetta er þesskonar froeði ok atferli, at ek ætla í öngum atbeina at vera, þúiat ek em kona kristin...Þorkell herðir nú at Guðríði, enn hon kveðz mundu gera, sem hann vildi. Slógu þá konur hring umhverfis, en Þorbjörg uppi á seiðhiallinum. Kvað Guðríðr þá kvæðit svá fagrt ok vel, at engi þóttiz fyrr heyrt hafa með fegri raust kveðit, sá er þar var. Spákona þakkar henni kvæðit ok kvað margar þær náttúrur hingat at hafa sótt ok þótti⁷⁶

There was a woman dwelling there, named Þorbjörg; she was a seeress; she was called Little-*Völva*...She asked for those women, who knew the wisdom (chant), which was necessary for *seiðr* and was called Varðlokkur [Warlock-song]. But those women could not be found. Then those dwelling there were asked, if anyone knew it. Then answered Guðríðr, "Neither am I magically skilled nor a wise-woman, but Halldís, my foster-mother, taught me that chant in Iceland, which she called Varðlokkur." Þorbjörg replied: "Then you are more learned than I had thought." Guðríðr replied, "This is the sort of knowledge and proceeding, that I want nothing to do with, for I am a Christian woman."... Þorkell now pressured Guðríðr, and she consented to do as he wished. Made then the women a ring around, and Þorbjörg sat up on the *seið*-platform. Then Guðríðr recited the chant so beautifully and well, that no one thought that they had heard the chant spoken with a fairer voice than was there. The seeress thanked her for the recital and said that many of the powers were now pleased

Laxdæla saga also features chanting,⁷⁷ but religion and prophesy were not the only reasons for singing. *Egils saga* makes it apparent that people composed love-songs as well, as Aulvir does for his sweetheart, Solveig.⁷⁸ In other occasions, music

⁷⁶ Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthias Thordarson, ed, *Eiríks saga rauða* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1935) ch. 4.

⁷⁷ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed, *Laxdæla saga* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1934) ch. 37.

⁷⁸ Sigurður Nordal, ed., *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1956) ch. 2.

was played simply for personal entertainment, as is the case in *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, where Helga plays harp to herself all night in her bed. (“Hún sló hörpu nær allar nætur því að henni var þá enn sem oftár ekki mjög svefnsamt.”⁷⁹ “She struck the harp nearly every night because she was still often not able to sleep.”) *Grettis saga* is full of singing: from an old woman chanting, to performing evil spells,⁸⁰ to Grettir singing in order to keep his spirits up while in captivity in Byzantium.⁸¹ In *Víglundar saga*, Earl Eiríkur entertains King Haraldur with singing and various instruments: “Og að enduðum gjöfum lét jarl fram bera eina hörpu.”⁸² (“And at the end of [this] gift-giving, let the earl bear forth a harp.”) Meanwhile, *Vatnsdæla saga* includes a rare scene involving horns when *lúðr* horns are blown to call men to battle.⁸³ While not the most reliable historical resource, *Íslendingasögur* are nevertheless valuable for depicting a broad range of scenarios wherein singing and musical instruments were performed.

Íslendingaþættir

Íslendingaþættir, or Short Tales of Icelanders, are similar in content to *Íslendingasögur*, with the main difference being that *þættir* are shorter in length than sagas. *Morkinskinna* (written in Iceland c. 1220 and preserved in a manuscript from c. 1275) contains such a short tale called *Hreiðars þáttr heimska*, and from this we can gather that horns were used to signal meetings and ship launches. In this *þáttr*, the protagonist Hreiðarr accompanies his brother Þórðr to Norway, where he hears a *hornblástr*. When Hreiðarr asks what it means, Þórðr answers, “Blásit er jafnan til móts eða til skipdráttar.”⁸⁴ (“A blast is always for a meeting or for a ship-

⁷⁹ Þórhallur Vilmundarson, ed., *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1991) ch. 7.

⁸⁰ Guðni Jónsson, *Grettis saga Ámundarsonar*, (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1936) ch. 81.

⁸¹ Ibid. ch. 90.

⁸² Jóhannes Halldórsson, ed., *Víglundar saga* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1959) ch. 4.

⁸³ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed., *Vatnsdæla saga* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1939) ch. 9.

⁸⁴ Ármann Jakobsson, and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, eds., *Morkinskinna*. (Reykjavík:

levy.”) Another *þáttr* that includes instruments, *Jökuls þáttur Búasonar* is unique in stating that the protagonist Jökull entertained with songs and bassoon music while visiting Soldan in the land of the Saracens.⁸⁵

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed some of the types of Old Norse sources that mention Old Norse music, including runic writing, skaldic and Eddic poetry, sagas, and *þættir*. While these are writings from within the same ethnographic tradition as the music of the so-called Vikings, it must be remembered that these writings were written down sometimes centuries after their events, necessitating one to be cautious when using them as historical sources. It is even difficult to say with any conviction that these literary sources truly follow the same cultural tradition, as culture is something that is constantly evolving. It certainly changes after multiple decades, as is the time between many of the sagas' events and their written date. Finally, the conversion to Christianity and increased cultural influence from the European mainland undeniably impacted Norse culture, causing some previous traditions to become discontinued or greatly changed. What the extant Old Norse written materials give us regarding Norse music are colorful illustrations of a great variety of music being played in diverse settings, indicating that there were indeed multiple styles and purposes for music during the Viking Age.

Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2011) 153.

⁸⁵ Jóhannes Halldórsson, ed., *Jökuls þáttr Búasonar* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1959) ch. 3.

Chapter 5

Reconstructing Music in the Viking Age

With the exception of runestones and runic inscriptions, Scandinavians did not have a widespread writing tradition during the Viking Age. Therefore, the majority of surviving sources in the Old Norse language were written down after 1100 CE, often well after the events that they describe. This inevitably presents several problems when using them as historical sources, but the problem becomes even more pronounced when turning towards them for information on music. It is comparable to seeking information from a concert review that was written two hundred years after the concert had taken place, from a reviewer who is not a music critic and who had never gone to a similar concert. This might make the task of the music historian seem quite futile—how accurately can we really even describe the music from several decades ago, let alone centuries ago? This chapter will attempt to reconstruct Viking Age Scandinavian music by combining archaeological and literary sources with later medieval melodies, musical styles, and contemporary music theory.

Various methods for writing down music have existed for thousands of years in the Near East, India, China, and Greece, but the practice of notating both pitch and rhythm in the familiar staff notation that is standard today (see fig. 13) began with Guido d'Arezzo (c. 991–1033 CE), a Benedictine monk in Italy. While his lifetime corresponds to the dates of the Viking Age, music of the Germanic peoples were not written down in this way (indeed, they were not written down at all) presenting considerable challenges to the task of recreating music.



Fig. 13 Example of standard Western music notation using 5 staves (lines) on which the notes are placed based on pitch. Here it shows the theme from Beethoven's 5th Symphony, 1st movement. (Photo: Jobrahms, "Beethoven symphony 5 opening." Wikipedia commons.)

Early Melodies

There are several works of music theory dating to the Viking Ages that detail how instruments were tuned in continental Europe, but it is uncertain as to what extent this information is applicable to Germanic music. The Frankish music theorist and Benedictine monk Hucbald (c. 840/850–930 CE) records in his work *De Harmonica Institutione* (c. 880 CE) that the six-stringed lyre was tuned C-D-E-F-G-A, i.e. the first 6 notes of the C major scale, when the first string was tuned to C.⁸⁶ However, his explanation refers to how the classical lyre was tuned during the time of the late Roman senator and philosopher Anicius Manilius Severinus Boëthius (c. 480–524 CE), who in turn wrote *De institutione musica*, a major work describing how Greek music functioned. Thus, it is entirely uncertain whether Germanic lyres were tuned in this manner.

The earliest recorded Scandinavian music is the melody from *Codex Runicus* (see ch. 4). This melody is the basis of the popular Danish song “Drømte mig en drøm i nat” (see fig. 14), which has many variations, but the arrangers of this tune have taken ample liberties with the music written in the manuscript, and the most well-known versions of this song are not accurate transcriptions of the manuscript.



Fig. 14 The popular Danish song “Drømte mig en drøm i nat”, based on the melody from *Codex Runicus*. (Photo: “Drömde mig en dröm i natt.” Folkwiki.)

⁸⁶ Peter C Horn, “The Sound of the Sutton Hoo Harp.” *Tha Engliscan Gesithas - The English Companions*.

Unlike in modern scores, medieval music notation does not have a time signature, meaning that the score does not indicate precise rhythm. What it does indicate are the pitches and sequence of the notes (i.e. the melody), depending on the clef. The marking that resembles a “C” at the beginning of the score is the C clef (see fig. 15). The placement of the C clef determines where the C is on the staves. In figure 15 below, the placements of the C clefs indicate that the starting notes of the melody are A and F. This early melody, called “Nobilis, humilis”, is preserved in late 13th century manuscripts, among them the *Codex C 233* in Uppsala, Sweden (see fig. 15). Written for two voices, it is a hymn of sorts for St. Magnus, and consists of seven strophes. The two parts are written in parallel thirds, with the upper voice starting on an A and the lower voice starting on an F (see fig. 16). It may then be presumed that those notes were part of an early medieval Scandinavian mode.

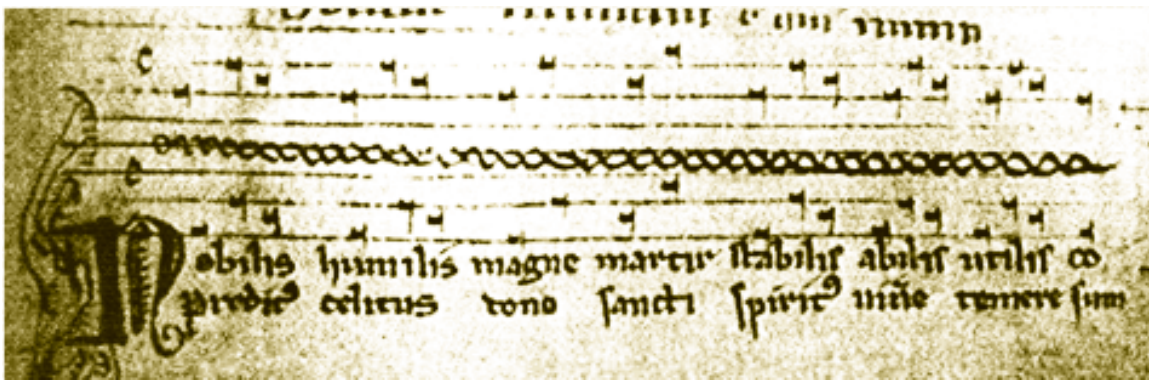


Fig. 15 “Nobilis, humilis” on *Codex Upsaliensis C 233*. (Photo: “Nobilis, humilis.” Liturgia.)



Fig. 16 Modern staff notation of “Nobilis, humilis.” (Photo: “Nobilis humilis.” The Viking Answer Lady.)

Parallel third chords, as exhibited in this manuscript, are either major or minor thirds. A major third is a musical interval of two pitches separated by four half steps, or semitones (e.g. C and E, etc.), as opposed to a minor third, which is separated by three half steps, or semitones (e.g. C and E-flat). Although the major third is common and sounds pleasing today, that is greatly due to the fact that western instruments since the 20th century use the equal tempered tuning system, where there is an equal interval between each semitone and where the frequency of a single note doubles per octave. The major third was considered dissonant during the early medieval period, when Pythagorean tuning was used and which results in rather displeasing-sounding harmonies. While the tuning system of early Germanic music is uncertain, “Nobilis, humilis” was very likely performed according to the non-equal tempered tuning system that was used in mainland Europe at the time. The hymn is believed to date from the early 12th century⁸⁷ (though it is preserved in 13th century manuscripts) both for its unusual harmonies and its subject matter, which is written in praise of St. Magnus, who was martyred in Orkney in 1117.

Medieval Ballads & the Gymel

Despite having changed from early medieval times, certain styles of music may give glimpses into late Viking Age Scandinavian music. One such style is a form of singing called *gymel*. A *gymel* is a type of polyphonic vocal music wherein a vocal part--usually the upper voice--is divided into two parts of equal range, with each part singing independently until they both converge in unison at the end of the piece. According to Giraldus Cambrensis (c. 1146–1223 CE), this vocal style was popular in northern England, which was historically occupied by Scandinavians. He suggests that as such polyphonic singing was not common in native English music, it was the Scandinavians who influenced this style.⁸⁸ If this was the case, then it would

⁸⁷ Philip Pulsiano and Kirsten Wolf, *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993), 422.

⁸⁸ Dom Anselm Hughes, *New Oxford History of Music: Early Medieval Music Up to 1300*. Vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1954) 315-317.

further support the theory that early Scandinavian singing incorporated polyphony, the likes of which is ubiquitous in the parallel third-dependent “Nobilis, humilis.”⁸⁹

Other musical styles may also give clues as to their possible Scandinavian ancestors. Among these are the Norwegian medieval ballad, *middelalderballade*—a genre of surviving folk songs that reflect mythological themes. The content and structure of these songs indicate the possibility that some of them may date from actual medieval times. Within *middelalderballader* are categories reminiscent of genres of sagas, such as *legendeballader* (legend ballads), *ridderballader* (chivalric ballads), and *naturmytiske ballader* (nature mythical ballads). This last category has its own subcategory of *bergtakingsvisene*, the most famous of which is the ballad, “Margit Hjukse.” Ballads are stories told through song, and “Margit Hjukse” tells the tragic tale of a young maiden who was abducted by and forced to wed the “Bergekongen” (mountain king). Its simple melody, mythological subject matter, and refrain structure of the lyrics is strongly evocative of medieval styles, making it quite probable that it is old, perhaps even stemming from motifs in medieval ballads.

Folk Songs

At first it might seem preposterous to attempt to gain any knowledge of Viking Age music from folk music that have survived until recent times. However, folk music is typically conservative by nature, and can preserve extremely old melodies for a remarkably long time. Music historian Nils Grinde put it best in his writing about Norwegian folk music:

Folk music is often closely tied to its milieu, and it is preserved primarily through so-called “oral” transmission. That is to say, this music, whether vocal or instrumental, originally was learned and preserved from generation to generation simply by hearing, without the help of notation or other means.

⁸⁹ It must be mentioned, however, that polyphonic music begin to appear in French manuscripts from the 10th century. During the lifetime of Giraldus Cambrensis, polyphonic music, particularly polyphonic organum, flourished in France. Nevertheless, it is still curious that polyphonic singing was a style that surfaced in the previously Scandinavian-occupied parts of England, and not elsewhere, which is likely to have occurred had *gymel* been primarily influenced by French singing.

Only in modern times has this changed.⁹⁰

Methods of oral transmission often produce variations of the original, and is particularly vulnerable to becoming lost. As the method of working that a song is tied to is discontinued, the songs may also become extinct. Such is the case, for instance, with the herding calls, *kulning*, in Norway, which are waning as the herding lifestyle disappears. Sadly, unwritten oral traditions may be nearly impossible to recover after living memory of them dies. However, it is important to acknowledge the tenacity of folk songs in general. The longest lingering melodies of any tradition tend to be lullabies and folk songs, followed by domestic songs (songs for weaving, drawing water, etc.). Again, this last category is dependent upon the continuation of the domestic task with which the song concerns; yet they may continue to exist as folk music even after the task itself is no longer performed (e.g. pastoral herding songs sung in urban environments). Such songs may have links to the distant past.

Understandably, historians jump to any modern traditions that may be tied to the remote past for direction. As Iceland lay farther away from mainland European influence and maintained the clearest linguistic link to the Old Norse-speaking peoples, it is natural to once again turn to Iceland for musical clues, although there is little evidence of an unbroken Icelandic musical tradition harkening back to the Viking Ages. Among known recorded Icelandic melodies include five set to Old Norse texts, recorded in Jean-Baptiste de la Borde's 1780 book, *Essai sur la Musique Ancienne et Moderne*.⁹¹ De la Borde received information regarding these songs from the German-Danish musician Johann Ernst Hartmann who lived in Copenhagen (then also the capital of Iceland). Supposedly, these songs were sung in Iceland at the time, and Hartmann learned of them from visiting Icelanders in Copenhagen. While this is slightly dubious, the subject matters of these songs are undeniably intriguing. Among the five songs are two that are set to poems

⁹⁰ Nils Grinde. *A History of Norwegian Music*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991) 73.

⁹¹ Jean-Baptiste de la Borde, Jean-Baptiste, *Essai sur la Musique Ancienne et Moderne*. Paris: De l'Impr. de P.D. Pierres, 1780.

from the *Poetic Edda*, and another that is also a poem. These songs' lyrics are from *Völuspá* (see fig. 17), *Hávamál*, and *Krakamál*, respectively.



Fig. 17 *Völuspá* song, as recorded by de la Borde in 1780. (Photo: "Score for *Völuspá* Tune." The Viking Answer Lady.)

The recorded melodies of these three songs are extremely similar, such that they could have been based off of one melody that was adapted for different texts:

They all are built over a flexible song formula which with minor variations are adapted to different metres. Such a song formula that can be adapted to almost any text, may well derive from ancient oral traditions. And even more strange - these tunes seem to circle around the major third. This is the central interval⁹²

That the song centers around a major third is interesting, as it ties directly to the central feature of "Nobilis, humilis." Since at least the end of the Renaissance period (c. 1400–1600 CE) and possibly previously, it is customary for western music to begin and end in the same key (e.g. D major pieces end in D). Folk music, with links to older traditions, often deviates from these sets of rules and is sometimes written in older modes, as opposed to the major and minor scales used in most European music since the 1600s. This is clearly the case in the *Völuspá* song, which defies structural rules of music theory from either the Classical Period (c. 1730–1820 CE) during which time the book was published, or that of the preceding Baroque Period

⁹² Kåre A. Lie, *Spor Av Vikingenes Sanger: Sanger Og Danser Fra Vikingtid Og Middelalder = Traces of the Songs of the Vikings* (Borre: Midgard Forl., 2009).

(c. 1600–1750 CE). Unless this song was a random post-1600 composition that just happened to defy all musical conventions of its time, it is likely that it has links to prior melodies.

Another of the five Old Norse songs recorded in *Essai sur la Musique Ancienne et Moderne* is one about Haraldr hardráði, and is therefore also thematically concerned with the Viking Ages. Unlike the melodies of the three previously mentioned songs, the Haraldr hardráði melody begins and ends on the same note (see fig. 18). Although the surviving record only shows it as having been written with one vocal line, the melody curiously functions perfectly well when a second part is added in parallel thirds,⁹³ exactly like in “Nobilis, humilis.”



Fig. 18 Song of Haraldr Hardráða, as recorded by de la Borde in 1780. (Photo: “Score for Haraldr Hardraða Tune.” The Viking Answer Lady.)

The last Old Norse song, titled “Lilja,” is something of an oddity. The lyrics of the song are based on the skaldic poem of the same name that was supposedly composed by Brother Eysteinn.⁹⁴ The melody for “Lilja” is completely different from

⁹³ Christie L. Ward, “Viking Age Music.” Viking Answer Lady Webpage. Accessed December 01, 2016. <http://www.vikinganswerlady.com/music.shtml>.

⁹⁴ Erika Sigurdson, *The Church in Fourteenth Century Ireland: The Formation of an Elite Clerical Identity* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2015) 56.

those of the other four, and centers around minor thirds and fifths (see fig. 19). It would not be hyperbolic to describe it as sounding quite creepy. The thematic use of minor thirds is highly evocative of Byzantine chants and Middle Eastern music, and one wonders whether this tune could have been a foreign import from the East.



Fig. 19 The song “Lilja”, as recorded by de la Borde in 1780. (Photo: “Score for Lilja Tune.” The Viking Answer Lady.)

Icelandic Rímur and Tvísöngur

Once again, we turn to Icelandic musical traditions in the hopes of catching a glimpse into its pre-Christian past. Two traditions that may be so linked are the Icelandic *rímur* and *tvísöngur*. *Rímur* is a form of sung oral poetry, with the earliest written poems harkening back to the 14th century. The poetic structure contains alliteration and rhyme, and its contents include kennings, *heiti*, and other characteristics of skaldic poetry. As a form of poetry, *rímur* have remained popular over the centuries, with 78 poems found before 1600, 138, 248, and 505 from the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries respectively, and 75 from the twentieth century.⁹⁵ Sigurður Nordal has remarked upon the extremely change-

⁹⁵ Finnur Sigmundsson, *Rímnatal* (Reykjavík: Rímnafélagið, 1966).

resistant nature of *rímur*, calling them “probably the most absurd example of literary conservatism that has ever been noted. It can be said that they remain unchanged for five whole centuries although everything around them changes.”⁹⁶ Another musical form with long roots, *tvísöngur* is a type of singing wherein two voices sing in parallel fifths. It is especially tempting to study *tvísöngur*, as this style “is evidently a remnant of the parallel organum⁹⁷ of the 9th century and was still practiced until comparatively recent times.”⁹⁸ Yet despite the temptation to regard *rímur* or *tvísöngur* as evidence of some pure, unbroken traditions, this would be as foolhardy as thinking that the modern Icelandic Alþingi has remained completely unchanged since its inception in 930 CE.⁹⁹ It is necessary to look to any of these surviving traditions for inspirational purposes, and not as accurate historical sources.

Reconstructing Viking Age Music

Certain musical groups have made much effort over the years to reconstruct Viking Age Scandinavian music, and the more scholarly-minded of them have taken inspiration from the aforementioned early medieval melodies and ballads, folk songs, and Icelandic *rímur*. Since there are no recordings from this time period, this reconstruction based on a hodge-podge of various styles may appear to be as good as it gets. Put more bluntly, it is impossible to know exactly how the music of the Germanic peoples during the Viking Age sounded without a time machine. It is both the beauty and the depressing truth of music that no words will ever do justice to capture it; a thousand eloquently written accounts will pale in usefulness to a single sheet of music that has notated the score. However, there is one more method with which we might be able to take one step closer to understanding early Scandinavian

⁹⁶ Daisy L. Neijmann, *The Icelandic Voice in Canadian Letters: The Contribution of Icelandic-Canadian Writers to Canadian Literature* (Carleton, Ont.: Carleton University Press, 1997) 28.

⁹⁷ A form of early polyphonic vocal music.

⁹⁸ Willi Apel, *Harvard Dictionary of Music* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969) 400.

⁹⁹ As it stands, the Alþingi was discontinued for 45 years between 1799 and 1844.

music: reconstruction via elimination. Given what we know about the instruments and accounts, it is possible to do a sort of reverse engineering by eliminating what it *was not*. As has been discussed earlier, Arab travelers and continental Europeans wrote their impressions of Viking music, on the whole of which were overwhelmingly negative, as they sounded overwhelmingly different from their own. Luckily for historians, these people have also written about their own music, making it possible to conduct a cross-cultural analysis of Greek, Western Ecclesiastical, and Arabic music, and decide what Scandinavian music must not have sounded like by eliminating these foreign styles from the list of possibilities. It needs hardly be said that the negative accounts imply that the music of the north were profoundly different from that of their southern neighbors. By contrasting what the known musical styles sounded like, and therefore eliminating similar sounds, it becomes possible to say with some confidence what Scandinavian Viking Age music did not sound like.

The current prevailing hypothesis is that Scandinavian music sounded displeasing to Arabic travelers such as Ibn Fadlān and al-Tartushi because they were unaccustomed to hearing anything like it. However, further analysis of 10th century Arabic music reveals that this may not necessarily have been the case. For Arabic sources, we may turn to the *Kitab al-Musiqa al-Kabir* (“Great Book of Music”), a treatise on music by the 10th century philosopher Al-Farabi (872–950/951 CE), and to Abu-I-Faraj’s master compendium, *Kitab al-Aghani* (“Book of Songs”). The *maqam* (pl. *maqamat*), or modes of traditional Arabic music, that Al-Farabi lists in his treatise are still influential today, as is his Arabian tone system.¹⁰⁰ Meanwhile, *Kitab al-Aghani* is invaluable for containing not just the songs and related historical information, but for also including early Islamic music theory and descriptions of the songs. We may glean from both of these books that 10th century Arabic music, far from being unfamiliar with thirds, had in fact contained major, minor, and

¹⁰⁰ Habib Hassan Touma, *The Music of the Arabs*. Translated by Laurie Schwartz (Portland, Or.: Amadeus Press, 1996) 170.

neutral thirds.¹⁰¹ This was the type of music played in Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate from the late 8th to mid-13th centuries; as such, a member of an embassy from Baghdad such as Ibn Fadlān would certainly have been familiar with these chords. Andalusian classical music, while different from that of Baghdad, was unmistakably influenced by the court music of the Abbasids, and also included thirds. The founding of Andalusian classical music in the 9th century is credited to Ziryab (Abu I-Hasan ‘Ali Ibn Nafi’), who was a pupil of the famous Abbasid court musician Ishaq al-Mawsili, and whose own career first saw success in Baghdad before he moved to Córdoba.¹⁰²

It cannot have been the case that the Baghdadian Ibn Fadlān or the Andalusian at-Tartushi were displeased by Norse music because it contained chord intervals that they were unfamiliar with. It is more likely that at-Tartushi’s visceral dislike was precisely *because* the music he heard contained familiar intervals, but which used a different tuning system. It is known from *Kitab al-Musiqa al-Kabir* that Arabic music contained microtones—pitches in between those used in Europe—and therefore any Norse music such as those of the people in Hedeby must have sounded constantly out of tune to Arab ears, causing a kind of musical uncanny valley and making it sound all the more jarring. This foreign music, with unintelligible chanting, strange instruments, and displeasing harmonies, must have sounded quite horrifying to one such as at-Tartushi indeed.

Pulling together information from archaeology, contemporary and later literary sources, and various musical styles, the picture of Viking Age music begins to show itself. Like the music of any people, the music of the Old Norse-speaking people were many, and undoubtedly had significant regional and local variations. Their repertoire included solo voice, a cappella, or vocals accompanied with string, woodwind, brass, and percussion instruments. Most often, string instruments were usually played indoors at drinking halls, accompanying songs of praise or those that

¹⁰¹ Neutral thirds are intervals that are wider than a minor third, but less than a major third.

¹⁰² Olivia Remie Constable, *Medieval Iberia: Readings from Christian, Muslim, and Jewish sources* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

told a story. Some rituals, such as those involving a *vǫlva* or the *Gothika* dance with wolf skins that Anna Komnene describes, involved chanting or dancing. As with everything else, there must have been variations on the sounds of these chants—it is difficult to imagine that war chants and *seiðr* chants sounded the same. It is not outrageous speculation to guess that chanting for battles or for frenzied religious ceremonies must have involved producing different pitches in order to stimulate adrenaline; the monotonous, consistent rhythmic chanting in the manner of Tibetan Buddhism, for example, encourages the brain to enter alpha waves, has a calming effect, and is good for meditation¹⁰³—exactly the opposite of what one would want before a battle. On the other hand, this latter type of “droning” chants may have been perfect for a *vǫlva*.

At-Tartushi describes Danish singing as a guttural humming and compares it to dogs barking,¹⁰⁴ hinting that at least some kinds of voice production were not melodic. From Arabic accounts, we can gather that Scandinavian instruments were not tuned in equal temperament and almost certainly did not use any of the Arabic modes, of which we know very much about. Early medieval melodies such as “*Nobilis, humilis*” and centuries old traditions such as *tvísöngur* strongly indicate that polyphony, particularly the use of parallel thirds, might have been involved. From Old Norse literary sources and later medieval musical styles, we learn the suspected contents of these songs, and can gather that there were likely different genres of music. There were almost certainly songs of praise for chiefs, warriors, and fallen heroes; songs about epics like the story of the *Vǫlsunga saga*; love songs; and likely domestic songs in the likeness of *Grottaþöngur*, *Darraðarljóð*-style weaving songs, or lullabies. While speculation, the lyrics of these songs probably included alliteration, rhyming, repeating refrains, or other poetic features that are shared in surviving forms such as the Icelandic *rímur* and the Norwegian *middelalderballader*.

¹⁰³ Michael Winkelman, “Shamanism as the Original Neurotheology,” *Zygon: Journal of Religion & Science* 39, no. 1 (2004): 193–217, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9744.2004.00566.x.

¹⁰⁴ Georg Jacob, *Arabische Berichte von Gesandten an Germanische Fürstenhöfe aus dem 9. und 10. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1927) 29.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to reconstruct Viking Age Scandinavian music by combining archaeological and literary sources with later medieval melodies and medieval music theories. On the one hand, archaeological records and foreign sources provide contemporary information of the time period, while on the other hand, post-Viking Age literary and musical sources describe when and what kind of music were used and how it may have sounded. The truth probably lies somewhere in the middle. No doubt the type of instruments found in the archaeological record were played, but it would be foolish to assume that every instrument was played for every occasion. There were likely many categories of Viking Age music, the way there are multiple genres of sagas and *middelalderballader*, and literary sources support this theory. Distant relations such as the *gymel* and *tvísöngur* combined with early medieval melodies and folk songs offer important harmonic clues about how the songs may have sounded, while Arabic sources suggest how they *did not* sound. All in all, it is possible to piece together quite a compelling picture of Viking Age Scandinavian music. It may not be a complete picture, but it is a picture nonetheless.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Every major civilization has its own art, of which music is often a cornerstone. Despite this, music has often been missing from discussions regarding Viking Age Scandinavian studies. While it is sadly impossible to reproduce the music of the Norse people wholly accurately, it is possible to make a cogent case. It is never easy to reconstruct historical music, but Old Norse music in particular has several factors that make it particularly difficult. The first is the general reason not specific to Viking Age culture: music is ephemeral in nature. Music of the Viking Age Scandinavians has the added complication of not having had any standardized system of music notation, nor a writing culture with which they might have described their own music. We must then rely on biased descriptions from other peoples for primary sources.

Second, the majority of musical instruments that we may have been able to use to gain a better idea of early Scandinavian music have been destroyed, lost, or in most cases, decayed. It is entirely probable that the small sample of instruments that have been excavated are heavily skewed towards wind instruments, simply because the common materials used for winds are metal and bone, which last longer than those used for strings or percussion, which overwhelmingly tend to be composed of organic, easily decomposed materials such as wood and animal hides.

Third, unlike reconstructing continental European music from the Early Middle Ages, music of the heathen Scandinavian peoples have been actively suppressed and destroyed by the Church. While the Catholic Church was not as powerful an entity during the early Viking Age as it would later become during the later Middle Ages, it was nonetheless able to accomplish its goal of persuading Scandinavia to become Christian.¹⁰⁵ Thus, the music of the so-called “Vikings” died a

¹⁰⁵ In actuality, it is more apt to say that the majority of Scandinavia chose to adopt Christianity, rather than it having been passively converted, but the end result of Christianity taking hold in the region is the same.

slower, insidious death, as it changed from within. Music that is suppressed may find ways to be kept alive by the people who still hold them dear (e.g. the vibrant music and dance traditions of the Yoruba Diaspora throughout the Americas), but music that is forgotten or abandoned by its own people faces a sadder end. Hence, this combination of unwritten music, lost instruments, and transformed traditions render constructing Scandinavian music of the Viking Age very difficult indeed.

Nevertheless, despite these challenges, the discussion should not rest upon the assumption that the music of the Norse people had ended. We should also not speak of “Old Norse music” as if it were one monolithic block. Rather, it should be understood that there were multiple musical styles, such as military, religious, praise, popular, and domestic music, with likely some crossover between similar genres. Over the centuries, certain styles, if they existed, certainly came to an end. Among this number are non-Christian religious chants and military chants, as the Scandinavian region changed its religion and modes of warfare. The styles most likely to have survived were the simple melodies of lullabies and domestic songs that were passed down from one generation to the next, eventually turning into folk songs. Even if a note-for-note exact reproduction is impossible, we can nevertheless propose an extremely educated hypothesis based on examining melodies, songs, and musical styles from the High and Late Middle Ages, and by searching within time-honored musical traditions with possible links to the medieval period for clues. Examining and conducting cross-cultural comparisons between medieval Western European, Byzantine, Abbasid, and Andalusian music theories aid reconstruction work, and a methodology of reconstruction via elimination of known dissimilar foreign styles may also be performed for further analysis. All of this combined yields a wealth of information on Viking Age Scandinavian music.

A people’s songs and music is just as important a part of their cultural history and heritage as their language and literature. Given the wealth of sources for Viking Age Scandinavian music and the importance of the subject, it is silly to ignore this area of study on the assumption that there is too little evidence. The question is not whether it is possible or impossible to study Vikings Age Scandinavian music, but rather how to study it. The Vikings, we may confidently say, had plenty of music.

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