

G U R P S<sup>®</sup>

# VIKINGS

SECOND EDITION



*Ally Fenwick*

By GRAECME DAVIS

**STEVE JACKSON GAMES**

# Loot! Pillage! Burn!

*“From the fury of the Norsemen, oh Lord, deliver us!” So prayed the Irish monks.*

To the victims of a Viking raid, the Norsemen were bearded giants with bloody axes. But the Viking was much more. He was a skilled navigator and a brave explorer and trader. He was a fighter to whom honor and reputation were far more important than life. He was a free man in an age of petty tyranny. He was a dreamer whose songs and stories live even today. And yes, he was a bloody-handed sea rover who took what he wanted!

This book is a complete guide to the Norse world. It includes maps, historical background, and details on society and religion. A separate chapter discusses Norse magic and runes. This new edition also provides templates for playing the magical races of Viking lore as player characters, and expands the number of campaign options available.

You can game any sort of Viking campaign, from fully realistic to magical and cinematic. Create a historical campaign, with sea battles, duels and bloody raids – or become a legendary berserker for mythic adventures with Thor and Odin!

*You may live, you may die. No man knows his fate.  
But act bravely and the skalds will sing of  
your deeds forever.*



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*GURPS Basic Set, Third Edition Revised and Compendium I* are required to use this book in a *GURPS* campaign. *Compendium II* is also recommended to those who want detailed rules on sea battles and mass combat. The historical and campaign material on Vikings can be used with *any* game system.

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SECOND EDITION, FIRST PRINTING  
PUBLISHED NOVEMBER 2002

ISBN 1-55634-512-7



9 781556 345128

SJG02295 6042

Printed in  
the USA

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**Special Thanks:** [www.arttoday.com](http://www.arttoday.com)

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ISBN 1-55634-512-7

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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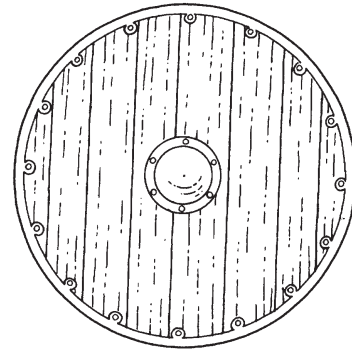
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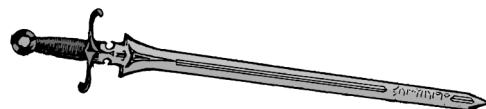
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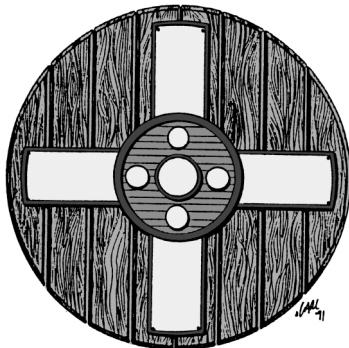


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## About GURPS

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The *GURPS Vikings* web page is at [www.sjgames.com/gurps/books/vikings/](http://www.sjgames.com/gurps/books/vikings/).

## Page References

Rules and statistics in this book are specifically for the *GURPS Basic Set, Third Edition*. Any page reference that begins with a B refers to the *GURPS Basic Set* – e.g., p. B102 means p. 102 of the *GURPS Basic Set, Third Edition*. Page references that begin with CI indicate *GURPS Compendium I*. Other references are CII for *GURPS Compendium II*, M for *GURPS Magic*, RU for *GURPS Russia*, SPI for *GURPS Spirits*, and UN for *GURPS Undead*. The abbreviation for this book is VI. For a full list of abbreviations, see p. CI181 or the updated web list at [www.sjgames.com/gurps/abbrevs.html](http://www.sjgames.com/gurps/abbrevs.html).

# INTRODUCTION

*GURPS Vikings* is about the Scandinavians of the Dark Ages and the early medieval period. It is also about the stories that were told – and are still told – about these people. In history, the Vikings span a 300-year period from the 8th century to the 11th; their mythology goes back to the beginning of the world and forward to its end. And the heroic exploits of the Norse sagas seem to occupy a time and space all of their own.

“From the fury of the Norsemen, oh Lord, deliver us!” So prayed the monks when the dragon ships were sighted. Over a thousand years later, the Vikings are still a byword for fearless, invincible barbarian warriors. Ancient chroniclers speak with horror of their savagery, modern moviemakers love them for their blood-and-thunder image, and fantasy barbarians everywhere owe them a vast unpaid debt.

All of which would amuse the average Viking immensely. In a world where even the gods were doomed to die, the only truly lasting thing a man could have was renown. To live well and die well, and have his saga told and retold till the end of the world – what more could a Viking ask?

*GURPS Vikings* lets roleplayers visit three Viking worlds. You can become a Viking from history, hoping to rise to the rank of Jarl or even king, command your own ship, and raid or trade as the mood takes you. Or you can step into the world of sagas, battling trolls and witches, sailing through untold perils to new lands. Finally, you can step beyond sagas to the world of myths, where gods walk the earth in disguise and woe betide the mortal who displeases them. Beware of a stranger with a broad hat and one eye . . .

## About the Author

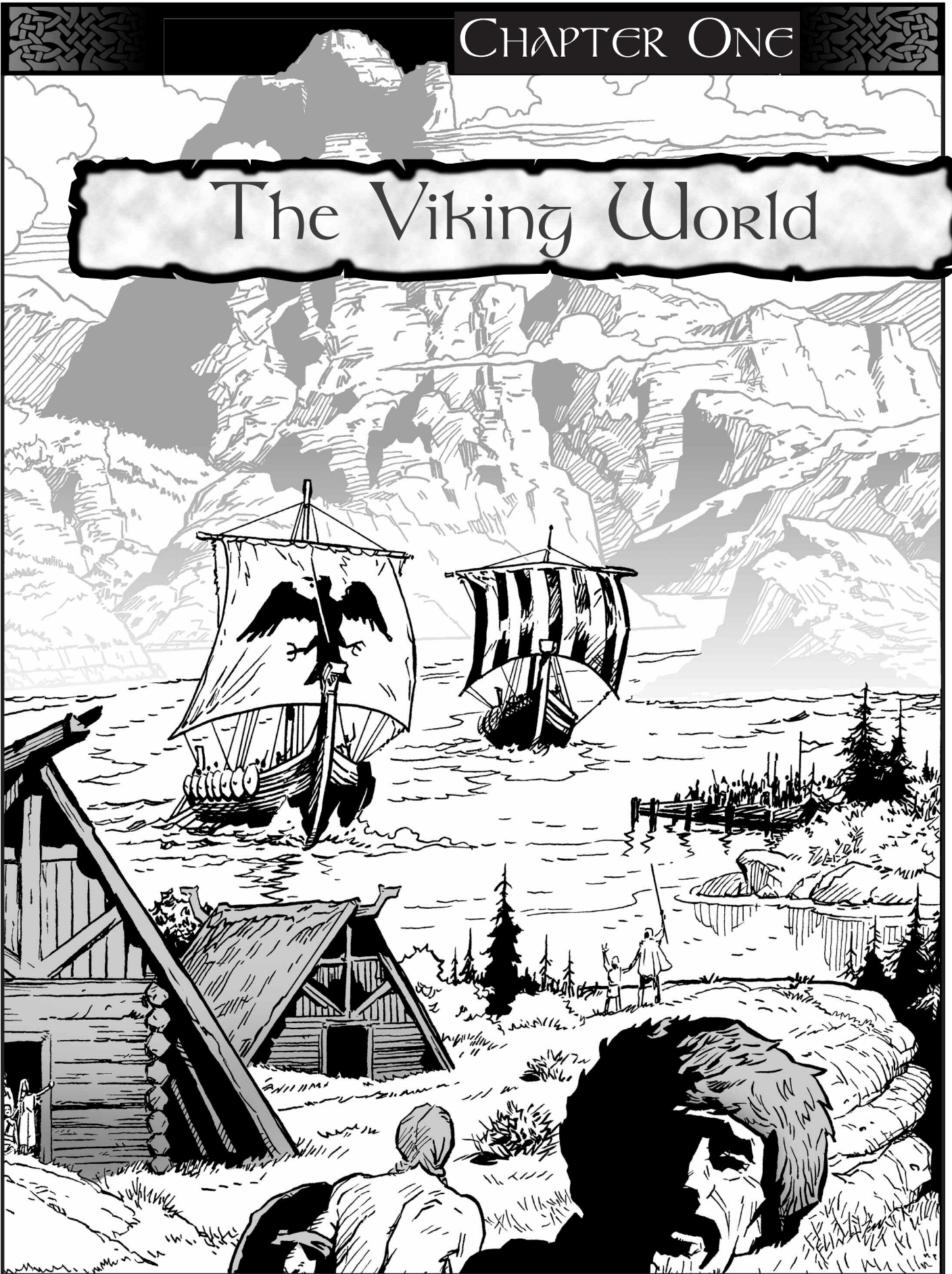
Graeme Davis discovered Vikings and roleplaying games at about the same time, as an archaeology student at Durham University, England, in 1979. Since then he has written for *GURPS*, *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, and *Vampire: The Masquerade*, among others. He makes a living designing games for the Internet, and to his father's chagrin, he shows no signs of growing up and getting a real job. Graeme lives in Colorado, with his long-suffering wife Gina and two very pampered cats.

## Vikings and Norsemen

It should be pointed out from the start that the title of this worldbook perpetuates a misnomer. During the “Viking Age,” the inhabitants of Scandinavia did do other things than raiding, pillaging, and looting. Strictly speaking, the term “Viking” should only be applied to an early medieval Scandinavian who is involved in such pursuits. This was actually a very minor part of Norse culture, no matter what Saxon chroniclers and Hollywood moviemakers would have us believe. However, the image of the Viking raider has such power, even today, that most people apply the term to all early medieval Scandinavians.

Besides, *GURPS Early Medieval Scandinavians* wasn't nearly such a good title.

# The Viking World



## The Word “Viking”

The origin and meaning of the word *Viking* have been hotly debated by scholars, and there is still no total agreement on the matter.

Some say that Viking must be a word of Scandinavian origin, since other peoples use different words for them. The Franks called them *Normanin* (men from the north; the part of France where they settled was called Normandy), while the Germans called them *Ascomanni* (“ash-men,” perhaps referring to the ash tree-trunks which they used as masts for their ships). The Anglo-Saxons called them *Dani* (Danes); the vast majority of Scandinavians who visited England were from Denmark. The Irish called them *Gall* (“stranger”) or *Lochlannach* (“northerner”) – the latter was often qualified with “white” for Norwegians and “black” for Danes, perhaps reflecting the predominant colors of their shields, or the nature of their dealings with the Irish. The Byzantines and Arabs called them *Rus* – the word seems to have been borrowed from the Finns via the Slavs, as the Finnish name for Sweden was *Ruotsi*, perhaps meaning “the land of the oarsmen.”

If the word “Viking” is of Nordic origin, it may have one of two derivations: from the word *vig*, meaning “battle,” or from *vík*, meaning “inlet,” which was also applied to fjords. Thus, it might mean “warrior,” or it might mean “dweller in an inlet or bay.” It was once suggested that the word originally meant people from the region of Vik, around Oslo, but the conventional term for people from this area was *Vikverjar* or *Vestfalding*, and this derivation is no longer widely accepted.

An increasingly popular theory derives “Viking” from an Anglo-Saxon word *wic*, which is ultimately derived from the Latin word *vicus*. The Romans applied the word *vicus* to small towns and trading-posts, like those that grew up around their major forts. The Saxon word *wic* seems to have a slightly more specialized meaning, indicating a shallow-water trading port on a navigable waterway. Several English place-names have *wic* as a significant element: for example Ipswich, Norwich, and Eoforwic – the Saxon name for the city of York.

If the *wic* theory is correct, “Viking” might mean “trader” – ironic for a name which has become synonymous with violence! Archaeology has established that the Scandinavians were great traders as well as pirates and explorers. Modern scholars agree that the historical record is biased because raids were more newsworthy than trading voyages, and tended to be mentioned in European chronicles more often.

The Vikings are often seen as simple barbarians, but this is far from the truth. Their society, and the nature of power within it, differed from those countries that had been shaped by Roman domination, but the medieval Scandinavians had most of the qualities by which we measure civilization: towns, long-distance trade, specialist craftsmen, a cash-based economy, and a degree of literacy. Very few were full-time warriors.

The Norse culture was, in fact, a strong and stable one. It is ironic that it is best remembered through the writings of people who never saw the homelands, but only the raiding dragon-ships.

## NORSE SOCIETY

Norse society was not highly structured, but in many ways was a good deal more democratic than its contemporaries. To western European eyes, it seemed like dangerous near-anarchy.

### SOCIAL CLASSES

There were three classes in Scandinavian society: the jarl or “earl” class, the carl or freeman class, and the thrall or serf class. The carl class was most numerous by far.

#### The Jarl Class

The jarls were the nobility of Viking society, and it was from this class that the king was drawn. In many ways, the jarls were not much different from the earls and barons of Christendom – in war they formed the officer class, commanding troops drawn from the farmers, while in peacetime they saw to the smooth running of their lands. Because of the nature of power in Norse society, however, they tended not to be so autocratic as their counterparts in England, France and elsewhere.

#### The Carl Class

The free farmer and fisherman was the backbone of Viking society, just like the medieval yeoman of England. Tilling the fields or plying their nets in peacetime, the carls formed the rank-and-file of the Viking war machine and the crews of the feared dragon-ships. Those who found the farming life tedious could aspire to becoming *huscarls* – “house carls” – in the retinue of their jarl, acting as household staff in peace and the jarl’s personal bodyguard in war.

#### The Thrall Class

The thrall occupied the lowest level of Viking society. Some were bond-slaves, and others were captives brought back from Britain and the Baltic, or bought in the markets of the “civilized” world. The Vikings conducted huge slave-raids among the Slavonic peoples, and some scholars believe this resulted in *sclavus* replacing *servus* in medieval Latin as the word for a slave – ultimately finding its way into English. Killing a thrall was regarded as destruction of property rather than unlawful killing.

### TRADES AND LIFESTYLES

So much emphasis has been placed on the raiding and exploration of the Norsemen that other aspects of their lifestyle have been almost forgotten. The image of the raider overshadows the reality which faced most Scandinavians during this period – of making a living from the land, or the sea, or by some craft in a town.



The Norsemen were a religious people, though they went about their worship in ways strange to their Western European neighbors. Many Vikings were, in fact, Christian! Viking characters in any campaign might pray to the Norse gods, or Christ, or both. Whether they get any response is up to the GM.

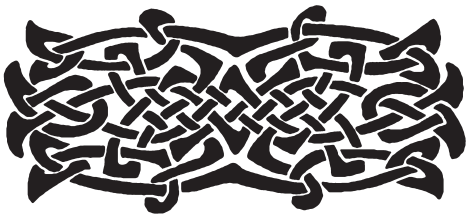
The “magic level” of a Viking campaign will dictate how active the gods are and how frequently they have dealings with mortals. The historical campaign has inactive deities; while the characters believe in them, the gods and their supernatural servants do not take an active hand in the doings of Midgard-folk.

The fantastic campaign has unobtrusive deities; the gods themselves do not show their hands clearly, but there will sometimes be events and situations which can only be explained by divine action.

The mythic campaign has active deities; gods walk the earth alongside mortals, albeit mainly in disguise, and take a hand in all kinds of affairs.

While magic level determines the frequency and extent of divine activity, the GM can also use the campaign’s level of violence to indicate the nature of divine activity. In a thoughtful campaign the gods will do subtle things for subtle reasons, often setting the PCs mind-numbing puzzles or tricking them into impossible situations. They are likely to be in disguise when encountered, and often PCs will not even realize that they have met a god until much later. In an action campaign, the gods will show their hands more clearly and the challenges they set will be more physical than mental in nature.

On those occasions where PCs meet the Norse gods – or encounter their machinations – the GM should take care to roleplay the deities properly. Even when they are in mortal disguise, the gods will display some trace of their normal personalities. Odin will have one eye and a quirky, unpredictable personality. Thor will be bluff, hearty, and short-tempered; Loki will be charming on the surface, sly and malicious underneath.



## THE NORSE DEITIES

The Norse gods were divided into two tribes: the Aesir and the Vanir. The Aesir were the more prominent group, while the bulk of the Vanir are less well-defined; most of them seem to be fertility and nature gods, and they may be the last remnants of an older, stone-age religion.

Our source material for the Norse gods comes almost exclusively from stories which were written down a century or more after Scandinavia had become completely Christian. Because of this, the gods lose much of their divine, awe-inspiring character and behave much like comic-book superheroes.

### Days of the Week

Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday are named after Tyr (Germanic form Tiw or Tiwas), Odin (Woden), Thor, and Frey respectively. This may or may not indicate that each god had a day of the week which was dedicated to him, but it does show that they were the most important gods to the Norsemen.

Their personalities are often all too human, with weaknesses that lead to sometimes comical situations. The pagan Norseman probably saw his gods in a different light than the 12th-century storyteller! The GM should bear this in mind when presenting Norse deities to PCs in fantastic and mythic campaigns.

## THOR

Thor was one of the favorite Norse gods, and his symbol – the hammer – has been found more often on pendants and other amulets than the mark of any other Norse deity. The Thor’s-hammer rivals the Christian cross in popularity even among the later Vikings, and molds for making both have been found cut into the same block.

Thor was a weather-god, making thunder with his great hammer Mjolnir and the wheels of his goat-drawn chariot. Since weather (and particularly storms) were of great interest to this race of farmers, fisherman and seafarers, it is not surprising that Thor was popular.

In all the stories where Thor appears, he is almost a caricature of the Viking image: unbelievably strong, totally fearless, naive at times, straightforward, hearty, and violent. To the pagan Viking, he was probably a role model; the ideal warrior, possessing strength, courage, and resoluteness in abundance. Certainly his worshippers took Thor seriously, and his cult is the most widely recorded both in literary evidence and in archaeological remains.

Thor normally appears as a huge, muscular warrior with a bristling red beard. He is armed and armored like a wealthy Jarl, but uses his great hammer instead of a sword. Besides Mjolnir he has a magical iron glove (or a pair, depending on the story) called Iarn Greiper, which enables him to catch the hammer after throwing it; Mjolnir is red-hot by the time it magically returns to Thor’s hand, perhaps through being transmuted into a thunderbolt. He also has a magical girdle called Megingjord, which gives him great strength, and a chariot drawn by a pair of goats, Tanngniostr and Tanngrisnr. These magical animals can be killed and eaten each night, and by the time morning comes they are alive and well, and ready to pull the chariot again.

Thor performs incredible feats of strength and feasting in the stories, and kills many giants, with and without good cause. He has no time for subtle plans and complex machinations – when offended or angered he simply smashes the miscreant’s head with his hammer. At Ragnarok, only Thor will have the strength to slay the Midgard Serpent, but he will die in a torrent of venom from the creature’s mouth.

# ALVAR

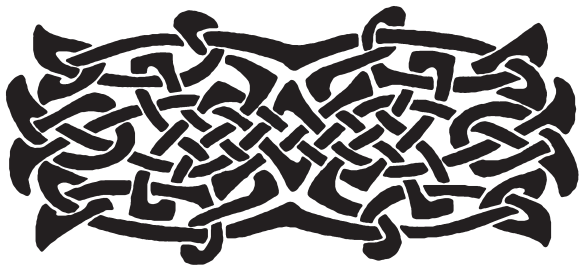
*Alvar* or *alfar* is the Norse name for the Elves. There seem to be two kinds of alvar: those who make up the population of Alfheim (p. 73), and the mound alvar, who are associated with burial mounds and the cult of the Vanir.

## Alfheim Alvar

The alvar of Alfheim have never been known to travel to Midgard. In an adventure that takes place in Alfheim, the alvar can be treated as human in all respects.

## Mound Alvar

The mound alvar are rarely seen by mortals. They are spirits, more like the *kami* of Japan than the elves of Tolkien or most generic fantasy settings. At certain times, offerings of food and drink were left out for them, and their goodwill helped ensure the fertility of crops and livestock and the well-being of the household. Alvar are one of several species with similar abilities and behavior (or perhaps, one of several names for the same species): other names include *thusser* and *huldre folk*.



As their name suggests, the mound alvar lived inside mounds, and without Area Knowledge or some similar skill it is difficult to distinguish their mounds from those which might house a *draugr* or *haugbui* (see. pp. 91-92). Inside their mounds are luxurious halls, and the mounds are often larger on the inside than they are on the outside. At full moon, the mounds are raised up on red pillars, revealing the hall inside with a feast in progress.

The mound alvar are nocturnal creatures, active from dusk till dawn. They appear as elves of great beauty, four to six feet tall, slim and beautiful, and dressed in colorful versions of local human clothing; red, green, and gray are their favored colors. Their skin is a pale, translucent blue. The *huldre folk* of Norway have cow's tails, like some spirits (see pp. 88-89), but other mound alvar do not. All avoid sunlight, which can turn them to stone, or at least wither them into ugly, shriveled creatures. They can change their appearance to disguise themselves as mortals, and sometimes lure young women to their feasts by impersonating their betrothed and other villagers.

They are highly skilled, especially in smithing, music and the use of rune magic. Their weapons are always of *very fine* quality (p. B74), and their jewelry is more beautiful than anything the most skilled mortals could make. Their mail coats are half the weight of those made by mortals (see p. B210),

and so finely woven that they are PD3, DR3 against all physical attacks, including impaling weapons. The mound alvar only work in iron, as they are vulnerable to steel.

The mound alvar are unsurpassed musicians and dancers, and can train a mortal to superhuman levels of ability in these skills. They know the secret of the Elf King's tune, which is able to make even the trees and rocks dance. All creatures hearing the Elf King's tune must make an IQ roll at a penalty equal to half the musician's skill or be unable to do anything except dance for as long as the music goes on. If a mortal plays the Elf King's tune, the only way to stop is by playing the entire tune backwards (requiring a skill roll at -4), or if someone breaks their instrument. The Elf King's tune is a Mental/Very Hard skill, which must be learned in addition to a Musical Instrument skill.

Mound alvar and their kin are not an ideal PC race, mainly because they are so closely tied to their home area; however, they can make very interesting and challenging characters to play in a domestic campaign, especially if it involves elements such as disputes between alvar and mortals, environmental threats (such as encroaching ice or trolls), or the introduction of Christianity into an area.

## ALVAR 229/209 POINTS

**Advantages:** Ally (other local alvar; 6-12 individuals) [20]; Animal Empathy [5]; Extended Lifespan (2 levels) [10]; Early Maturation (1 level) [5]; Healing [25]; Ice Skates [5]; Invisibility (become visible at will, objects become invisible when picked up, up to Light encumbrance) [52]; Magery (Dark-Aspected, 3 levels) [18]; Morph [40]; Move through Ice [10]; Night Vision [10]; Doesn't Sleep [20]; Speak with Animals [15]; Speak with Fish [10]; Speak with Plants [15]; Unaging [15]; Racial Memory [40].

**Disadvantages:** Bad Temper (Capricious, easily offended) [-10]; Dependency (Home area; common, constantly) [-10]; Duty (other local alvar; 12 or less) [-10]; Dying Race (Christian period) [-10]; Nocturnal [-10]; Vulnerability (Steel, 1 level) [-15]; Vulnerability (Sunlight, 3 levels) [-45]; Weakness (Christianity and its trappings; 1d per minute, occasional/common) [-20/-40].

**Skills:** Area Knowledge (Home area) IQ+4 [8]; Bard (IQ+3) [8]; Dancing (DX+3) [16]; Musical Instrument (Fiddle; IQ+4) [12].

GMs with access to *GURPS Spirits* can base mound alvar on the Spirit of Place template (p. SPI61 or the Physical Faeries variant of the Faerie template (pp. SPI57-58), depending on their intended role in the campaign.

## ALVAR MAGIC

Nearly all mound alvar and similar creatures will have some magical ability. Details are left to the GM to fit in with the overall magic level of the campaign (see p. 100), but the bulk of their magic affects plants and animals, and they may also have some Mind Control magic as well, and the ability to impose and lift curses and cause or cure disease.

# Ten Things You Thought You Knew About Vikings

## 1. *They wore horned helmets.*

No, they didn't. Ever. Gauls, yes (see *GURPS Celtic Myth*); Vikings, no. Blame 19th-century artists and 20th-century movie-makers. Deities are sometimes pictured wearing horned helmets in Norse art dating from the Bronze Age to the Viking period, but there is no evidence at all that mortals ever did. Not a single horned Viking helmet has ever been found.

## 2. *They were professional pirates and raiders, like seaborne medieval biker gangs.*

No, they weren't. The vast majority of their wealth came from trading – *peacefully* – with people from Scotland to Turkey. Raiding just made the chronicles more often because it was news. At some times, and in some places, it has to be admitted, Scandinavians were regarded with the same mixture of fear and distrust that some people today reserve for bikers. And with about the same amount of justification.

## 3. *They were hugely muscled, thought with their swords, and were halting of speech.*

Hardly. They might have spoken haltingly in Frankish, Latin, or Anglo-Saxon, but how many people did they meet who had bothered to learn Old Norse? Judging by the remains found in excavated Viking-age burials, they were pretty much the same size and build as other rural Europeans. And their craftsmanship, strategy, and political dealings are every bit as skilled, well-designed, and intricate as those of any contemporary nation you care to name.

## 4. *They dressed in furs and chainmail at all times.*

Furs were good at keeping out the cold of the Scandinavian winter, but it was a rare and wealthy man who could afford chainmail. A mail coat could be worth as much as a working farm, depending on time and location, and no one walked about in armor unless he was expecting trouble – or inviting it. Many 21st-century Americans own guns – a greater proportion than the number of Vikings who owned mail coats, in fact – but only a few carry them all the time.

## 5. *When they weren't killing people, they held huge and riotous feasts, roasting whole oxen and drinking mead and wine by the barrel.*

Well, there is a fair amount of feasting and drinking in the sagas, so maybe that is how the Norsemen would have liked to have spent their time. Everyone likes to party once in a while. But most Scandinavians spent far more time growing food than consuming it. The literary evidence suggests, too, that they preferred their meat stewed rather than roasted – no ox-sized spits and fire-irons have yet been found.

## 6. *They were very fierce and insanely brave, and would never retreat whatever the circumstances.*

They were very practical, and although no one liked a coward, only a fool fought on if death was certain and nothing would be gained by it. They would retreat from overwhelming odds and withdraw from impossible situations,

and even the heroes of the sagas were allowed to run away from supernatural foes sometimes. And they could be very imaginative – downright underhanded at times – in finding ways to narrow the odds. See *Cleverness*, p. 11.

## 7. *Their women were almost as strong as the men, and could fight alongside them.*

Romantic nonsense. Ever since the Romans encountered the Nordic peoples of northern Germany in the first couple of centuries AD, the “civilized” world has been obsessed with the idea of women warriors – counting the Amazons, the obsession goes back four or five more centuries. What would Freud have made of it? There were no women warriors in medieval Scandinavian society, ever. Women stayed at home, ran the household, and bore and raised the children. Sexist? Well, these *are* the Dark Ages. Socially, though, Scandinavian women were a lot freer and a lot more respected than their Christian counterparts. For instance, they were never considered to be their husbands' property, and could divorce themselves from their husbands at will. One of the things that seems to have sparked the idea of Norse shield-maidens is the mythological band of minor goddesses, the Valkyries. 19th- and 20th-century artists have always portrayed these beings as clean-limbed, nubile, armored maidens, whereas to the Vikings they were death-goddesses, and had no erotic connotations at all. Wagner has a lot to answer for, as well – he was very free with the plot of the *Volsung Saga* when he set it to music as the Ring Cycle.

## 8. *All their ships had dragon-heads on the stem-posts.*

Some did. Not very many, actually. Only a handful of ships have been found with dragon-heads, and at least one of these – the Oseberg ship from Norway – was the lavishly decorated royal barge of a princess, and not a warship at all. Even in pictures of the time, less than one ship in ten had a carved stem-post.

## 9. *They loved big, brutal weapons, like huge axes and warhammers.*

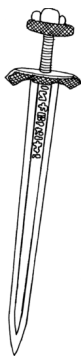
Given the choice, the average Viking would have preferred a sword – it's just that a good-quality sword could cost as much as a house. Two-handed axes were rare, since the Vikings liked to have a shield in the left hand, but one-handed axes – which might have doubled as farm tools – were a very common weapon. There is no evidence that Vikings used maces or warhammers – although if there were no other weapon handy, a Viking would probably fight with a sledgehammer quite cheerfully.

## 10. *The only law they knew was “might is right.”*

The Viking system of law, as described in Chapter 1, was sophisticated and reasonably just, even if enforcement was sometimes a problem. It was the Vikings of the Danelaw who introduced the idea of adversarial trial and trial by jury into English law, and thus into the legal systems of most of the English-speaking world.

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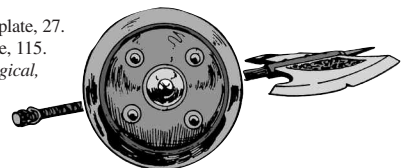
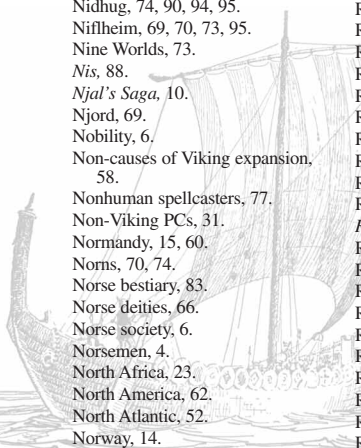
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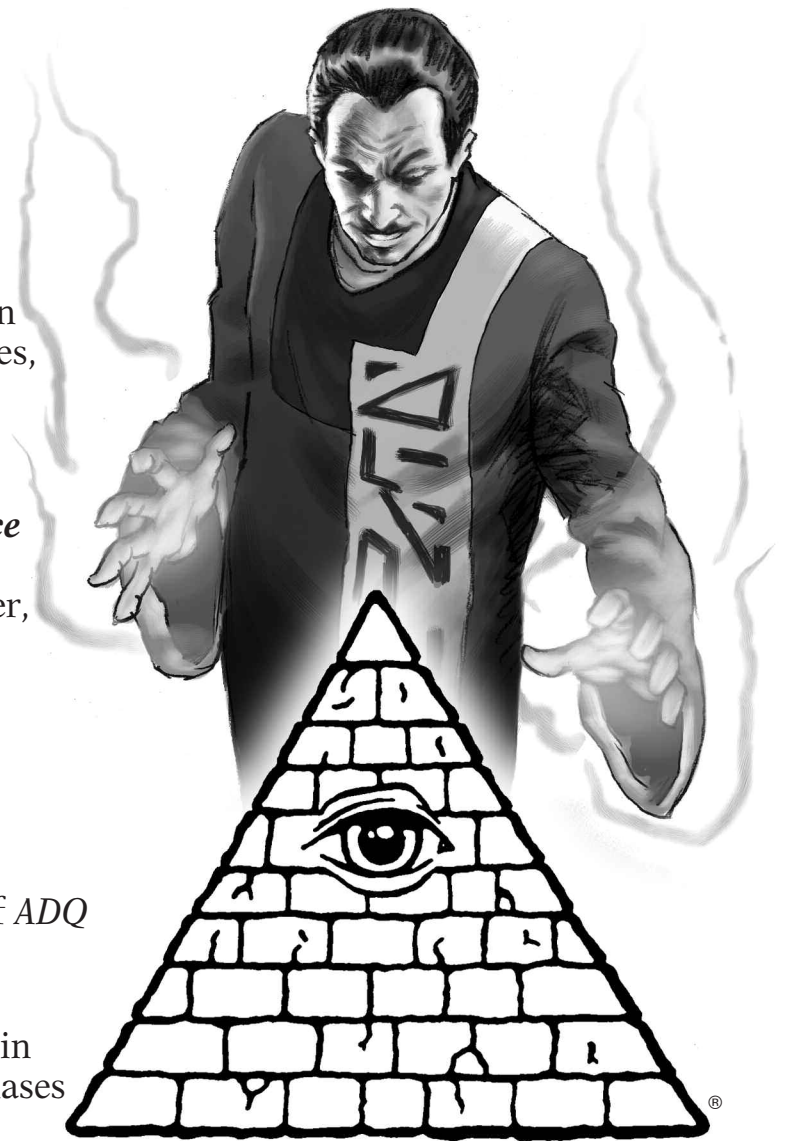


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