

# *The Western World: A Primary Source Reader: The Medieval World*

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## **Bede: Augustine of Canterbury (672-735)**

*The venerable Bede was an Anglo-Saxon monk, scholar, and theologian who achieved his most lasting fame as the author of the ecclesiastical history of the English people. The scope and success of this pioneering work, complete and 731, have earned him the title “Father of English History.” This selection describes Augustine of Canterbury’s missionary and organizational activities, from his commissioning by Pope Gregory the Great to his death in the first decade of the seventh century.*

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### **Chapter XXIII**

HOW POPE GREGORY SENT AUGUSTINE, WITH OTHER MONKS, TO PREACH TO THE ENGLISH NATION, AND ENCOURAGED THEM BY A LETTER OF EXHORTATION, NOT TO CEASE FROM THEIR LABOR. [AD 596.]

In the year of our Lord 582, Maurice, the 54th from Augustus, ascended the throne, and reigned 21 years. In the 10th year of his reign, Gregory, a man renowned for learning and behavior, was promoted to the apostolical see of Rome, and presided over it 13 years, six months, and 10 days. He, being moved by divine inspiration, in the 14th year of the same emperor, and about the 150th after the coming of the English into Britain, sent the servant of God, Augustine, and with him several other monks, who feared the Lord, to preach the word of God to the English nation.

### **Chapter XXV**

AUGUSTINE, COMING INTO BRITAIN, FIRST PREACHED IN THE ISLE OF THANET TO KING ETHELBERT, AND HAVING OBTAINED LICENSE, ENTERED THE KINGDOM OF KENT, IN ORDER TO PREACH THEREIN. [AD 597.]

Augustine, thus strengthened by the confirmation of the blessed father Gregory, returned to the work of the word of God, with the servants of Christ, and arrived in Britain. The powerful Ethelbert was at that time king of Kent; he had extended his dominions as far as the great river Humber, by which the southern Saxons are divided from the northern. On the east of Kent is the large Isle of Thanet, containing according to the English way of reckoning, 600 families, divided from the other land by the River Wantsum, which is about three furlongs over, and fordable only in two places, for both ends of it run into the sea. In this island landed the servant of our Lord, Augustine, and his companions, being, as is reported, nearly forty men. They had, by order of the blessed pope Gregory, taken interpreters of the nation of the Franks, and sending to Ethelbert, signified that they were come from Rome, and brought a joyful message, which most undoubtedly assured to all that took advantage of it everlasting joy is in heaven and a kingdom that would never end with the living and true God. The king having heard this, ordered them to stay in that island where they had landed, and that they should be furnished with all necessaries, till he should consider what to do with him. For he had before heard of the Christian religion, having a Christian wife of the royal family of the Franks, called Bertha, whom he had received from her parents, upon condition that she should be permitted to practice her religion with the bishop Luidhard, who was sent with her to preserve her faith. Some days after, the king came into the island, and sitting in the open air, ordered Augustine and his companions to be brought into his presence. But he had taken precaution that they should not come to him in any house, lest, according to an ancient superstition, if they practiced any magical arts, they might impose upon him, and so get the better of him. But they came furnished with divine, not with magic virtue, bearing a silver cross for their banner, and the image of our Lord and Savior painted on a board; and singing the litany, they offered up their

prayers to the Lord for the eternal salvation both of themselves and of those to whom they were come. When he had sat down, pursuant to the king's commands, and preached to him and his attendance there present, the word of life, the king answered us: "Your words and promises are very fair, but as they are new to us, and of uncertain import, I cannot approve of them so far as to forsake that which I have so long followed with the whole English nation. But because you were come from far into my kingdom, and, as I conceive, are desirous to impart to us those things which you believe to be true, and most beneficial, we will not molest you, but give you favorable entertainment, and take care to supply you with your necessary sustenance; nor do we forbid you to preach and gain as many as you can to your religion." Accordingly he permitted them to reside in the city of Canterbury, which was the metropolis of all his dominions, and, pursuant to his promise, besides allowing them sustenance, did not refuse them liberty to preach. It is reported that, as they drew near to the city, after their manner, with the holy cross, and the image of our sovereign Lord and King, Jesus Christ, they, in concert, sung this litany: "We beseech thee, O Lord, and all thy mercy, that thy anger and wrath be turned away from the city, and from the whole house, because we have sinned. Hallelujah."

## **Chapter XXIX**

THE SAME POPE SENDS AUGUSTINE THE PALL, AN EPISTLE AND SEVERAL MINISTERS OF THE WORD. [AD 601.]

Moreover, the same pope Gregory, hearing from bishop Augustine, that he had a great harvest, and by few laborers, sent to him, together with his aforesaid messengers, several fellow laborers and ministers of the word of whom the first and principal were Mellitus, Justus, Paulinus, and Rufianus, and buy them all things in general that were necessary for the worship and service of the church, viz., sacred vessels and vestments for the altars, Also ornaments for the churches, investments for the priests and clerks, as likewise relics of the holy apostles and martyrs; besides many books. He also sent letters, wherein he signified that he had transmitted the pall to him, and at the same time directed how he should constitute bishops in Britain. The letters were in these words:

To his most Reverend and holy brother and fellow bishop, Augustine; Gregory, the servant of the servants of God. That would be certain, that the unspeakable rewards of the eternal kingdom are reserved for those who labor for Almighty God, yet it is requisite that we bestow on them the advantage of honors, to the end that they may by this recompense be enabled the more vigorously to apply themselves to the care of their spiritual work. And, in regard that the new church of the English is, through the goodness of the Lord, and your labors, brought to the grace of God, we grant you the use of the pall in the same, only for the performing of the solemn service of the mass; so that you and several places ordain 12 bishops, who shall be subject to your jurisdiction, so that the bishop of London shall, for the future, be always consecrated by his own synod, and that he received the honor of the pall from this holy and apostolical see, which I, by the grace of God, now serve. But we will have you send to the city of York such a bishop as you shall think fit to ordain; yes so, if that city, with the place is adjoining, shall receive the word of God that bishop shall also ordain 12 bishops, and enjoy the honor of a metropolitan; for we design, if we live, by the help of God, to bestow on him also the pall; and yet we will have him to be subservient to your authority; but after your decease, he shall so preside over the bishops he shall ordain, asked to be in no way subject to the jurisdiction of the bishop of London. But for the future let this distinction between the bishops of the cities of London and York that he may have the precedence who shall be first ordained. But let them unanimously dispose, by common advice and uniform conduct, whatsoever is to be done for the zeal of Christ; let them judge rightly, and perform what they judge Convenient in a uniform manner.

But to you, my brother, shall, by the authority of our God, and Lord Jesus Christ, be subject not only those bishops you shall ordain, and those that shall be ordained by the bishop of York, but also all the priests in Britain; to the end that from the mouth and life of your holiness they may learn The rule of believing rightly, and living well, and fulfilling their office in faith and good manners, they may, when it shall please the lord, attain the heavenly kingdom. God preserve you and safety, most Reverend brother.

### **Source:**

"Augustine of Canterbury," from *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, by Bede, translated by Leo Sherley-Price, edited by D. H. Farmer, 1968.

## **Einhard (770-840): The Emperor Charlemagne**

*Einhard was born in East Franconia and educated in the monastery of Fulda. Soon after 791 he was sent to the court of Charlemagne and was educated at the palace school by the famous Anglo-Saxon scholar Alcuin. He became a close associate of Charlemagne. His most famous work was his Life of Charlemagne. The following selection contains Einhard's description of Charlemagne's character and habits, as well as his piety and devotion to learning, and tells of his crowning as emperor in Rome on Christmas Day, AD 800 by Pope Leo III.*

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### **BOOK III**

#### **18. Private Life**

Thus did Charles defend and increase as well, as beautify his kingdom, as is well known; and here let me express my admiration of his great qualities and his extraordinary constancy alike in good and evil fortune. I will now forthwith proceed to give the details of his private and family life.

After his father's death, while sharing the kingdom with his brother, he bore his unfriendliness and jealousy most patiently, and to the wonder of all, could not be provoked to be angry with him. Later he married a daughter of Desiderius, King of the Lombards, at the insistence of his mother; but he repudiated her at the end of the year for some reason unknown, and married Hildegard, a woman of high birth, of Suabian origin. He had three sons by her: Charles, Pepin, and Louis, and as many daughters, Hruodrud, Bertha, and Gisela. He had three other daughters besides these: Theoderada, Hiltrud, and Ruodhaid, two by his third wife, Fastrada, a woman of East Frankish, that is to say, of German, origin, and the third by a concubine, whose name for the moment escapes me. At the death of Fastrada [794], he married Liutgard, an Alemannic woman, who bore him no children. After her death [June 4, 800] he had three concubines....Charles's mother, Berthrada, passed her old age with him in great honor; he entertained the greatest veneration for her; and there was never any disagreement between them except when he divorced the daughter of King Desiderius, whom he had married to please her. She died soon after Hildegard, after living to three grandsons and as many granddaughters in her son's house, and he buried her with great pomp in the Basilica of St. Denis, where his father lay. He had an only sister, Gisela, who had consecrated herself to a religious life from girlhood, and he cherished as much affection for her as for his mother. She also died a few years before him in the nunnery where she passed her life.

#### **19. Private Life (continued): Charles and the Education of his Children**

The plan that he adopted for his children's education was, first of all, to have both boys and girls instructed in the liberal arts, to which he also turned his own attention. As soon as their years admitted, in accordance with the custom of the Franks, the boys had to learn horsemanship, and to practice war and the chase, and the girls to familiarize themselves with cloth making, and to handle distaff and spindle, but they might not grow indolent through idleness, and he fostered in them every virtuous sentiment. He only lost three of all his children before his death, two sons and one daughter: Charles, who is the eldest; Pepin, whom he had made king of Italy; and Hruodrud, his oldest daughter, whom he had betrothed to Constantine [VI, 780–802], Emperor of the Greeks. Pepin left one son, named Bernard, and five daughters, Adelaide, Atula, Guntrada, Berthaid, and Theoderada. The king gave a striking proof of his fatherly affection at the time of Pepin's death [810]: he appointed the grandson to succeed Pepin, and had the granddaughters brought up with his own daughters. When his sons and his daughter died, he was not so calm as might have been expected from his remarkably strong mind, for his affections were no less strong, and moved him to tears. Again, when he was told of the death of Hadrian [796], the Roman pontiff, whom he had loved the most of all his friends, he wept as much as if he had lost a brother, or a very dear son. He was by nature most ready to contract friendships, and not only made friends easily, but clung to them persistently, and cherished most finally those with whom he had formed such ties. He was so careful of the training of his sons and daughters that he never took his meals without them when he was at home, and never made a journey without them; his sons would ride at his side, and his daughters followed him, while a number of his bodyguard, detailed for their protection, brought up the rear. Strange to say, although they were very handsome women, and he loved them very dearly, he was never willing to marry any of them to a man of their

own nation or to a foreigner, but kept them all at home until his death, saying that he could not dispense with their society....

## **22. Personal Appearance**

Charles was large and strong, end of lofty stature, though not disproportionately tall (his height is well known to have been seven times the length of his foot); the upper part of his head was round, his eyes very large and animated, nose a little long, hair fair, and face laughing and merry. Thus his appearance was always stately and dignified, whether he was standing or sitting; although his neck was thick and somewhat short, and his belly rather prominent; but the symmetry of the rest of his body concealed of these defects. His gait was firm, his whole carriage manly, and his voice clear, but not so strong as his size lead one to expect. His health was excellent, except during the four years preceding his death, when he was subject to frequent fevers; at the last he even limped a little with one foot. Even in those years he consulted rather his own inclinations than the advice of physicians, who were almost hateful to him, because they wanted him to give up roasts, to which he was accustomed to, and to eat boiled meat instead. In accordance with the national custom, he took frequent exercise on horseback and in the chase, accomplishments in which scarcely any people in the world can equal the Franks. He enjoyed the exhalations from natural warm springs, and often practiced swimming, and which he was such an adept that none could surpass him; and hence it was that he built his palace Aixla-Chapelle, and lived there constantly during his later years until his death....

## **23. Dress**

He used to wear the national, that is to say, the Frank dress next to his skin a linen shirt and linen breeches, and above these a tunic fringed with silk; while hose fastened by bands covered his lower limbs, and shoes his feet, and he protected his shoulders and chest in winter by a close-fitting coat of otter or marten skins. Over all he flung a blue cloak, and he always had a sword girt about him, usually one with a gold or silver hilt and belt; he sometimes carried a jeweled sword, but only on great feast days or at the reception of ambassadors from foreign nations. He despised foreign costumes, however handsome, and never allowed himself to be roped in them, except twice in Rome, when he donned the Roman tunic, chlamys, and shoes; the first time at the request of pope Hadrian, the second to gratify Leo, Hadrian's successor. On great feast days he made use of embroidered clothes, and shoes bedecked with precious stones; his cloak was fastened by a golden buckle, and he appeared crowned with a diadem of gold and gems: but on other days his dress very little from the common dress of the people.

## **24. Habits**

Charles was temperate in eating, and particularly so in drinking, for he abominated drunkenness in anybody, much more in himself and those of his household; but he could not easily abstain from food, and often complained that fasts injured his house. He very rarely gave entertainment, only on a great feast days, and then to large numbers of people. His meals ordinarily consisted of four courses, not counting the roast, which his huntsman used to bring in on the spit; he was more fond of this than of any other dish. While at table, he listened to reading or music. The subjects of the readings were the stories and deeds of olden time: he was fond, two, of St. Augustine's books, and especially of the one entitled *The City of God*.

He was so moderate in the use of wine and all sorts of drink that he rarely allowed himself more than three cups in the course of a meal. And summer after the midday meal, he would eat some fruit, drain a single cup, put off his clothes and shoes, just as he did for the night, and rest for two or three hours. He was in the habit of awaking and rising from bed four or five times during the night. While he was dressing and putting on his shoes, he not only gave audience to his friends, but if the count of the palace told him of any suit in which his judgment was necessary, he had the parties brought before him forthwith, took a cognizance of the case, and gave his decision, just as if he were sitting on the judgment seat. This was not the only business that he transacted at this time, but he performed any duty of the day whatever, whether he had to attend to the matter himself, or to give command concerning it to his officers....

## **28. Charlemagne Crowned Emperor**

When he made his last journey [to Rome], he also had other ends in view. The Romans had inflicted many injuries upon the Pontiff Leo, tearing out his eyes and cutting out his tongue, so that he had been compelled to call upon

the king for help [November 24, 800]. Charles accordingly went to Rome, to set an order the affairs of the church, which were in great confusion, and passed the whole winter there. It was then that he received the titles of emperor and Augustus [December 25, 800], to which he at first had such an aversion that he declared that he would not have set foot in the church the day that they were confirmed, although it was a great feast day, if he could have foreseen the design of the pope. He bought very patiently with the jealousy which the Roman emperors showed upon his assuming these titles, for they took this step very ill; and by dint of frequent embassies and letters, and which he addressed them as brothers, he made their haughtiness yield to his magnanimity, a quality in which he was unquestionably much their superior.

**Source:**

“The Emperor Charlemagne,” *The Life of Charlemagne*, by Einhard, in *Two Lives of Charlemagne*, translated by Lewis Thorpe, 1969.

## Peter Damian (1007-1072): On the Perfection of Monks

*St. Peter Damian was an influential teacher and reformer of the 11th century. By all accounts he practices a rigorous form of monastic discipline and self-denial. In this selection, we see Peter concerned, not just with the rules, but also with restoring the spirit of Benedictine monasticism, and his zeal for “the perfection of the monks” reveals him as the product of an age of reform.*

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Therefore, beloved, gather your forces, with Christ’s aid, and do not bear the yoke of his service to whose banner you are pledged to idly or weakly, but rather zealously and mentally; so that the foundation of your way of life, which stands at present in the middle away, may not through your carelessness return to nothing, which God forbid, but may, through the perseverance of your abiding fervor, reach the peak of perfection. Remember what was said to the angel of the church of Sardis: “Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die; for I have not found that works perfect before God.” Since he did not find his works perfect before God, he declared that even those things which had been well done we’re at the point of death. If, therefore, that which is dead is us be not fanned into life, what remains alive in us will soon be extinguished. It is certain that he who does not bring his labors to completion loses the benefit of the work he has done. Of what use is it that a body begins to be formed in the mother’s womb, if it does not reach the fullness of natural growth?

...Thus, when our mind begins to rest in its creator and to taste those delights of inner sweetness, it soon rejects anything which it considers to be opposed to the law of God, and abhors whatever is not in harmony with the rules of eternal justice. And from this true mortification springs; this is how it happens that a man, bearing his Redeemer’s cross, seems dead to the world. From now on, he takes no pleasure in frivolous gossip, nor does he waste time in idle conversation; he occupies himself with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; he desires solitude and seeks a quiet place; The workshops where the brethren speak together in the cloisters of the monastery are to him like the public marketplace; he searches for and takes pleasure in remote and lonely places; as far as he can, he avoids all human contact, so that he may the more easily stand in the presence of his Creator....

It is true that the man who takes refuge in the monastic life puts an end to his evil doing. But what is the good of ceasing to commit sins and less we also endeavor to wipe out those which we have already committed, atoning for them by severe penances? If you do not believe me, see what the blessed pope Gregory says about this in his book on the pastoral care: “Those who have given up their sinful ways, but do not weep for them, must be warned, less they think that descends to whose number they have ceased to add, but which they have not cleansed by their tears, are already absolved. These matters are so clearly and so reasonably set forth there that he who reads it through carefully will have no further doubts on the subject; I have not added any more of it here because I wish to avoid wearing you by being verbose. How indeed can he be sure that his offenses will be pardoned who, coming to a place of penitence, performs no penance?

Moreover, it is necessary that every brother who with a perfect heart renounces the world should unlearn whatever he knows that is harmful, and as far as he can, consignment to perpetual oblivion. He should be unable to argue the rival merits of cooks, or care for rich and splendid food; he must lose his skill in sophisticated or captures conversation, nor may he make use of rhetorical display by producing ringing declamations, or raise a smile from anyone by his witty or facetious remarks. Let him love fasting and cherish his lack of the needs of life; let him fly from the saint of men and bind himself by a severe silence; let him withdraw from all outward affairs and keep watch over his lips, So that they do not engage in idle conversation. Let him seek the secret places of his mind where he may strive with all his might to see the face of his Creator; let him along for the grace of tears and in treat his God earnestly for them in daily prayers. For the moisture of tears cleanses the soul from the all stain and makes fertile the fields of the heart so that they may bring forth the seeds of virtue. Often the wretched soul sheds her fruit and the beauty of her leaves as it touched by the frost of winter; grace ebbs away and she is left abandoned and barren, stripped of the glory of her fallen flowers. But as soon as tears well forth, the gift of him who sees in secret, the soul flourishes again, the ice of idle sloth is melted, And like a tree in spring, warmed by the south wind, she is closed a new in the flower of her virtues.

The tears which come from God approach the judgment seat of the divine mercy with perfect confidence, and obtaining at once what they ask, are assured of the certain forgiveness of our sins. Tears of the trustees in the

making of peace between God and man, and true and wise masters in the doublings of human ignorance. For if we are wondering whether or not we are pleasing to God, we shall never have greater certitude than when we pray with genuine tears. Whatever our souls resolve I should now like to give a short account of the various offices of the monastery, and to set forth the things which it is right but those who administer these offices should observe....

Do not shudder at the idea of dining at the monastic table, nor take pleasure in private banquets; you must not think that those who share with you the common table of the altar are unfit to partake of bodily nourishment with you. Do not, therefore, let your absence give rise to the suspicion that you are dining privately, for this will mean that you're a good name will be troubled by pestilential murmurs and detractors....

Those who are but newly come to the order of religion must be reminded that they should first of all take up the struggle against greed; so that when the belly is forced to observe the laws of temperance the fires of lust will as a result to be checked....the tongue must be restrained from idle chatter, and indeed from too much talking of any kind with the brethren or anyone else; so that the less it has been worn out by the interchanges and circumlocutions of empty worthiness, the more free it may be to occupy itself with prayer and the praise of God.... Let your poverty and need cause you to favor rough and rugged clothing; in the cold of winter wear poor and despised garments....Keep away from public places; flee from the sight of men. Search for unfrequented places, go into hidden and remote retreats....

What I am saying at such length is this: drink muddy or lukewarm water often so that, spurning the desire for wine, you may think that clear cold water is enough for you. Often serve a bran loaf, so that you may have an appetite for our ordinary bread, and not look for loaves made with fine wheat and flower. A man who has lain on a couch of cushions will not be content with a patchwork quilt; but he will be satisfied with a litter of straw in any place if he has been wearing out the bear floor with his flanks.

**Source:**

From "The Monastic Ideal," by Peter Damian, translated by James Bruce Ross, in *The Portable Medieval Reader*, 1977, 49-55.



## Geoffrey of Monmouth: Leir and His Daughters

*Geoffrey of Monmouth, author of The History of the Kings of Britain, told us nothing about himself except his name. From 1129 to 1151 he seems to have lived in Oxford, where he may have been a teacher, although the university had not yet been founded. Geoffrey became bishop-elect of St. Asaph, in North Wales, though he probably never visited his see. He died in 1155, according to Welsh chronicles. The following is part of his history that Geoffrey claimed to have got from an ancient Welsh book. It is the story of King Leir and his three daughters, and it is decidedly less tragic than Shakespeare's version.*

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### CHAPTER XI

When Bladud was thus given over to the destinies, his son Leiar was next raised to the kingdom, and ruled the country after manly fashion for threescore years. He it was that builded the city on the river Soar, that in the British is called Kaerleir, but in the Saxon, Leicester. Mail issue was denied and to him, his only children being three daughters named Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia, whom all he did love with marvelous affection, but most of all the youngest born, to wit, Cordelia. And when that he began to be up on the verge of eld, he thought to divide his kingdom amongst them, and to marry them onto such husbands as we are worthy to have them along with their share of the kingdom. But that he might know which of them was most worthy of the largest share, he went onto them to make inquiry of each as to which of them did most love himself.

When, accordingly, he asked of Goneril how much she loved him, she first called all the gods of heaven to witness that her father was dear to her heart and the very soul that dwelt within her body. Unto whom saith her father: "For this, that thou hast set mine old age before thine own life, the, my dearest daughter, will I marry onto whatsoever youth shall be the choice, together with the third part of Britain."

Next, Regan, that was second, fain to take an example of her sister and to wheedle her father into doing her an equal kindness, made answer with a solemn oath that she could no otherwise expressed her thought than by saying that she loved him better than all the world beside. The credulous father thereupon promised to marry her with the same dignity as her elder sister, with another third part of the kingdom for her share.

But the last, Cordelia, when she saw how her father had been cajoled by the flatteries of her sisters who had already spoken, and desiring to make a trial of him otherwise, went onto make answer onto him this: "Father mine, is there a Leir wroth with Cordelia daughter anywhere that presumeth to love her father more than a father? Nonesuch, I trow, there is that durst confessed as much, see if she were trying to hide the truth and words of jest. For myself, I have ever loved the as a father, nor never from that love will I be turned aside. Albeit that thou aren't bent on ringing more from me, yet hearken to the true measure of my love. Ask of me no more, but let this be mine answer: so much as thou hast, so much art thou worth, and so much do I love thee." Thereupon forthwith, her father, thinking that she had this spoken out of the abundance of her heart, waxed mightily indignant, nor did he tarry Terry to make known what his answer would be. "For that thou hast so despised they father's old age that thou hast to stand to love me even as well as these they sisters love me, I also will disdain thee nor never in my realm shalt thou have share with thy sisters. Howbeit, sith that thou art my daughter, say not but that I will marry the upon terms of some kind under some stranger that is of other land than mine, if so be that fortune shall offer such an one; only be sure of this, that never will I trouble me to marry thee with such honor as they sisters, and as much as, whereas up to this time I have loved the better than the others, it now seemeth that thou lovest me less than they."

Straightway thereupon, by council of the nobles of the realm, he giveth the twain sisters onto to dukes, of Cornwall, to wit, and Albany, together with one moiety only of the island so long as he should live, but after his Cordelia married into France he willed that they should have the whole of the kingdom of Britain. Now it so fell out about this time that Aganippus, king of the Franks, hearing reports of Cordelia's beauty, forthwith dispatched his envoys to the king, beseeching him that Cordelia might be entrusted to their charge as his bride whom he would marry with due rite of the wedding torch. But her father, still persisting in his wrath, made answer that right willingly would he give her, but that needs must it be without land or fee, seeing that he had shared his kingdom along with all his gold and silver betwixt Cordelia's sisters Goneril and Regan. When this word was brought onto Aganippus, for that he was on fire with love of the damsel, he sent again onto King Leir, saying that



enough had he of gold and silver and other possessions, for that one-third part of Gaul was his, and that he was fain to marry the damsel only that he might have sons by her to inherit his land. So at last the bargain was struck, and Cordelia was sent to go to be married onto Aganippus.

## CHAPTER XII

Some long time after, when Leir began to wax more sluggish my reason of age, the foresaid dukes, with whom and his two daughters he had divided Britain, rebelled against him and took away from him the realm and the kingly power which up to that time he had held right manfully and gloriously. Howbeit, Leir's piteous plight restored, and one of his sons in law, Maglaunus, Duke of Albany, agreed to maintain him with threescore knights, so that he should not be without some semblance of state. But after that he had sojourned with his son in law two years, His daughter Goneril began to wax indignant at the number of his knights, who flung jibes at her servants for that their rations were not more plentiful. Whereupon, after speaking to her husband, she ordered her father to be content with a service of 30 knights and to dismiss the other 30 that he had.

The king, taking this in dudgeon, left Maglaunus, and betook him to Henvin, Duke of Cornwall, and to whom he had married his other daughter. Here, at first, he was received with honor, but a year had not passed before discord again arose betwixt those of the king's household and those of the dukes, in so much as that Regan, waxing indignant, ordered her father to dismiss all his company save five knights only to do him service. Her father, beyond measure aggrieved thereat, returned once more to his eldest daughter, thinking to move her to pity and to persuade her to maintain himself and his retinue. Howbeit, she had never renounced her first indignation, but swore by all the gods of heaven that never should he take up his abode with her save he contented himself with a service of a single knight and were quit of all the rest. Moreover, she upgraded the old man for that, having nothing of his own to give away, he should be minded to go about with such a retinue; so that finding she would not give away to his wishes one single tittle, he at Leir seeketh Cordelia last obeyed and remained content with one knight only, leaving the rest to go their way. But when the remembrance of his former dignity came back under him, bearing witness to the misery of the estate to which he was now reduced, he began to bethink him of going to his youngest daughter overseas. Howbeit, he sore misdoubted that she would do not for him, seeing that he had held her, as I have said, in such scanty honor in the matter of her marriage. Nevertheless, disdaining any longer to endure so mean a life, he betook him across the channel to Gaul. But when he found the two other princes were making the passage at the same time, and that he himself had been assigned but the third place, he brake forth into tears and sobbing, and cried aloud: "Ye destinies that do pursue your wonted way marked out by irrevocable decree, wherefore was it your will ever to uplift me too happiness so fleeting? For a keener grief it is to call to mind that lost happiness than to suffer the presence of the unhappiness that come with after. For the memory of the days went in the midst of hundreds of thousands of warriors I went to batter down the walls of cities and to lay waste to the provinces of mine enemies is more grievous unto me than the calamity that has overtaken me in the meanness of mine estate, which hath incited them that but now were groveling under my feet to desert my feebleness. O angry fortune! Will the day ever come where and I may requite the evil turn that hath thus driven forth the length of my days and my poverty? O Cordelia, my daughter, how true were the words wherein thou didst make answer unto me, when I did ask of the how much didst love me! For thou saidst, so much as thou hast so much art thou worth, and so much do I love thee. So long, therefore, as I had that which was my own to give, so long seemed I of worth unto them that were the lovers, none of myself, but of my gifts. They loved me at times, but better love they the presents I made onto them. Now that the presents are no longer forthcoming, they do have gone their ways. But with what face, O thou dearest of my children, shall I dare appear before thee? I who, wroth with thee for these they words, was minded to marry thee less honorably than thy sisters, who, after all the kindnesses I have conferred upon them, have allowed me to become an outcast and a beggar?"

Landing at last, his mind filled with these reflections and others of a like kind, he came to Karitia, where his daughter lived, and waiting without the city, send a messenger to tell her into what indigence he had fallen, and two beseech his daughter's compassion in as much as he had neither food or clothing. In hearing the tidings, Cordelia was much moved and wept bitterly. When she made inquire how many armed men he had with him, the messenger told her that he had none save a single knight, who was waiting with him without the city. Then took she as much gold and silver as was needful and gave it unto the messenger, bidding him take her father to another city, where he should bathe Leir, clothe him, and nurse him, feigning that he was a sick man. She commanded

also that he should have a retinue of 40 knights well appointed and armed, and that then he should duly announce his arrival to Aganippus and herself. The messenger accordingly forthwith attended King Leir into another city, and hid him there in secret until that he had fully accomplished all that Cordelia had borne him on and to do.

### **CHAPTER XIII**

As soon, therefore, as he was meetly arrayed in kingly apparel and invested with the ensigns of royalty and a train of retainers, he sent word onto Aganippus and his daughter that he had been driven out of the realm of Britain by his sons in law, and had to come onto them in order that by their assistance he might be able to recover his kingdom. They accordingly, with the great counselors and nobles, came forth to receive him with all honor, and placed in his hands the power over the whole of aul until such time as they had restored him onto his former dignity.

### **CHAPTER XIV**

In the meanwhile, magnificent envoys throughout the whole of Gaul to summon every knight bearing arms therein to spare no pains in coming to help him to recover the kingdom of Britain. He recovereth his kingdom for his father-in-law, King Leir. When they had all made them ready, Leir led the assembled host together with Aganippus and his daughter into Britain, fought a battle with his sons in law, and won the victory, again bringing them all under his own dominion. And the third year there after he died, and Aganippus died also, and Cordelia, now mistress of the helm of state in Britain, buried her father in a secret underground chamber which she had bidden be made under the river Soar at Leicester. This underground chamber was founded in honor of the two-faced Janus, and there, when the yearly celebration of the day came round, did all the workmen of the city set hand under such work as they were about to be busied upon throughout the year.

**Source:** “Leir and His Daughters,” from *The History of the Kings of Britain*, by Geoffrey of Monmouth, translated by Lewis Thorpe, 1966, 81-86.

## Beroul: Tristan and Isolde Wait the Wrath of King Mark

The Romance of Tristan is a tale of tragic love written probably in the mid-12th century by a writer who is known today only by his name: Beroul. This romance is the earliest known treatment of the story of Tristan, one of the great love stories in Western literature, and the basis of a famous opera by Richard Wagner. In Beroul's version, a mistakenly consumed love potion leads Tristan, a great warrior, to fall in love with Yseut, the wife of his liege lord, King Mark of Cornwall. Tristan and Yseut are eventually found out and suffer the consequences.

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[Tristan and Isolde have escaped to the forest of Morrios, where, together with Tristan's squire and tutor, Govenal, they wait on the wrath of King Mark....]

Anyone who would now like to hear a story that shows the benefits of training and animal should listen to me as well. You will hear about Tristan's good hunting dog. No king or count ever had one like it. He was fast and alert; he was beautiful, and he ran well, and his name was Husdent. He was leashed, and he kept watch from the dungeon. He was unhappy because he missed his master, and he refused all food. He whined and pawed the ground, tears in his eyes. What pity people felt for the dog! They all said: "If he were mine, I would let him go; it would be a shame if he went mad. Oh, Husdent, there never will be another hunting dog who grieves so much for his master. No animal ever loved anyone so much. Solomon correctly said that his dog was his best friend. You are proof of that, because you have refused to eat since your master was captured. King, released the dog!"

The king, thinking the dog was going mad because he missed his master, said to himself: "This dog is most discerning, for in all of Cornwall I did not think that in our time we could find a knight equal of Tristan."

The three barons of Cornwall urged the king: "Sir, unleash Husdent. Then we will see whether he is grieving for his master; for if he is mad, he will bite somebody or something as soon as he is free, and his tongue will hang out of his mouth." The king called a squire to have Husdent released. Everyone climbed up benches and stools for fear of the dog. Everyone said: "Husdent is mad!" But he paid no attention to them. As soon as he was released, he ran past them without hesitation; he raced out the door and ran to the house where he used to meet Tristan. The king and the others watched him. The dog barked and whined and appeared to be very sad.

Then he picked up his master's trail, and he followed every step that Tristan had taken when he was captured and was to be burned. Everyone urged the dog on. Husdent entered the room where Tristan had been betrayed and arrested; he bounded out of the room, barking, and ran toward the chapel, with the people close behind. Now that he was finally free, he did not stop until he reached the church built on the cliff. The faithful Husdent ran into the chapel without pausing; he jumped onto the altar, and not seeing his master there, jumped out the window. He fell down the cliff and injured his leg. He sniffed the ground and barked. At the edge of the woods where Tristan had taken refuge, Husdent paused briefly, then plunged into the forest. Everyone who saw him felt pity for him. The knights said to the king: "Let's stop following the dog. We might not be able to get back easily from where he is leading us."

They left the dog and turned back. Husdent found a trail, and the sound of the happy dog barking filled the woods. Tristan was deep in the forest, with the Queen and Govenal. They heard the sound; Tristan listened and said: "I am sure that is Husdent I hear." They were frightened. Tristan jumped up and grabbed his bow, and they hid in a thicket. They were afraid of the king, and they thought he might be with the dog. Husdent, following the trail, wasted no time. When he saw Tristan he recognized him, He raised his head, and he wagged his tail. Anyone who's had seen him weep with joy would have said that no one had ever witnessed such happiness.

Husdent ran to the blonde Isolde, and then to Govenal. He was happy to see all of them—even the horse. Tristan felt pity for the dog. "It is unfortunate that the dog followed us," he said. "People in hiding have no need for a dog that will not remain silent in the forest. We have to stay in the woods, hated by the king. Lady, Mark has people searching for us on the plains, in the forest, everywhere! If he found us and captured us, he would have us burned or hanged. We don't need a dog. We can be sure that if Husdent stays with us, he will bring us nothing but trouble. It is better to kill him than to let ourselves be captured because of his barking. I regret that such a noble animal came here only to die; it was his noble nature that made him do it. But what else can I do? It grieves me that I have to kill him. Help me make the decision; we have to protect ourselves!"

Isolde told him: “Sir, take pity on him! A dog barks while hunting as much from training as from instinct. After Arthur became king, I heard of a Welsh forester who had trained his hunting dog so that when he wounded a stag with an arrow, the dog would follow the stag anywhere without barking or making a sound. Tristan, it would be wonderful if we could train him not to bark while hunting.”

Tristan stood and listened to her. He took pity on the animal; he thought a moment and then said: “If I could train Husdent not to bark, he would be of great value to us, and I will try to do it before the week is out. I don’t want to kill him; but I am afraid of his barking, because someday when I am with you or Governal, his barking may cause us to be captured. So I will do my best to train him to hunt without barking.”

Tristan went hunting in the forest. He was a skilled hunter, and he shot a buck. Blood flowed from its wound; the dog barked, and the wounded buck fled. The barking of the excited dog echoed through the forest. Tristan struck him violently.

Husdent stopped at his master’s side, ceased barking, and abandoned the chase. He looked up at Tristan, not knowing what to do. Tristan forced the dog forward, using a stick to clear the path. Husdent wanted to bark again, but Tristan continued to train him. Before the month was up, the dog was so well trained that he followed the trails without a sound. Whether on snow, and grass, or on ice, he never abandoned his prey, however fleet or agile it might be.

Now the dog was a great help to them, and he served them well. If he caught a deer or a buck in the woods, he would hide it carefully, covering it with branches. And if he caught it in the open, as he often did, he would throw grass over it. He would then return to his master and lead him to the place where he had killed the deer. Indeed, dogs are very useful animals!

Listen now to what happened to one of the three whom God has cursed, and through whom Tristan and Isolde were discovered. He was a powerful man who was highly respected. He loved to hunt with dogs. The people of Cornwall were so afraid of the forest of Morrios that none of them dared enter it. They had a good reason to be afraid, for if Tristan would capture them, he would hang them on trees. They were right to avoid the forest!

One day Governal was alone with his horse, beside a stream that flowed out of a little spring. He had unsaddled his horse, and it was grazing on the tender grass. Tristan was lying in his hut. Governal hidden, and by chance he heard dogs that were pursuing a stag at full speed. They were the dogs of one of the three whose advice had incited the king’s wrath against the Queen. The dogs ran, and the stag fled. Governal followed a path and came to a heath; far behind him he saw the man whom his lord hated more than anything, and he was approaching alone, without a squire. He spurred and whipped his horse sharply, so that it sprang forward. The horse stumbled on a stone. Stopping beside a tree, Governal hid and waited for the baron, who was approaching rapidly, but would be slow to flee! The wheel of fortune cannot be turned backward; he was not on his guard against the anger that he inspired in Tristan. Governal, under the tree, saw him coming and waited resolutely. He told himself he would rather have his ashes scattered in the wind than pass up a chance for revenge, for it was because of this man and his actions that all of them nearly perished.

The dogs were following the fleeing stag, and the man came after them. Governal jumped out of hiding, and thinking of all the evil the man had done, he cut him to pieces with his sword. He took the head and rode away. The hunters, who had flushed out the frightened stag, were still pursuing it when they saw the headless body of the lord under the tree. They fled as quickly as they could. They were sure that this had been done by Tristan, the object of the king’s proclamation.

**Source:**

From Beroul (ca. 1191), *The Romance of Tristan*. Quoted in *The Romance of Arthur: an Anthology of Medieval Texts in Translation*. Ed. James J. Wilhelm. New, expanded edition. *Garland Reference Library of the Humanities*, vol. 1267. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994), 243-246.

## Anonymous: The Vinland Sagas, the Norse Discovery of America

The Vinland Sagas (c. 1160-1260) are believed by modern scholars to describe the Norse exploration and establishment of a colony in Greenland in the tenth century. Archaeological evidence testifies to the existence of the settlement and the general accuracy of these literary sources, which were written in the late 12th and mid-13th centuries. The sagas also recount the further journeys of Bjarni Hjolfsson and Leif the Lucky to unknown lands to the south, populated by "Red Indians," a land now called America.

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Herjulf was the son of Bard Herjulfson; he was kinsman to the colonist Ingolf. To Herjulf gave Ingolf land between Vog and Reykjanes. Herjulf lived first at Drepstock; Thorgerd hight [called] his wife, and Bjarne was their son, a very hopeful man. He conceived, when yet young, a desire to travel abroad, and soon earned for himself both riches and respect, and he was every second winter abroad, every other at home with his father. Soon possessed Bjarne his own ship, and the last winter he was in Norway, Herjulf prepared for a voyage to Greenland with Erik. In the ship with Herjulf was a Christian from the Hebrides, who made a hymn respecting the whirlpool, in which was the following verse:

O thou who triest holy men!  
Now guide me on my way,  
Lord of the earth's wide vault,  
Extend thy gracious hand to me!

Herjulf lived at Herjulfssness; he was a very respectable man. Erik the Red lived at Brattahlíkd; he was the most looked up to, and everyone regulated themselves by him. These were Erik's children: Leif, Thorvald, and Thorstein, but Freydis hight his daughter; she was married to a man who Thorvard hight; they lived in Garde, where is now the bishop's seat; she was very haughty, but Thorvard was narrow-minded; she was married to him chiefly on account of his money. Heathen were the people in Greenland at this time. Bjarne came to Eyrar with his ship the summer of the same year in which his father had sailed away in spring. These tidings appeared serious to Bjarne, and he was unwilling to unload his ship. This his seamen asked him what he would do; he answered that he intended to continue his custom, and pass the winter with his father; "And I will," said he, "bear for Greenland if ye will give me your company." All said that they would follow his counsel. Then said Bjarne: "Imprudent will appear our voyage, since none of us has been in the Greenland ocean."

However, they put to sea so soon as they were ready and sailed for three days, until the land was out of sight under the water; but then the fair wind fell, and there arose north winds and fogs, and they knew not where they were, and thus it continued for many days. After that saw they the sun again, and could discover the sky; they now made sail, and sailed for that day, before they saw land, and counseled with each other about what land that could be, and Bjarne said that he thought it could not be Greenland. They asked whether he wished to sail to this land or not. "My advice is," said he, "to sail close to the land"; and so they did, and soon saw that the land was without mountains, and covered with wood, and had small heights. Then left they the land on their larboard side, and let the stern turn from the land. Afterwards they sailed two days before they saw another land. They asked if Bjarne thought that this was Greenland, but he said that he as little believed this to be Greenland as the other; "because in Greenland are said to be very high ice hills." They soon approached the land, and saw that it was a flat land covered with wood. Then the fair wind fell, and the sailors said that it seemed to them most advisable to land there; but Bjarne was unwilling to do so. They pretended that they were in want of both wood and water. "Ye have no want of either of the two," said Bjarne; for this, however, he met with some reproaches from the sailors.

He bade them make sail, and so was done; they turned the prow from the land, and sailing out into the open sea for three days, with a southwest wind, saw then the third land; and this land was high, and covered with mountains and ice hills. Then asked they whether Bjarne would land there, but he said that he would not: "for to me this land appears little inviting." Therefore did they not lower the sails, but held on along this land, and saw that it was an island; again turned they the stern from the land, and sailed out into the sea with the same fair wind;

but the breeze freshened, and Bjarne then told them to shorten sail, and not sail faster than their ship and ship's gear could hold out.

They sailed now four days, when they saw the fourth land. Then asked they Bjarne whether he thought that this was Greenland or not. Bjarne answered: "This is the most like Greenland, according to what I have been told about it, and here will we steer for land." So did they, and landed in the evening under a ness; and there was a boat by the ness, and just here lived Bjarne's father, and from him has the ness taken its name, and is since called Herjulfness. Bjarne now repaired to his father's, and gave up seafaring, and was with his father so long as Herjulf lived, and afterwards he dwelt there after his father.

### **VOYAGE OF LEIF ERIKSON (AD 1008)**

The next thing now to be related is that Bjarne Herjulfson went out from Greenland and visited Erik Jarl, and the Jarl received him well. Bjarne told about his voyages, that he had seen unknown lands, and people thought he had shown no curiosity, when he had nothing to relate about these countries, and this became somewhat a matter of reproach to him. Bjarne became one of the Jarl's courtiers, and came back to Greenland the summer after. There was now much talk about voyages of discovery. Leif, the son of Erik the Red, of Brattahlid, went to Bjarne Herjulfson, and bought the ship of him, and engaged men for it, so that there were thirty-five men in all.

Leif asked his father Erik to be the leader on the voyage, but Erik excused himself, saying that he was now pretty well stricken in years, and could not now, as formerly, hold out all the hardships of the sea. Leif said that still he was the one of the family whom good fortune would soonest attend; and Erik gave in to Leif's request, and rode from home so soon as they were ready; and it was but a short way to the ship. The horse stumbled that Erik rode, and he fell off, and bruised his foot. Then said Erik, "It is not ordained that I should discover more countries than that which we now inhabit, and we should make no further attempt in company." Erik went home to Brattahlid, but Leif repaired to the ship, and his comrades with him, thirty-five men. there was a southern on the voyage, who Tyrker hight (named). Now prepared they their ship, and sailed out into the sea when they were ready, and then found that land first which Bjarne had found last.

There sailed they to the land, and cast anchor, and put off boats, and went ashore, and saw there no grass. Great icebergs were over all up the country, but like a plain of flat stones was all from the sea to the mountains, and it appeared to them that this land had no good qualities. Then said Leif, "We have not done like Bjarne about this land, that we have not been upon it; now will I give the land a name, and call it Helluland." Then went they on board, and after that sailed out to sea, and found another land; they sailed again to the land, and cast anchor, then put off boats and went on shore. This land was flat, and covered with wood, and white sands were far around where they went, and the shore was low. Then said Leif, "This land shall be named after its qualities, and called Markland" (woodland).

They then immediately returned to the ship. Now sailed they thence into the open sea, with a northeast wind, and were two days at sea before they saw land, and they sailed thither and came to an island [Nantucket?] which lay to the eastward of the land, and went up there, and looked round them in good weather, and observed that there was dew upon the grass; and it so happened that they touched the dew with their hands, and raised the fingers to the mouth, and they thought that they had never before tasted anything so sweet.

After that they went to the ship, and sailed into a sound, which lay between the island and a ness [promontory], which ran out to the eastward of the land; and then steered westwards past the ness. It was very shallow at ebb tide, and their ship stood up, so that it was far to see from the ship to the water.

But so much did they desire to land, that they did not give themselves time to wait until the water again rose under their ship, but ran at once on shore, at a place where a river flows out of a lake; but so, soon as the waters rose up under the ship, then took the boats, and rode to the ship, and floated it up to the river, and thence into the lake, and their cast anchor, and brought up from the ship their skin cots, and made their booths.

After this took counsel, and formed the resolution of remaining there for the winter, and built their large houses. There was no want of salmon either in the river or in the lake, and larger salmon than they had found previously.

But when they had done with the house building, Leif said to his comrades: "Now will I divide our men into two parts, and have the land explored, and the half of the men shall remain at home at the house, while the other half explore the land; however, not go farther than that they can come home in the evening, and they should not separate." Now they did so for a time, and Leif changed about, so that the one day he went with him, and the other

remained at home in the house. Leif was a great and strong man, grave and well favored, there with sensible and moderate in all things.

It happened one evening that a man of the party was missing, and this was Tyrker the German. This took Leif much to heart, for Tyrker had been along with his father and him, and loved Leif much in his childhood. Leif now took his people severely to task, and prepared to seek for Tyrker, and took 12 men with him. But when they had got a short way from the house, then came Tyrker towards them, and was joyfully received. Leif soon saw that his foster father was not in his right senses. Tyrker had a high forehead, and unsteady eyes, was freckled in the face, small and mean in stature, but excellent in all kinds of artifice. Then said Leif to him: "Why wert thou so late, my foster, and separated from the party?" He now spoke first, for a long time, in German, and rolled his eyes about two different sides, and twisted his mouth, but they did not understand what he said.

After a time he spoke Norse. "I have not been much farther off, but still have I something new to tell of; I found vines and grapes." "But is that true, my foster?" quoth Leif. "Surely is it true," replied he, "for I was bred up in a land where there is no want of either vines or grapes." They slept now for the night, But in the morning, Leif said to his sailors: "We will now set about two things, and that the one day we gather grapes, and the other day cut vines and fell trees, so from thence will be a loading for my ship," and that was the counsel taken, and it is said their long boat was filled with grapes. Now was a cargo cut down for the ship, and when the spring came they got ready and sailed away, and leaf gave the land a name after its qualities, and called it Vinland, or Wineland.

They sailed now into the open sea, and had a fair wind until they saw Greenland, and the mountains below the joklers. Then a man put in his word and said to Leif: "Why do you steer so close to the wind?" Leif answered: "I attend to my steering, and something more, and can you not see anything?" They answered that they could not observe anything extraordinary. "I know not," said Leif, "whether I see a ship or a rock." Now looked they, and said it was a rock. But he saw so much sharper than they that he perceived there were men upon the rock. "Now let us," said Leif, "hold our wind so that we come up to them, if they should want our assistance, and the necessity demands that we should help them; and if they should not be kindly disposed, the power is in our hands, and not in theirs."

Now sailed they under the rock, and lowered their sails, and cast anchor, and put out another little boat, which they had with them. Then asked Tyrker who their leader was. He called himself Thorer, and said he was a Northman; "But what is thy name?" said he. Leif told his name. "Art thou a son of Erik the Red, of Brattahlid?" said he. Leif answered that so it was. "Now will I," said Leif, "take ye all on board my ship, and as much of the goods as the ship can hold." They accepted this offer, and sailed thereupon to Eriksfjord with the cargo, and thence to Brattahlid, where they unloaded the ship. After that, Leif invited Thorer and his wife Gudrid, and three other men to stop with him, and got berths for the other seamen, as well Thorer's as his own, elsewhere. Leif took 15 men from the rock; he was, after that, called Leif the Lucky.

Leif had now earned both riches and respect. The same winter came a heavy sickness among Thorer's people, and carried off as well for himself as many of his men. This winter died also Erik the Red. Now there was much talk about Leif's voyage to Vinland, and Thorvald, his brother, thought that the land had been too little explored. Then said Leif to Thorvald: "Thou canst go with my ship, brother! If thou wilt, to Vinland, but I wish first that the ship should go and fetch the timber, which Thorer had upon the rock quote"; and so was done.

### **THORVALD REPAIRS TO VINLAND (AD 1002)**

Now Thorvald made ready for this voyage with 30 men, and took counsel thereon with Leif his brother. Then made they their ship ready, and put to sea, and nothing is told of their voyage until they came to Leif's booths in Vinland. There they laid up their ship, and spent a pleasant winter, and caught fish for their support. But in the spring, said Thorvald, that they should make ready to ship, and that some of the men should take the ship's longboat around the western part of the land, and explore there during the summer. To them appeared the land fair and woody, and but a short distance between the wood and the sea, and white sands; there were many islands, and much shallow water. They found neither dwellings of men nor beasts, except upon an island, to the westward, where they found a corn shed of wood, But many works of men they found not; and they then went back and came to Leif's booths in the autumn.

But the next summer went Thorvald eastward with the ship, and round the land to the northward. Here came a heavy storm upon them when off a ness, so that they were driven on shore, and the keel broke off from the ship, and they remained here a long time, and repaired their ship. Then said Thorvald to his companions: "Now will I



that we fix up the keel here upon the nest, and call it Keelness [Kjalarness], then so did they. After that they sailed away around the eastern shores of the land, and into the mouths of the firth which lay nearest thereto, And to a point of land which stretched out, and was covered all over with wood. There they came too, with the ship, and shoved out a plank to the land, and Thorvald went up the country with all his companions. He then said: "Here it is beautiful, and here would I like to raise my dwelling."

Then went away to the ship, and saw up on the stands within the promontory three elevations, and went thither, and saw there three skin boats [canoes], and three men under each. Then divided they their people, and caught them all, except one, who got away with his boat. They killed the other eight, and then went back to the cape, and looked around them, and saw some heights inside of the firth, and supposed that these were dwellings. After that, so great a drowsiness came upon them that they could not keep awake, and they all fell asleep. Then came a shout over them, so that they all awoke. Thus said the shout: "Wake thou! Thorvald! And all thy companions, if thou wilt preserve life, and return thou to the ship, with all thy men, and leave the land without delay." Then rushed out from the interior of the firth an innumerable crowd of skin boats, and made towards them. Thorvald said then: "We will put out the battle screen, and defend ourselves as well as we can, but fight little against them."

So did they, and the Skraelings shot at them for a time, but afterwards ran away, each as fast as he could. Then asked Thorvald his men if they had gotten any wounds; they answered that no one was wounded. "I have gotten a wound under the arm," said he, "for an arrow fled between the edge of the ship and the shield, in under my arm, and here is the arrow, and it will prove a mortal wound to me. Now council I ye, that ye get ready instantly to depart, but ye shall bear me to the cape, where I thought it best to dwell; it may be that a true word fell from my mouth, that I should dwell there for a time; there shall ye bury me, and set up crosses at my head and feet, and call the place Krossaness forever and all time to come. "

Greenland was then Christianized, but Erik the Red died before Christianity was introduced. Now Thorvald died, but they did all things according to his directions, and then went away, and returned to their companions, and told to each other the tidings which they knew, and dwelt there for the winter, and gathered grapes and vines to load the ship. But in the spring they made ready to sell to Greenland, and came with the ship and Eriksfjord, and could now tell great tidings to Leif.

**Source:** "The Norse Discovery of America," from *The Vinland Sagas*, translated by Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Palsson, 1965, 51-61.

## Anonymous: Viking Warfare

The Orkneyinga Saga (c. 1200) concerns the political and military history of the Orkney Islands in the Middle Ages, including their conquest by the kings of Norway in the ninth century. It is a unique source for the early history of this remote part of Europe, which nevertheless had extensive contacts with Scotland and Scandinavia. In style, the saga is more a chronicle than a work of epic literature. It depicts the brutality of medieval war, and politics in the far north where the leaders were at once farmers, warriors, and pirates.

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14. After the fall of Earl Sigurd, his sons took the realm and shared it into trithings among Summerled, Brusi, and Einar. Thorfinn was with the Scot-king five winters old when his father Sigurd fell. Then the Scot-king gave Thorfinn, his daughters son, Caithness and Sutherland and the title of earl, and set up men to rule the land with him. Earl Thorfinn was early in coming to his full growth, the tallest and strongest of men; his hair was black, his features sharp, and his brows scowling, and as soon as he grew up it was easy to see that he was forward and grasping. Those brothers, Brusi and Einar, were unlike in temper. Einar was a man stern and grasping, unfriendly, and a mighty man for a war. Brusi was a meek man; he kept his feelings well in hand and was humble, and ready tongued. Summerled was like to Brusi in temper; he was the eldest of those brothers, and lived the shortest, and died of sickness. After his death Earl Thorfinn claimed a share of the realm in the Orkneys. Einar said that Thorfinn had Caithness and Sutherland, that realm which their father had owned, and called it more than a trithing of the isles, and would not grant Thorfinn a share after Summerled; but Brusi was willing to grant it, and gave over the share for his part. "I will not," he said, "covet more of the realm than that trithing which I own by right." Then Einar took two lots of the isles under him; then he made himself mighty, and had many followers, was oft a warring in the summers, and had a great levy of men out of the land, but it was quite another story with the spoil. Then the freemen began to be wary of that toil; but the earl held boldly on with his burdens, and suffered no man to speak a word against him. Einar was the most overbearing of men. A great dearth arose in his realm from the toil and outgoings which the freemen had; but in that lot of the land that Brusi had was great peace and plenty, and the freemen had an easy life; for that he had many friends.

15. There was a powerful and wealthy man named Amund, who dwelt at Hrossey, at Sandwick on Lopness. His son's name was Thorkell, the properest man of all men who were then growing up in the Orkneys. Amund was a wise man, and one of the men most esteemed in the islands. It fell out on spring that the Earl had a mighty levy, as was his wont, but the freemen grumbled and took it ill, and brought the matter before Amund, and made him speak to the Earl for a little forbearance. Amund said the Earl would turn a deaf ear, "and little will come a bit; as it is the Earl and I are good friends, but methinks there is a great risk if we two should come to a quarrel with our tempers. No," says he, "I will have nothing to do with it." Then they told their story to Thorkell; he was loathe to do anything, but still promised them his good offices, after being egged on by the men. And thought he had been too hasty and promising. But when the Earl held a Thing, then Thorkell spoke on behalf of the freemen, told the need of the men, and bade the Earl spare his people. Einar answers well, and says he will give heed to his words: "I had meant now to have six ships out of the land, but now no more than three shall go; but as for thee, Thorkell, don't now ask this anymore. "The freemen thanked Thorkell well for his help. The Earl fared away on a Viking voyage, and came back at autumn. But after that, in the spring, the Earl had again a levy and held a Thing with the freemen. Then Thorkell spoke again, and did the Earl spare the freemen. The Earl answers wrathfully, and said that the lot of the freemen should much worsen for his speech. He made himself so wood and wrath, that he said they should not be both there another spring safe and sound at the Thing. And so the Thing broke up. But when Amund became aware of what had passed between the Earl and Thorkell, he begged Thorkell to go away. So he fared over to Caithness to Earl Thorfinn, and was there long afterwards, and fostered him, when the Earl was young, and was afterwards called Thorkell fosterer; and he was a man of mark. Many were the men of might who fled away out of the Orkneys for the over bearing of Earl Einar. Most fled to Earh Thorfinn, some to Norway, and to diverse lands.

16. As soon as Earl Thorfinn was grown up, then he sent a message to Einar his brother, and asked of him that share of the realm which he thought belonged to him in the Orkneys, but that was a trithing. Einar was in no hurry to lessen himself so. But when Earl Thorfinn hears that, then he calls out force from Caithness. But when Earl Einar was aware of that, then he gathers force, and goes against Thorfinn, and means to fight with him. Earl Brusi also gathers force, goes to meet them, and brings about an agreement that Thorfinn should have a trithing of the realm in the Orkneys which he owned by right, but Earl Brusi and Earl Einar laid their lots together. Einar was to have the leadership over them, and the wardship of the land, but if either of them died before the other, then that one of them who lives longer should take the lands after the other. But that settlement was thought to be unfair, for Brusi had a son, whose name was Rognvald, but Einar was sunless. Earl Thorfinn sets men to keep watch and ward over that realm which he owned in the Orkneys; but he was most often in Caithness.

17. Earl Einar was most often in the summers in warfare around Ireland and Scotland and Wales. It happened one summer when he was warring on Ireland that he fought in Ulfreksfirth with Konufogur the Irish king. Earl Einar their got a mighty defeat and loss of men. The next summer after Eyvind Urarhorn fared from the west from Ireland, and meant to steer for Norway. The weather was sharp, and there was a great storm. Then Eyvind put into Osmund's voe, and lay there weather-bound a while. But when Earl Einar learns that, then he went thither with a great force, and he took there Eyvind, and made them slay him, but gave peace to most of his men. They fared home to Norway about autumn, and went to find King Olaf, and told him how Eyvind had been taken off. The king answers little about it, and yet it could be found out that he thought this a mickle manscathe, and wrought more against himself than anyone else. The king was short of words whenever he thought anything much against his mind. Earl Thorfinn sent Thorkell, his fosterer, out into the isles to get together his scatts and tolls. Earl Einar laid at Thorkell's door much of that rising against him which had happened when Earl Thorfinn laid his claims out in the isles. Thorkell fared hastily out of the isles over to the nest, and told Earl Thorfinn that he had become sure of this, that Earl Einar meant death for him, if his friends or kinsman had not given him warning. "Now I must choose one of these two things, either to let the earl's and my meeting be so that we may settle our business once for all; or that other to fare farther away, and thither where the earl shall never have power over me. "Earl Thorfinn was very eager that he should fare east to Norway to meet King Olaf. "Thou wilt," says the earl, "be made much of wherever that art with honorable men; but I know both your temper is, the earl's and thine, that ye two would be but a scant time before you came to blows." Then Thorkell busked him to go to King Olaf, and fared about autumn to Norway, and was with King Olaf that winter in great love; the king took Thorkell much into his counsel. He thought, as was true, that Thorkell was a wise and very able man. The king found out from his talk that he was very uneven in his stories about the earls, and that he was a great friend of Thorfinn, but slow to praise Earl Einar. And early next spring that king sent a ship west over the sea to find Earl Thorfinn, and this bidding, by word of mouth, that the earl should come to see him. He did not lay the journey under his pillow, for words of friendship came along with the message.

18. Earl Thorfinn fared east to Norway and came to see King Olaf. He got there a good welcome, and stayed there long on in the summer. But when he made ready to go west, then King Olaf gave him a great and good longship, with all her tackling. Thorkell fosterer made up his mind to go with Earl Thorfinn, and the earl gave him that ship which he had brought from the west that summer. The king and the Earl parted the best of friends with great love. Earl Thorfinn came back about autumn to the Orkneys. But when Earl Einar heard this, he got many men together and lay aboard ship. Earl Brusi went to meet those brothers, and tried to bring about a settlement between them, and so it came about that they were set at one again, and bound that with oaths. Thorkell fosterer was then to be taken into that settlement, and into friendship with Earl Einar, and that was also said that each of them should make the other a feast, and the earl was to come first to pay Thorkell a visit at Sandwick. But when the Earl was there at the feast, he was treated in the bravest way. The earl was not cheerful. There was a mickle hall there, and doors at both ends. That day on which the earl was to go away, and was busking himself, Thorkell was to go along with him to the feast. Thorkell sent men forward to spy out on the road along which they were to fare that day; but when they came back they told Thorkell that they found there three ambushes and men with weapons; "and we think, to say thee sooth, that treachery must lie under this." But when Thorkell learned that he put off his busking and got his men together. The Earl bade him busk himself and said twas high time to ride. Thorkell said he had much to look after. He went sometimes out and sometimes in. Fires were on the floor. Then Thorkell went

in at one of the doors and with him a man who is named Hallvard. He was a man from Iceland, an Eastfirther by kin. He shut the door after them. Thorkell went inside along the hall between the fire and where the Earl sat. The earl asked, "art thou boun now?" Thorkell answers, "I am boun now." Then Thorkell hewed at the Earl on his head. The earl fell forward stooping on the floor. Hallvard said, "Here I see the worst of all wrestling tricks, that you do not draw the Earl from the fire." Then he thrust an Irish axe under the nape of the Earl's neck, and jerked him up on the bench. Then both those comrades, Thorkell and Hallvard, went out hastily, by the other doorway facing that by which they went in, and their outside stood Thorkell's men armed to the teeth. The earl's men looked to him, but he was then dead, and the hands of all failed them to avenge him; besides, it was all done in a hurry, for no man looked for such a deed from Thorkell; for they all thought that it would be, As was already agreed, that there should be friendship between the earl and Thorkell. Most of the men too were weaponless who were inside the hall, and many of them good friends of Thorkell of yore. It happened too by that fate by which longer life was allotted to Thorkell. When Thorkell came out he had no less force than the earl's men. Then Thorkell fared to his ship, but the earl's men went away. Thorkell sailed away that day east into the sea, and that was after the winter had begun. Then they came safe and sound to Norway. Thorkell went at once to find King Olaf, and he got there a good welcome: the king showed himself well pleased at this deed. Thorkell was with him that winter.

114. After the fall of Earl Rognvald, Earl Harold took all the isles under his rule, and became the sole chief over them. Earl Harold was a mighty chief, one of the tallest and strongest of men, "dour" and hard hearted; he had to wife Afreka; their children were these: Henry and Hacon, Helena and Margaret. When Hacon was but a few winters old, Sweyn Aslief's son offered to take him as a foster child, and he was bred up there, and as soon as ever he was so far fit, that he could go about with other men, then Sweyn had him away with him at sea roving every summer, and led him on to the worthiness in everything. It was Sweyn's wont at that time, that he sat through the winter at home in Gairsay, and there he kept always about him 80 men at his back. He had so great a drinking hall, that there was not another as great in all the Orkneys. Sweyn had in the spring hard work, and made them lay down very much seed, and looked much after it himself. But when that toil was ended, he fared away every spring on a Viking voyage, and harried about among the Southern Isles and Ireland, and came home after Midsummer. That he called spring-Viking. Then he was at home until the cornfields were ripped down, and the grain seen to and stored. Then he fared away on a Viking voyage, and then he did not come home till the winter was one month spent, and that he called his autumn Viking.

115. These tidings happened once on a time, Sweyn Asleif's son fared away on his spring cruise, then Hacon, Earl Harold's son, fared with him; and they had five ships with oars, and all of them large. They harried about among the southern isles. Then the folk was so scared at him in the southern Isles, that men hid their goods and chattels in the earth or in piles of rocks. Sweyn sailed as far south as Man, and got ill off for spoil. Thence they sailed out under Ireland and harried there. But when they came about south under Dublin, then two keels sailed there from off the main, which had come from England, and meant to steer for Dublin; they were laden with English cloths, and the great store of goods was aboard them. Sweyn and his men pulled up to the keels, and offered them battle. Little came of the defense of the Englishman before Sweyn gave the word to board. Then the Englishman were made prisoners. And there they robbed them of every penny which was aboard the keels, save that the Englishman kept the clothes they stood in and some food, and went on their way afterwards with the keels, but Sweyn and his men fared to the southern isles, and shared there war spoil. They sailed from the west with a great pomp. They did this as a glory for themselves when they lay in harbors, that they threw awnings of English cloth over their ships. But when they sailed into the Orkneys, they sewed the cloth on the floor part of the sails, so that it looked in that wise as though the sails were made altogether of broadcloth. This they called the broadcloth cruise. Sweyn fared home to his house in Gairsay. He had taken from the keels much wine and English mead. Now when Sweyn had been at home a short while, he bade to him earl Harold, and they made a worthy feast against his coming. When Earl Harold was at the feast, there was much talk amongst them of Sweyn's good cheer. The Earl spoke and said: "This I would know now, Sweyn, that thou wouldest lay aside thy sea roving; 'tis good now to drive home with a whole wain. But thou knowest this, that thou hast long maintained thyself and thy men by sea roving, but so it fares with most men who live by unfair means, that they lose their lives and strife, if they do not break themselves from it." Then Sweyn answered, and looked to the Earl, and spoke with a smile,

and said this: "Well spoken is this, Lord, and friendly spoken, and it will be good to take a bit of good counsel from you; but some men laid that to your door, that ye too are men of little fairness." The Earl answered: "I shall have to answer for my share, but a gossiping tongue drives me to say what I do." Sweyn said: "Good, no doubt, drives you to it, lord. And so it shall be, that I will leave office roving, for I find that I am growing old, and strength lessens much in the hardships and warfare. Now I will go out on my autumn cruise, and I would that it might be with no less glory than the spring cruise was; but after that my warfaring shall be over." The earl answers: "Tis hard to see, messmate, whether death or lasting luck will come first." After that they dropped talking about it. Earl Harold fared away from the feast, and was let out with fitting gifts. So he and Sweyn parted with great love tokens.

116. A little after Sweyn busks him for his roving cruise; he had seven longships and all great. Hacon, Earl Harold's son, went along with Sweyn on his voyage. They held on their course first to the southern isles, and got there a little war spoil; thence they fared out under Ireland, and harried their far and wide. They fared so far south as Dublin, and they came upon them there very suddenly, so that the townsmen were not aware of them before they had got into the town. They took their much goods. They made prisoners there those men who were rulers in the town. The upshot of their business was that they gave the town up into Sweyn's power, and agreed to pay as great a ransom as he chose to lay upon them. Sweyn was also to hold the town with his men and to have rule over it. The Dublin men swear an oath to do this. They fared to their ships at even, but next morning Sweyn was to come into the town, and take the ransom, place his men about the town, and take hostages from the townsmen. Now it must be told of what happened in the town during the night. The men of good counsel who were in the town held a meeting among themselves, and talked over the streets which had befallen them; it seemed to them hard to let their time come into the power of the Orkneyingers, and worst of all, that man whom they knew to be the most unjust man in the Western lands. So they agreed amongst themselves that they would cheat Sweyn if they might. They took that counsel, that they dug great trenches before the burg gate on the inside, and in many other places between the houses where it was meant that Sweyn and his men should pass; but men lay in wait there in the houses hard by with weapons. They laid planks over the trenches so that they should fall down as soon as every man's weight comes on them. After that they screwed straw on the planks so that the trenches might not be seen and so bided the morrow.

117. On the morning after Sweyn and his men arose and put on their arms; after that they went into the town. And when they came inside beyond the burg gate the Dublin men made a lane from the burg gate right to the trenches. Sweyn and his men saw not what they were doing and ran into the trenches. The townsmen ran straightway to hold the burg gate, but some to the trenches, and brought their arms to bear on Sweyn and his men. It was unhandy for them to make any defense, and Sweyn lost his life there in the trenches, and all those who had gone into the town. So it was said that Sweyn was the last to die of all his messmates, and spoke these words ere he died: "Know this all men, whether I lose my life today or not, that I am one of the Saint Earl Rognvald's bodyguard, and I now mean to put my trust in being there where he is with God." Sweyn's men fared at once to their ships and pulled away, and nothing is told about their voyage before they come into the Orkneys. There now is an end of telling about Sweyn; and it is the talk of men that he has been most of a man for his own sake in the western lands, both of yore and nowadays, of those men who had no higher titles of honor than he.

After the fall of Sweyn, his sons Olaf and Andrew shared his inheritance between them. They made the next summer after Sweyn lost his life a party wall in that great drinking hall which he had owned in Gairsay. Andrew Sweyn's son had to wife Frida Kolbein the burley's daughter, sister of Bjarni, bishop of the Orkneyingers.

**Source:** "Viking Warfare," from *Orkneyinga Saga, The History of the Earls of Orkney*, translated by Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards, 1978, 34-43, 214-218.

## Dante Alighieri: The Gates of Hell

*Dante Alighieri is widely considered the greatest and most characteristic poet of the Middle Ages, but little is known about his life. Born in Florence in 1265, his early life coincided with the emergence of Florence as a major economic and military power in Tuscany. Dante was the youngest member in a group of Florentine poets whose aim was to turn Tuscan into a literary language. The Divine Comedy tells the story of Dante's journey to the center of the earth, through lowest hell to purgatory, located on the opposite side of the globe. The purpose of the comedy is to rouse Dante's fellow Christians from spiritual tepidity by showing them the ultimate consequences of their acts. The following is the Comedy's Third Canto.*

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As Dante and his guide, the Roman poet Virgil, enter the vestibule that leads to hell itself, Dante sees the inscription above the gate, and he hears the screams of anguish from the damned souls.

**Through Me Pass into the Painful City,  
Through Me Pass into Eternal Grief,  
Through Me Pass among the Lost People.**

**Justice Moved My Master-Builder:  
Heavenly Power First Fashioned Me  
With Highest Wisdom and with Primal Love.**

**Before Me Nothing Was Created That  
Was Not Eternal, and I Last Eternally.  
All Hope Abandon, You Who Enter Here.**

These words in dim color I beheld  
Inscribed on the lintel of an archway.  
“Master,” I said, “this saying’s hard for me.”

And he—as someone who understands—told me:  
“Here you must give up all irresolution;  
All cowardice must here be put to death.

“We are come to the place I spoke to you about  
Where you shall see the sorrow-laden people,  
Those who have lost the Good of the intellect.”

And with that, putting his own hand on mine,  
With smiling face, just to encourage me,  
He led me to things hidden from the world.

Here heartsick sighs and groanings and shrill cries  
Re-echoed through the air devoid of stars,  
So that, but started, I broke down in tears.

Babbling tongues, terrible palaver,  
Words of grief, inflections of deep anger,  
Strident and muffled speech, and clapping hands,

All made a tumult that whipped round and round,  
Forever in that colorless and timeless air,  
Like clouds of sand caught up in a whirlwind.

An I, my head enwreathed with wayward doubts,  
Asked, "Master, what is this that I am hearing?  
Who are these people overwhelmed by pain?"

And he told me: "This way of wretchedness  
Belongs to the unhappy souls of those  
Who lived without being blamed or applauded.

"They are now scrambled with that craven crew  
Of angels who elected neither rebellion  
Nor loyalty to God, but kept apart.

"Not to mar its beauty, heaven expelled them,  
Nor will the depths of hell take them in there,  
Lest the damned have any glory over them."

And I: "Master, what is so burdensome  
To them that they should wail so dismally?"  
He answered, "Very briefly, I will tell you.

"These people have no hope of again dying,  
And so deformed has their blind life become  
That they must envy every other fate.

"The world will not allow a word about them;  
Mercy and justice hold them in disdain.  
Let us not discuss them. Look and pass on."

And I, looking again, observed a banner  
Which, as it circled, raced on with such speed  
It did not seem ever to want to stop.

And there, behind it, marched so long a file  
Of people, I would never have believed  
That death could have undone so many souls.

After I had recognized some there,  
I saw and then identified the shade  
Of that coward who made the greatest refusal.

Immediately I understood for certain  
That this troop was the sect of evil souls  
Displeasing both to God and to His enemy.

These wretches, who had never been alive,  
Went naked and repeatedly were bitten  
By wasps and hornets swarming everywhere.



The bites made blood streak down upon their faces;  
Blood mixed with tears ran coursing to their feet,  
And there repulsive worms sucked the blood back.

Then, looking again a little farther on,  
I saw people at the shore of a vast river.  
At that I said, "Master, permit me now  
"To know who these souls are and what law  
Makes them appear so eager to cross over,  
As, even in this weak light, I can discern."

And he: "These things will become clear to you  
After the two of us come to a halt  
Upon the gloomy banks of the Acheron."

Then, with eyes downcast, deeply abashed,  
In fear that what I said offended him,  
I spoke no more until we reached the river.

And look! Coming toward us in a boat,  
An old man, his hair hoary with age, rose  
Yelling, "Woe to you, you wicked souls!

"Have no hope of ever seeing heaven!  
I come to take you to the other shore,  
To endless darkness, to fire, and to ice.

"And you over there, the living soul,  
Get away from those who are already dead!"  
But when he saw that I had not moved off,

He said, "By other routes, by other harbors,  
Not here—you shall cross over to this shore.  
A lighter skiff will have to transport you!"

And my guide: "Charon, do not rack yourself!  
This deed has so been willed where One can do  
Whatever He wills—and ask no more questions."

With these words he silenced the wooly cheeks  
Of the old ferryman of the livid marshes,  
Who had two rings of flame around his eyes.

Those souls, however, who were weak and naked  
Began to lose color and grind their teeth  
When they heard the ferryman's cruel words.

They called down curses on God and their parents,  
The human race, the place, the time, the seed  
Of their conception and of their birth.

At that they massed all the closer together,  
Weeping loudly on the malicious strand  
Which waits for those who have no fear of God.

The demon Charon, with burning-ember eyes,  
Gave a signal and gathered all on board,  
Smacking lagging stragglers with his oar.

As in the autumn the leaves peel away,  
One following another, until the bough  
Sees all its treasures spread upon the ground,

In the same manner that evil seed of Adam  
Drifted from that shoreline one by one  
To a signal—like a falcon to its call.

So they departed over the dark water,  
And even before they landed on that side  
Already over here a new crowd mustered.

“My son,” my kindly mater said to me,  
“Those who have perished by the wrath of God  
Are all assembled here from every land,

“And they are quick to pass across the river  
Because divine justice goads them on,  
Turning their timidity to zeal.

“No good soul ever crossed by this way.  
If Charon, therefore, has complained about you,  
You now know clearly what he meant to say.”

Just as he finished, the blackened landscape  
Violently shuddered—with the fright of it  
My memory once more bathes me in sweat.

The harsh tear-laden earth exhaled a wind  
That hurtled forth a bright-red flash of light  
That knocked me right out of all my senses,

And I fell as a man drops off to sleep.

**Source:** “The Gates of Hell,” from Canto 3 in *The Divine Comedy, Volume 1: The Inferno*, by Dante Alighieri, translated by Mark Musa, 1971, 89-93.

## Anonymous: Tenth-Century Savagery

*Njal's Saga (c. 1280) is the greatest of the classical sagas of Icelandic literature. Its historical setting is 300 years before its actual composition, roughly one century after Iceland was discovered and settled by Ireland, the Hebrides, and Norsemen from Scandinavia. At the center of the saga is the violent and tragic story of a farmer and sage, Njal Thorgeirsson, and his family, who in the end is burned alive by their enemies. The work is the culmination of an oral tradition that describes medieval Iceland as an agrarian society marked by outbreaks of appalling violence, when brutality ruled and survival seemed a matter of pure luck.*

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### 9. THORWALD GETS HALLGERDA TO WIFE

Now, it must be told how Hallgerda, Hauskuld's daughter, grows up, and is the fairest of women to look on; she was tall of stature, too, and therefore she was called "Longlegs." She was fair-haired, and had so much of it that she could hide herself in it; but she was layish and hard-hearted. Her foster-father's name was Thiostolf: He was a Southlander by stock: he was a strong man, well skilled in arms, and had slain many men, and made no atonement in money for one of them. It was said, too, that his rearing had not bettered Hallgerda's temper.

There was a man named Thorwald; he was Oswif's son, and dwelt out on Middlefells strand, under the Fell. He was rich and well-to-do, and owned the islands called Bear-isles, which lie out in Broadfirth, whence he got meal and stock fish. This Thorwald was a strong and courteous man, though somewhat hasty in temper. Now, it fell out one day that Thorwald and his father were talking together of Thorwald's marrying, and where he had best look for a wife, and it soon came out that he thought there wasn't a match fit for him far or near.

"Well," said Oswif, "wilt thou ask for Hallgerda Longlegs, Hauskuld's daughter?"

"Yes! I will ask for her," said Thorwald.

"But that is not a match that will suit either of you," Oswif went on to say, "for she has a will of her own, and thou art stern-tempered and unyielding."

"For all that I will try my luck there," said Thorwald, "so it's no good trying to hinder me."

"Ay!" said Oswif; "and the risk is all thine own."

After that they set off on a wooing journey to Hauskuldstede and had a hearty welcome. They were not long in telling Hauskuld their business, and began to woo; then Hauskuld answered, "As for you, I know how you both stand in the world, but for my own part I will use no guile towards you. My daughter has a hard temper, but as to her looks and breeding you can both see for yourselves."

"Lay down the terms of the match," answered Thorwald, "for I will not let her temper stand in the way of our bargain."

Then they talked over the terms of the bargain, and Hauskuld never asked his daughter what she thought of it, for his heart was set on giving her away, and so they came to an understanding as to the terms of the match. After that Thorwald betrothed himself to Hallgerda and rode away home when the matter was settled.

### 10. HALLGERDA'S WEDDING

Hauskuld told Hallgerda of the bargain he had made, and she said, "Now that has been put to the proof which I have all along been afraid of, that thou lovest me not so much as thou art always saying, when thou hast not thought it worthwhile to tell me a word of all this matter. Besides, I do not think this match so good as thou hast always promised me."

So she went on, and let them know in every way that she thought she was thrown away.

Then Hauskuld said, "I do not set so much store by thy pride as to let it stand in the way of my bargains; and my will, not thine, shall carry the day if we fall out on any point."

"The pride of all you kinsfolk is great," she said, "and so it is not wonderful if I have some of it."

With that she went away, and found her foster father Thiostolf, and told him what was in store for her, and he was very heavy hearted. Then Thiostolf said, "Be of good cheer, for thou wilt be married a second time, and then they will ask thee what thou thinkest of the match; for I will do in all things as thou wishest, except in what touches thy father or Hrut."

After that they spoke no more of the matter, and Hauskuld made ready the bridal feast, and rode off to ask men to it. So he came to Hrutstede and called Hrut out to speak with him. Hrut went out, and they began to talk, and Hauskuld told him the whole story of the bargain, and bade him to the feast, saying, "I should be glad to know that thou dost not feel hurt, though I did not tell thee when the bargain was being made."

"I should be better pleased," said Hrut, "to have nothing at all to do with it; for this match will bring luck neither to him nor to her; but still I will come to the feast if thou thinkest it will add any honor to thee."

"Of course I think so," said Hauskuld, and rode off home.

Oswif and Thorwald also asked men to come, so that no fewer than 100 guests were asked.

There was a man named Swan, who dwelt in Bearfirth, which lives north from Steingrimsfirth. This Swan was a great wizard, and he was Hallgerda's 's mothers brother. He was quarrelsome, and hard to deal with, but Hallgerda asked him to the feast, and sent Thiofolf to him; so he went, and it soon got to friendship with between him and Swan.

Now men came to the feast, and Hallgerda sat upon the cross bench, and she was very merry and bright. Thiofolf was always talking to her, that he sometimes found time to speak to Swan, and men thought they were talking strange. The feast went off well, and Hauskuld paid down Hallgerda's portion with the greatest readiness. After he had done that, he said to Hrut, "Shall I bring out any gifts beside?"

"The day will come," answered Hrut, "when thou wilt have to waste thy goods for Hallgerda's sake, so hold thy hand now. "

## 11. THORWALD'S SLAYING

Thorwald rode home from the bridal feast, and his wife with him, and Thiofolf, who rode by her horse's side, and still talked to her in a low voice. Oswif turned to his son and said, "Art thou pleased with the match? And how went it when ye talked together?"

"Well," said he, "she showed all kindness to me. Thou mightest see that by the way she laughs at every word I say."

"I don't think her laughter so hearty as thou dost," answered Oswif, "but this will be put to the proof by and by."

So they rode on till they came home, and at night she took her seat by her husband's side, and made room for Thiofolf next herself on the inside. Thiofolf and Thorwald had little to do with each other, and few words were thrown away between them that winter, and so time went on. Hallgerda was prodigal and grasping, and there was nothing that any of their neighbors had that she must not have too, and all that she had, no matter whether it were her own or belonged to others she wasted. But when the spring came, there was a scarcity in the house, both of meal and stockfish, so Hallgerda went up to Thorwald and said, "Thou must not be sitting indoors any longer, for we want for the house both meal and fish."

"Well," said Thorwald, "I did not lay in less for the house this year than I laid in before, and then it used to last till summer. "

"What care I," said Hal Gordon, "if thou and thy father have made your money by starving yourselves. "

Then Thorwald got angry and gave her a blow on the face and drew blood, and went away and called his men and ran the skiff down to the shore. Then six of them jumped into her and rode out to the Bear-isles, and began to load her with meal and fish.

Meantime it was said that Hallgerda sat out of doors heavy at heart. Thiofolf went up to her and saw the wound on her face, and said, "Who has been playing this sorry trick?"

"My husband, Thorwald," she said, "and thou stoodst aloof, though thou wouldst not if thou hadst cared at all for me."

"Because I knew nothing about it," said Thiofolf, "but I will avenge it."

Then he went away down to the shore and ran out a six-oared boat, and held in his hand a great ax that he had with a haft overlaid with iron. He stepped into the boat and rode out to the Bear-isles, and when he got there all the men had rowed away, but Thorwald and his followers, and he stayed by the skiff to load her, while they brought the goods down to him. So Thiofolf came up just then and jumped into the skiff, and began to load with him, and after a while he said, "Thou canst do but little at this work, and that little thou dost badly."

"Thinkest thou thou canst do it better?" asked Thorwald.

“There’s one thing to be done which I can do better than thou,” said Thiostolf, and then he went on: “The woman who is thy wife has made a bad match, and you shall not live much longer together.”

Then Thorwald snatched up a fishing knife that laid by him, And made a stab at Thiostolf; he had lifted his ax to his shoulder and dashed it down. It came on Thorwald’s arm and crushed the wrist, but down fell the knife. Then Thiostolf lifted up his axe a second time and gave Thorwald a blow on the head, and he fell dead on the spot.

## **19. GUNNAR COMES INTO THE STORY**

There was a man whose name was Gunnar. He was one of Unna’s s kinsmen, and his mother’s name was Rannveig. Gunnar’s father was named Hamond. Gunnar Hamond’s son dwelt at Lithend, in the Fleetlithe. He was a tall man in growth, and a strong man—best skilled in arms of all men. He could cut or thrust or shoot if he chose as well with his left as with his right hand, and he smote so swiftly with his sword, that three seemed to flash through the air at once. He was the best shot with the bow of all men, and never missed his mark. He could leap more than his own height, with all his war gear, and as far backwards as forwards. He could swim like a seal, and there was no game in which it was any good for anyone to strive with him; and so it has been said that no man was his match. He was handsome of feature, and fair skinned. His nose was straight, and a little turned up at the end. He was blue eyed and bright eyed, and ruddy cheeked. His hair thick, and of good hue, and hanging down in comely curls. The most courteous of men was he, of sturdy frame and strong willed, bountiful and gentle, a fast friend, but hard to please when making them. He was wealthy in goods. His brother’s name was Kolskegg; he was a tall, strong man, a noble fellow, and undaunted in everything. Another brother’s name was Hjort; he was then in his childhood. Orm Skogarnef with a base-born brother of Gunnar’s; he does not come into this story. Arnguda was the name of Gunnar’s sister. Hroar, the priest at Tongue, had her to wife.

## **54. THE FIGHT AT RANGRIVER**

Now we must take up the story, and say that Gunnar was out of doors at Lithend, and saw his shepherd galloping up to the yard.

The shepherd rode straight into the town; and Gunnar said, “Why ridest thou so hard?”

“I would be faithful to thee,” said the man; “I saw men riding down along Markfleet, eight of them together, and four of them were in colored clothes. “

Gunnar said, “That must be Otkell.”

“The lad said, “I have often heard many temper-trying words of Skamkell’s; for Skamkell spoke away there east at Dale, and said that thou sheddest tears when they rode over thee; but I tell it thee because I cannot bear to listen to such speeches of worthless men.”

“We must not be word-sick,” said Gunnar, “but from this day forth thou shalt do no other work than what thou choosest for thyself. “

“Shall I say aught of this to Kolskegg thy brother?” asked the shepherd.

“Go down and sleep,” said Gunnar; “I will tell Kolskegg.”

The lad laid him down and fell asleep at once, but Gunnar took the shepherd’s horse and laid his saddle on him; he took his shield, and girded him with his sword, Oliver’s gift; he set his helm on his head; took his bill, and something sung loud in it, and his mother, Rannveig, heard it. She went up to him and said, “Wrathful art thou now, my son, and never saw I thee thus before. “

Gunnar went out, and drove the butt of his spear into the earth, and threw himself into the saddle and rode away.

His mother, Rannveig, went into the sitting room, where there was a great noise of talking.

“Ye speak loud,” she said, “but yet the bill gave a louder sound when Gunnar went out.”

Kolskegg heard what she said, and spoke, “This betokens no small tidings.”

“That is well,” said Hallgerda, “now they will soon prove whether he goes away from them weeping.”

Kolskegg took his weapons and sought him a horse, and rode after Gunnar as fast as he could.

Gunnar rode across Acretongue, and so to Gellastofna and thence to Rangriver, and down the stream to the ford at Hof. There were some women out the milking post there. Gunnar jumped off his horse and tied him up. By this time the others were riding up towards him; there were flat stones covered with mud in the path that led down to the ford.

Gunnar called out to them and said, "Now is the time to guard yourselves; here now is the bill, and here now ye will put it to the proof whether I shed one tear for all of you."

Then they all of them sprang off their horses' backs and made toward Gunnar. Hallbjorn was the foremost.

"Do not thou come on," said Gunnar; "thee last of all would I harm; but I will spare no one if I have to fight for my life."

"That I cannot do," said Hallbjorn; "thou wilt strive to kill my brother for all that, and it is a shame if I sit idly by." And as he said as he thrust at Gunnar with a great spear which he held in both hands.

Gunnar threw his shield before the blow, but Hallbjorn pierced the shield through. Gunnar thrust the shield down so hard that it stood fast in the earth, but he brandished his sword so quickly that no eye could follow it, and he made a blow with the sword, and it fell on Hallbjorn's arm above the wrists, so that it cut it off.

Skamkell ran behind Gunnar's back and made a blow at him with a great axe. Gunnar turned short round upon him and parried the blow with the bill, and caught the axe under one of its horns with such a wrench that it flew out of Skamkell's hand away into the river.

Then Gunnar sang a song:

*Once thou askedst, foolish fellow,  
Of this man, this seahorse racer,  
When as fast as feet could foot it  
Forth ye fled from farm of mine,  
Whether that were rightly summoned?  
Now with gore the spear we redden,  
Battle-eager, and avenge us  
Thus on thee, vital source of strife.*

Gunnar gave another thrust with his bill, and through Skamkell, and lifted him up and cast him down in the muddy path on his head.

Audulf the Easterling snatched up a spear and launched it at Gunnar. Gunnar caught the spear with his hand in the air, and hurled it back at once, and it flew through the shield in the Easterling too, and so down into the earth. Otkell smote at Gunnar with his sword, and aimed at his leg just below the knee, but Gunnar leapt up into the air and he missed him. Then Gunnar thrust at him the bill, and the blow went through him.

Then Kolskegg came up, and rushed at once at Hallkell and dealt him his death blow with his short sword. There and then they slew eight men.

A woman who saw all this ran home and told him Mord, and besought him to part them.

"They alone will be there," he said, "of whom I care not though they slay one another."

"Thou canst not mean to say that," she said, "for thy kinsman Gunnar, and thy friend Otkell will be there." "Baggage, that thou art," he said, "thou art always chattering," and so he lay still indoors while they fought.

Gunnar and Kolskegg rode home after this work, and they rode hard up along the riverbank, and Gunnar leapt off his horse and came down on his feet.

Then Kolskegg said, "Hard now thou ridest, brother!"

"Ay," said Gunnar, "that was what Skamkell said when he uttered those very words when they wrote over me."

"Well, thou hast avenged that now," said Kolskegg.

"I would like to know," said Gunnar, "whether I am by so much the less brisk and bold than other men, because I think more of killing men than they?"

**Source:** From "Tenth-Century Savagery," from *Njal's Saga*, translated by Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Palsson, 1960, 55-59, 73, 133-35.