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VIOLENT VIKINGS, GENTLE HORSEMEN: THE HORSE CULTURE AND PRACTICE OF HORSEMANSHIP IN VIKING AGE SCANDINAVIA

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ABSTRACT

The Scandinavians of the Viking Age (from the eighth to the eleventh centuries) had formed a strong reliance upon their horses. Contrary to the engrained images that many have of the Viking Age Scandinavians, these ancient people were very loving of their horses and took good care of them. Horses were very important in Scandinavian life, making their way into the people's religion in cult and burial practices. This thesis uses evidence from sagas, eddas, and art to prove that the Scandinavians' highly skilled horsemanship had many similar aspects of natural horsemanship that is receiving ever-growing support today.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Scandinavians in the Viking Age, which lasted from the eighth to the eleventh century, had strong ties to their horses. The most impressive thing about their relationships with horses was the degree of naturalness that their method of horsemanship had. Their culture depended on horses. They used the animals for transportation, farming, food, and battle. Equines were deeply incorporated into the Scandinavians' religious practices in both cult rites and funerals. They appreciated their personal mounts and became skilled horsemen. The horsemanship that these people practiced so long ago has many similarities to natural horsemanship that many people study today. A natural form of horsemanship had begun much earlier, when man first started to stalk the horse as his prey.

Horsemanship began as a relationship developed from a predator's understanding of his prey. Hunters learn to read their prey's body language in order to manipulate their movements to effectively kill the animals. Paleolithic hunters knew how to drive herds of horses by manipulating the boss mare and stallion to make the easiest kills. Ancient peoples' ability to read horses' body language and use their own to drive horses allowed them to make the transition to keeping horses, desensitizing the creatures, and eventually riding them. The relationship that developed between the species was completely natural.

The definition of horsemanship is blatantly simple, but somehow overlooked. Horsemanship is a compound word made up of the nouns "horse," "man," and "relationship." The meaning implies that the focus of humans should be on the relationship between the two species. Horsemanship not only pertains to the art of *riding* horses, or the term would be *horseridership*. A *horseman* should be just that, a combination of the two, with both of the species' abilities. Good horsemen look far beyond riding and understand that everything they do by, near, with, or for their horses is horsemanship. Horsemanship includes everything having to

do with horses, from things like leading, stabling, pasturing, grooming, sheath cleaning, loading, and groundwork, to cutting, dressage, reining, driving, and jumping. Most traditional horsemen are too focused on practicing disciplines and fixing problems that their horses have by using pieces of tack, instead of addressing the roots of those mistakes that *always* stem from their own inadequacies in communicating and building relationships with the animals. Horsemen must realize that every second that they spend with their horses counts towards their equine partners gaining or losing trust in them as a leader. Horses communicate with their bodies and have an adept ability to read our body language as well as that of their own species. Natural horsemanship, particularly Parelli Natural Horsemanship, promotes the teaching of humans to understand horses, whereas traditional forms of horsemanship merely focus on teaching the horse to tolerate the incompetence of humans. Communication only occurs when both parties involved are understood and have their needs met by the other.

Although the Scandinavians produced tough Vikings, the Northern Europeans in the Viking Age were highly skilled horsemen who understood their horses' body language and incorporated it into a style of horsemanship that closely resembles natural horsemanship of today. The horses that the Scandinavians chose for mounts and breeding stock possessed confidence, calmness, intelligence, and athleticism. Contrary to their legendary deeds of conquering, pillaging, and raping their way through Europe, the Scandinavian people took great pride in their horses and prized them above all other animals. Their literature even contains instances of love felt by horsemen for their horses. Those who had horses in the Viking Age society, like many horsemen today, were wealthy people because of the expense of the animals.

While the sagas and eddas of the Scandinavians are based on oral or written literature that had been passed down through generations and the stories contain fantastic elements, as these

people had a love for lively entertainment on bitter winter nights, many common and everyday details of life are historically accurate. The care and horsemanship skills that are exhibited should be trusted as valuable sources.

The Bayeux Tapestry's fine detail of horses and horsemanship provides strong evidence that the horsemen, both mounted noblemen and farmers, possessed great skills. The tapestry, which is more accurately a long piece of linen with embroidery, has a highly debated origin. In either the 1070s or 1080s someone, most likely Odo, the Earl of Kent and brother to William the Conqueror, or Queen Mathilda, wife of William, is believed to have commissioned the tale of the conquest of England to be embroidered.[1] Women embroidered the cloth and their acute attention to detail suggests that while females may not have been as widely involved with horses as their male counterparts, they were just as knowledgeable about the proper practice of horsemanship. After all, the Valkyries were goddesses who chose which of the slain men on the battlefields would go to Valhalla to fight for Odin at Ragnarök, the end of the world. These females were forces to be reckoned with, great horsewomen, and rode on highly prized horses. Women served as members in their own horse cults as well.

Scandinavians fully understood how essential their horses were to them and the animals became incorporated into their religion. The pagan religion of the Scandinavians involved the sacrificial killings of many animals, especially horses, to ensure good harvests. Horses were important in other aspects of Scandinavian religion and beliefs. Men and women alike were buried with their horses so the animal could deliver their souls to Valhalla in the afterlife. The gods and other legendary figures in their mythology had great horses and even fought over who should possess the animals.

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[1] Bloch, Howard, *A Needle in the Right Hand of God: the Norman Conquest of 1066 and the Making and Meaning of the Bayeux Tapestry* (New York: Random House), 42.

Chapter 1: How Horsemanship Began

To gain a better understanding of how the Scandinavian people in the Viking Age viewed horsemanship and interacted with their equines, knowledge of the history of the beginning and practice of horsemanship is necessary. Horsemanship began as a basic hunter-prey relationship between humans and horses and gradually evolved into a closer bond between the two species.

Many believe that horsemanship began when man was first able to successfully ride his "tamed" equine. This is a very common misconception that is harbored in the minds of people in the horse world today. Humans became interested in horses only because the animals served as a great source of meat in their diets. Many people think that horses have clean-tasting meat, which is why the animals are still eaten in some countries throughout the world. Horsemanship truly began when humans had no thoughts of riding the magnificent creature at all. When humans began to hunt the horse, horsemanship was born. Just as wolves work herds of prey animals and Native Americans hunted bison herds in the West, early hunters of horses in the Paleolithic and Neolithic Ages studied the creatures in their bands to learn of easier ways to make kills. In a time when humans subsisted solely on hunting and gathering, much work and energy went into obtaining food. Survival depended on conserving energy, and hunting was an exhausting effort for the early humans who stalked their prey on foot. Horses were an especially difficult species to hunt because of their great speed, nature to flee from any perceived danger in a split second, nearly 360 degree vision, and a keen sense of hearing. Conserving as much of their vital energy as possible and having the need to feed their families, the prehistoric hunters were driven to study and understand their prey's movements and behaviors to make hunting more efficient. Making quick kills allowed the hunters to save their energy and reduce the need to eat more of their stores for revitalization of their bodies. Wolves, lionesses, and other predators of large prey

animals can be observed conserving their energy on the hunt. Observations of body language in the herd most likely would have been made prior to hunt to determine which two horses were the stallion and boss mare (these are the horses that instruct when and where the other horses should go). Manipulating those two horses would allow the hunters to move the herd wherever they desired, in order to make a kill.

Horse domestication is thought to have "occurred in the fourth millennium B.C. on the Eurasian steppes, a great expanse of grasslands stretching eastward from Hungary for more than 6,400 km to the borders of China".[2] Other herding prey animals, such as goats, sheep, and cattle had been domesticated a few thousand years earlier than horses. During the period between the Paleolithic and Neolithic Ages, someone made an intelligent decision to domesticate equines. At the same time, humans slowly began to abandon their nomadic lifestyle of hunting and gathering as a way of subsistence and replaced the method with agriculture and domestication of animals and cultivation of crops for a much more dependable way of getting foods. The decision to domesticate the animals was not made from any idea to ride or drive the animal. Cultivation of grains such as millet, barley, and wheat was secondary to the steppe people, who more heavily focused on the meat in their diet.[3] Just as goats and cows were domesticated for the easy obtainment of sources of protein in the human diet, horses were kept for the sheer purpose of meat. Farming horses was much easier than hunting them for miles, finally killing one from a herd, and then having the arduous task of carrying the animal's meat the entire distance back to the settlement. An entire, enclosed herd was now at the disposal of humans, conveniently located in their communities. Killing the equines became quite simpler.

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[2] Kelekna, Pita, *The Horse in Human History* (New York: Cambrige University Press, 2009), 1.
[3] Kust, Michael, *Man and Horse in History* (Alexandria: Plutarch Press, 1983), 10.

Merely raising wild horses as a meat source did not "domesticate" the animals then nor will keeping wild horses today "domesticate" them. "Domestication" as a term used in reference to horses is very inappropriate and must be used with great caution. Horses can never truly be domesticated as animals such as dogs can. Horses are very fast learners, capable of learning several times more quickly than humans. In the hands of inadequate humans, disasters with horse training are common because people fail to understand that every second they spend with their horse, the animal is learning something, good or bad. The intelligence and speedy learning abilities come in handy for the prey animals, as these traits allow equines to adapt into whatever environment they find themselves in the wild. In the human environment, the reactions that served them so well (fleeing from fear and pressure) for about fifty-five million years often leads the animals and people into trouble and dangerous situations. Coming back to the question of "domestication" and why it should be avoided in reference to horses: its adaptability to its surroundings allows a completely wild horse, independent of human beings, to be taught how to safely live in the human's world while it also allows a horse, considered to be "domesticated" and "tame" by most people in the horse world, that has thousands of years worth of predecessors that were raised by humans, lived in barns, and ridden, to be turned loose many miles from human civilization and revert to the same state enjoyed by horses that never even saw humans. If this once "domesticated" horse that was turned loose would be captured and brought back to the human world, after some time, it would need to be treated like a truly wild horse that never experienced humans. The animal would require re-acclimation to humans, confined spaces, ground manners, riding, and all of the other training that it had once completed. All of the training would need to be reintroduced from the lowest level on this horse, just like a young foal.

Horses do have incredible memories and without a doubt, the horse would remember its previous time in the human world and take less time to be trained than the normal wild horse.

"[I]n the Paleolithic, when wolfhound participation in the chase increased the efficiency of the hunt…young puppies may have been captured as pets and tamed."[4] The practices of obtaining and taming horses were probably very different than those concerning canine companions. The taming, or rather the building of horses' confidences in humans, most likely did not occur from snatching a wild foal from its mother and herd because baby horses are dependent on their mothers much longer than puppies, as they nurse for a greater period of time than other mammals with comparatively shorter life spans. Mares in wild horse herds continue to nurse their foals until the babies reach nine months of age. Every baby mammal needs its mother's milk to mature properly and healthily until it can survive on plants or meat alone. Wild foals were also much more difficult to steal than other baby mammals. Early man could wait for the adult dogs to go hunting and kill the one or two adults left to guard the babies. Goats, sheep, and cows were easier to domesticate because of their smaller size and slower speed. Foals had a stallion and an entire herd to protect them with sharp, kicking hooves, hundreds of pounds of charging power, and teeth to tear apart any invading humans. Horses' speed also made capture difficult as even today's miniature horse foals can nimbly outrun people. If a foal had been successfully captured, the humans would have soon discovered that despite looking delicate and unstable, the baby could give effective kicks. Young foals, not yet old enough to have started to eat grass would quickly become dehydrated and die. Older foals that had started to supplement their mother's milk with grasses withstood a better chance of survival. The older babies, however, would be far more difficult to control, having reached three-quarters or more of their

[4] Kelekna, Pita, *The Horse in Human History* (New York: Cambrige University Press, 2009), 22.

adult size by weaning age. All of the above factors probably played large roles in equines being domesticated much later than wild dogs, cows, sheep, and goats.

The knowledge of the equine's ability to completely revert to a wild state makes the questions of how early humans taught horses how to accept them as non-threatening presences; gained the animals' trust; how long the process took before the first ride in history was taken; and how humans controlled their horses in the beginning, very difficult to answer for most historians. An understanding of horse psychology and behavior is helpful when predicting how humans' relationships grew with the animals. After horses were herded by humans from the wild and kept for meat, the animals began to get accustomed to the presence of people. The foals born into the kept herds saw people from their first moments of life and associated humans with an ordinary part of life. Each generation of new foals became easier to handle. Mares are capable of birthing many times throughout their long lives, so the confidence that horses developed towards humans must have happened fairly quickly. The growing confidence of their horses towards them enabled humans to interact increasingly more with the animals and vice versa.

Being able to approach and touch their horses was the first step that eventually allowed people to have the animals carry goods and riders. The keepers of the horses had already learned how to manipulate the animals' movements on the ground from the centuries before, when hunters observed the body language that horses used amongst themselves to move each other and drove the herds during hunting. They took their understanding of horses' movements on the ground and simply transferred the principles when they were astride their backs. Most horse historians eagerly search for evidence of the point in time when humans began to ride their horses. Unfortunately, they think from the viewpoint of traditional horsemen and focus too

much on bits, connecting the devices with the only way to control a horse's movement from atop its back. Riding most likely occurred long before bits were invented.

Archaeologist David Anthony devoted considerable amounts of his energy on trying to find bit wear on the premolars of modern horses' teeth with the intention of comparing abrasion marks on ancient horses' teeth.[5] In his focus on premolar wear, he leaves out the mention of wolf teeth in his studies. (Wolf teeth should not be confused with canine teeth that are beneficial in fights between stallions. Male and female horses both develop wolf teeth around 2 years of age, but mares are less likely to get canines, which erupt at around five years of age). The vast majority of horses today have their wolf teeth extracted before being bitted, as these teeth interfere when the bit is in and pinch the horses' soft flesh. The steppe people did not practice equine dentistry and their horses' wolf teeth were left alone. This means that wear marks would be much more prevalent on those teeth than on the premolars.

[5] Anthony, David, The Horse, the Wheel, and Language: How Bronze-Age Riders from the Eurasian Steppes Shaped the Modern World (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 194-195.

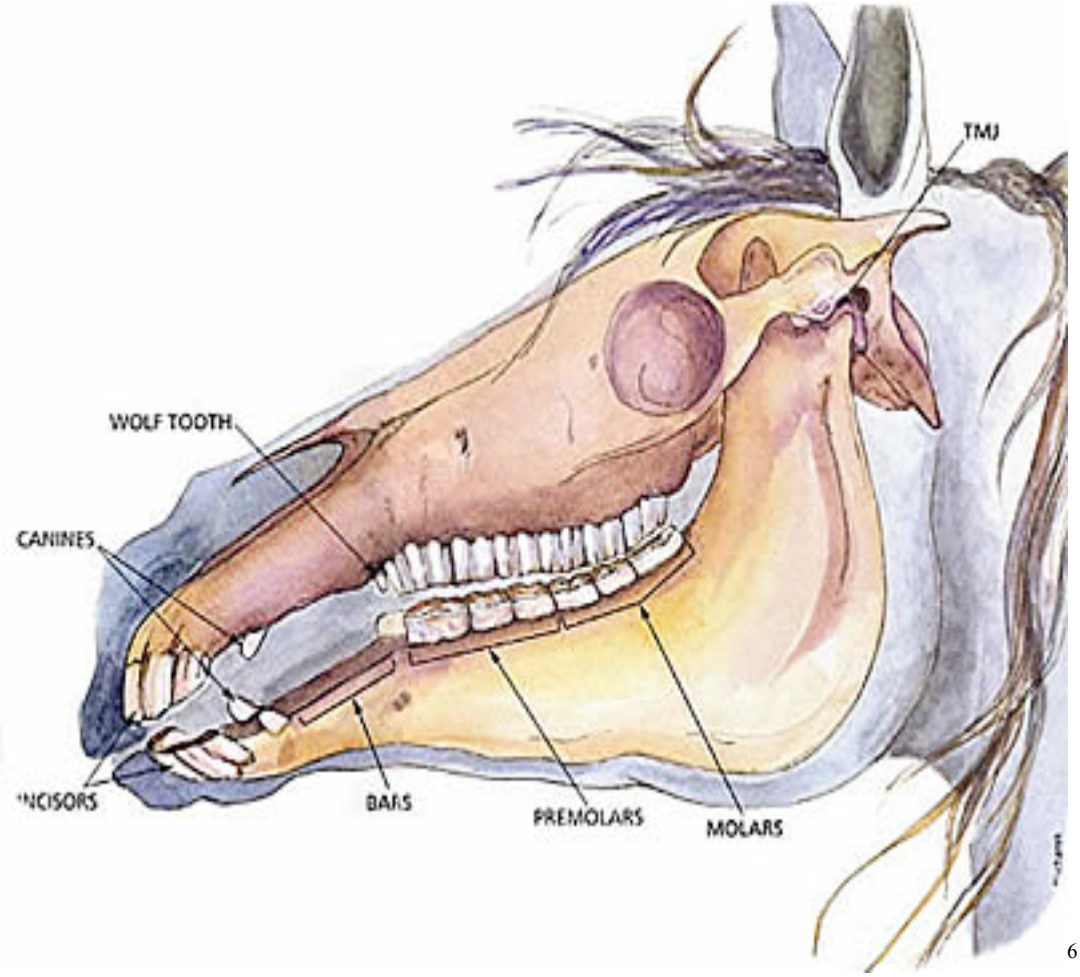

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Fig. 1. Note the location of the wolf tooth in this diagram. The tooth is positioned in front of the premolar.

Unlike in Fig. 1., sometimes wolf teeth do not erupt directly against the premolar and cause even greater problems with the bit. The belief that early riders used bits contradicts the very way that people first directed their horses' movements. People communicated with and guided their horses through body language, by using their arms, hands, legs, and long sticks; as well as the placement of their bodies in relation to certain parts of the horse.

[6] *Basic Anatomy,* http://www.horsegroomingsupplies.com/horse-forums/tooth-abscess-144858.html.

Over the first few thousand years of man being partnered with horse, natural relationships and understanding between the species grew. Horsemanship surpasses the knowledge of how to ride horses. Early horsemen knew how to read horses' body language and manipulate the animals' movements long before they thought of riding the animals. Why humans' natural horsemanship skills began to fail is probably attributed to many different reasons. Increasing focuses on money and time led to less concern for the animals and the creation of devices to control them without devoting as much time to groundwork training.

Chapter 2: Natural Horsemanship

The method of horsemanship used by the Viking Age Scandinavians is very similar to natural horsemanship that is practiced today. To understand the Northern Europeans' method, one must become acquainted with the basics of natural horsemanship and how horsemen practice it. Natural horsemanship is far from being a new-age way for humans to interact with horses, as it is considered to be by many traditional practicing horsemen. The term of "natural" horsemanship developed in the last half of the twentieth century, but this method of interaction really began thousands of years ago when man first encountered the horse while he hunted and later raised the animal. Understanding horses' natures, the ways that the animals think and behave, and using that knowledge effectively allows natural horsemen to alter their own behavior and develop stronger bonds with equines than those held by their traditional peers.

The goal of natural horsemanship is getting the horse to act like a partner in the horse-human relationship instead of a prey animal. This is achieved when humans make the realization that people are predatory animals while horses are prey animals. In *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudún*, Sigurd shows his understanding of this by being a calm leader for his horse, Grani. Decisions that humans make are in direct opposition to those that horses make. Humans are the more intelligent species of animal of the two, so it is their responsibility to adapt their communications for the horse by acting less like predators. In a situation where the horse spooks, a traditional horseman/predator would urge the horse towards the terrifying object while the horse/prey would want to bolt from potential death. The object might only be a harmless plastic bag or a beautiful butterfly to humans, but the horse that never became desensitized to these things will not stop to ponder them. To the horse, anything new is potentially life threatening and flight is the only option. Only when the prey animal is a far enough distance

away from the object, will it look back and puzzle about the object. A natural horseman, thinking like a prey animal and about what his horse needs to feel safe, would note the horse's fear (and wisely get off his back, if mounted) and back the equine away from the object instead of urging the horse towards the object. Why should a horse trust anyone who makes it go towards what the animal thinks will kill it and against what its ancestors had done to survive for millions of years?

As a natural horseman, one must always, and most importantly, correctly read the horse's body language. There are many instances in the sagas that display Scandinavian horsemen's abilities to interpret their horses' language. People who cannot read their horse's language may often find themselves in dangerous situations that most certainly could be prevented. In *Njal's Saga,* Otkel cannot read the body language of horses and owns two unconfident horses and he has no control over the animals. Horses are in constant communication with their fellow equines and humans, but the latter often fail to understand the language. Horses always tell what they intend to do before they follow through with the action. Therefore, riding accidents, bites, kicks, etc. can all be avoided. Many traditional horsemen have rude, one-sided conversations with their horses, in which the humans do all of the talking and none of the listening. If people listened more and ordered less, they would soon discover that their horses would begin to put more effort into the activity and eagerly participate in the relationship. Horsemen achieve their personal goals faster with willing horses.

There are several things for natural horsemen to pay attention to for when they interact with equines. The speed with which the horse carries out its actions, the movement and/or carriage of the following: head, eyes, ears, neck, body, feet, tail, mouth, and the tendency of its

actions should all be observed.[7] Paying attention to all of these areas and actions of the horse is important, as they give a complete picture of what the horse is communicating. Often one part of the horse's body may give a further explanation of what another spot's movement means.

Horses that are kept by traditional owners deal with the frustration, pain, and anger of going through life unheard, with their needs unfulfilled, are the animals that develop unnatural vices and habits. Weaving, wind sucking, cribbing, and digging holes are some activities that horses do to make themselves feel better while they remain in a confined area and have nothing to engage their physical, mental, and emotional needs. Equines seek out these activities because endorphins are produced, making the actions desirable, much like a happy drug. Aggressive behaviors such as biting, charging, and striking out with the front hooves occur in horses that suffer from rough handling and/or isolation at the hands of traditional horsemen. Stallions especially fall victims to not having their needs met. More often than not, this causes them to develop highly aggressive behaviors, as they spend most of their lives in separation from other horses and receive rude handling during semen collection and in-hand breeding practices by their handlers. The above listed mannerisms do not exist in horses that have never been subjected to humans or those handled solely, from birth, by proficient natural horsemen who understand horse psychology and language. Like natural horsemen, the Scandinavians allowed their horses to roam free in order to have their physical, emotional, and mental needs met by their herd mates. Stallions had their own herd of mares and the freedom of social interaction with other horses.

Natural horsemen always put their horses' feelings and the relationship they have with their animals before their own desires, such as time limits and competition. Many horse owners believe that they lack the time that is required to get their animals desensitized and unafraid of

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[7]*Liberty and Horse Behavior: Reading Body Language*, DVD, directed by Parelli Natural Horsemanship (Pagosa Springs, CO, 2006).

various stimuli in the environment. For instance, people who have horses that are afraid to go inside of trailers (this is because the area offers no escape for the prey animal, and certain death, if a predator would happen to attack) resort to putting protective helmets on their animals or drugging them so they will not receive brain injuries, or die, from rearing and hitting their heads on the ceiling of the trailer. Instead of taking the time to work with their horses and get them over the fear before traveling is necessary, most owners end up spending a greater amount of their time by trying to forcibly load their animals into the trailers on every occasion. The horses will only become worse with every forceful attempt that humans make. The trust that the animals have in their owners also decreases with each instance. There is great trust in the relationships that exist between the horses and their horsemen in the sagas. Scandinavian horsemen chose confident horses to avoid fear-induced reactions and resulting injuries.

Understanding the way horses learn is critical to effectively teaching them all things, from haltering to passage. The learning process begins when pressure is applied to the horse (this is when the human sends a message to the horse, telling the animal what to do). The process ends when the human releases the pressure. Only with the release does the horse learn something, good or bad. This is why the release must occur at the correct moment. If not, the horse will get the wrong idea from the human and learn something that he was not intended to learn from the person. Pressure must be applied to the part on the horse's body that will help him to understand what the human wants him to do. Using four phases of either direct or indirect pressure allows horsemen to increase their suggestion with more intensity every few seconds and to see when to stop, as soon as the horse answers correctly.

There are four phases of pressure, which can be direct or indirect, that can be used to make a horse move.[8] Direct pressure is applied on the horse's body. The four phases under direct pressure should first press on the hair, then on the skin, next into the muscle, and lastly into the bone. Indirect pressure's four phases should begin with a scowling expression on the horseman's face, then increase to a slight waving of the finger, next with an intensified waving, and proceed with direct contact. A horseman may begin with phase one and increase pressure to phase four until he achieves the desired movement or action. Phase one should be *extremely* light because communication between horses is very rapid, as the animals have an excellent ability of reading the subtlest changes in body and facial expressions. A backward twitch of the ear or a slightly squinted eye can be used to tell another horse to avoid getting too close. By consistently starting with phase 1 pressure and stepping up to the next level if necessary, horsemen reach their goal of communicating through body language with their horses. The horse also becomes highly responsive to the lightest suggestion that his owner makes. After the equine fully understands what is desired of him and offers to challenge the horseman's authority by ignoring the suggestion of phase 1, the human may skip phases 2 and 3 and go directly to phase four. Phase one asked nicely, and if unanswered, phase four will assert the dominance of the human without the horse feeling as if it was dealt an abusive blow. Horses use phases with each other and us. Horsemen who are often heard saying that their horses gave no warning before kicking, running, rearing, bucking, etc. are not observant of the phases of body language that their horses give in communication. Before doling out a kick, for example, a dominant horse may use phase one: laid back ears, phase two: aggravated swishing of the tail, phase three: hind leg stomped in warning, phase four: the kick. Sometimes horses skip directly to phase four after

[8] *The Success Series: Seven Games,* DVD, directed by Parelli Natural Horsemanship (Pagosa Springs, CO: 2002).

displaying phase one. There is strong evidence that the Scandinavians understood the importance of using phases to become effective with their horses. Horsemen depicted on the Bayeux Tapestry and picture stones use loose reins, which indicate that they were not in a constant struggle, unlike traditional horsemen, with their horses to keep the animals' heads up. These horsemen also used spurs, which are refinement tools to be used at phase one. The effects of snaffle bits in horses' mouths also subjects the animals to the lightest amount of pressure of all the bits. They were gentle and effective horsemen because they did not have to use force on their horses, as the animals were taught to yield to the lightest of the phases.

There are five zones on the horse's body.[9] Each zone also includes the air space around that area. (This can be related to the socially acceptable, personal space that people feel comfortable maintaining while they interact with each other.) Zone one's range is from miles in front of the horse's face to his poll, which is located on the top of his head, directly behind his ears. Zone two encompasses the area between the poll and horse's withers. Zone three stretches from the withers to the point of the animal's hip. Zone four ranges the point of the hip to the dock, where the tail begins. Zone five starts at the top of the tail and ends miles behind the horse. Understanding the zones and how utilizing each of them achieves a different movement from the horse. The Scandinavians used their knowledge of the zones to get their horses to perform on the ground and while mounted. The sagas describe sticks or rods that the horsemen used for directing isolated areas of the animals' bodies to move.

[9] *The Success Series: Beyond the Round Pen,* DVD, directed by Parelli Natural Horsemanship (Pagosa Springs, CO: 2002).

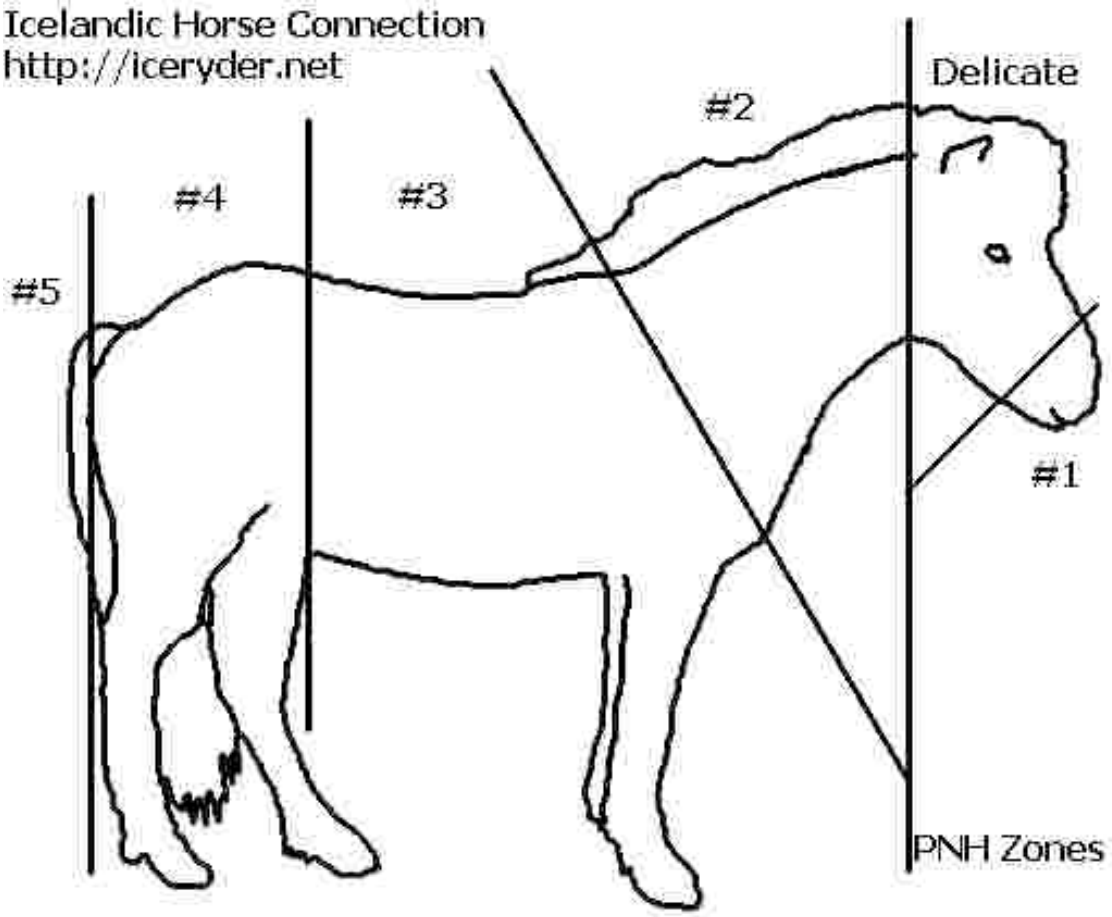

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Fig. 2. This diagram shows the zones of the horse and each is used to move the horse differently. There are seven games that horses, and natural horsemen, use to play with equines.

Natural horsemen play them on the ground first to establish a solid relationship before riding. Parelli Natural Horsemanship calls them the friendly (this desensitizes the horse to the human and everything else), porcupine (the horse moves away from steady pressure, contact is required with the human), driving (the horse moves away from rhythmic pressure, at a distance from the human), yo-yo (moving backwards and forwards), circling (*this is like not lounging*, the horse maintains the gait, by behaving like a partner, instead of being constantly chased by a whip to keep going), sideways (using sideways movement will facilitate easier lead changes and better balance for the horse when being ridden), and squeeze (this game builds the horse' confidence in

[10] *PNH Zones*, http://iceryder.net/7games.html.

tight areas) games.[11] The Equines use the games to get their herd mates to move in certain ways. When horsemen use these games with their equines and understand how horses direct each other, they can successfully motivate their horses mentally, emotionally, and physically by establishing dominance and trust in order to get their animals into a confident frame of mind. The games are especially helpful in assuring that the horse is safe to ride before mounting. As opposed to natural horsemen who use seven different games to prepare their horses, traditional horsemen merely lounge their horses, making them go round and round in torturously boring circles. Sometimes traditional horsemen lounge their horses for several hours before big events to get the animals so exhausted that they lack the spirit to give resistance to their handlers and riders. Lounging causes many problems that traditional horsemen want to avoid by destroying the relationship between horse and human and making the horse more muscular, and therefore, harder to control and tire out the next time, leading to implementation of stronger bits and gear like chambons (these are designed to keep the horse's head down, but use of this is unnecessary because horses can be taught to keep their heads down naturally). By allowing the lounging horse off of the line suddenly, a traditional horseman would discover that his horse, as it runs into the distance, does not enjoy his company because of the forced task. The specific groundwork training that the Scandinavians used is unknown. The outcome of the training, however, was highly successful. References to the willingness of horses to act as partners, the horsemen's knowledge of the zones and effective phases, etc. indicate that whatever type of work or games that the people did with their equines on the ground made them into perfect mounts.

[11] Weeks, Jo. *The Complete Equine Training Manual: A Comprehensive Guide to Schooling* (Cincinnati: David and Charles Publishers, 2007), 85-87.

As described by the method of Parelli Natural Horsemanship, there are four horsenalities, which are divided into extroverted and introverted, and left brained and right brained.[12] Every day is a different day. Horsemen must not assume that the same tactics they used on their horse the previous day will work today. Like people, horses will act differently depending on their environment and mood. The Scandinavians recognized the confident, brave, calm, and athletic qualities of left brain horses and bred horses that exhibited these behaviors. All horses, despite their main horsenality's characteristics, may display more tendencies of a left brain extrovert on one day and the following day act more like a right brain introvert, which are the exact opposites of each other.

The left brain extrovert is that wonderfully exuberant horse with confidence and endless energy. This horse gets into trouble with traditional horsemen because he tends to test and play with everything by using his mouth, including humans. This nibbling is just how he expresses a desire to play, but the behavior is still dominant. Traditional horsemen will punish their horses for nibbling (usually by slapping the horse on the face). This type of reaction from the human only serves to either enhance the game for the horse (he will quickly try to nip the person and then dart away in anticipation of the slap because this game is played among horses in a herd), or to make the equine more aggressive in his biting. Just like dealing with a hyper child, all of this horse's physical energy needs to be channeled into something constructive. When, and preferably before, he begins to act mischievously, he is communicating that he needs something to do and the horseman should direct him elsewhere so he does not have the time to become dominantly pushy. Keeping this horse constantly busy is reverse psychology. Soon he will just

[12]*Liberty and Horse Behavior: Horsenality,* DVD, directed by Parelli Natural Horsemanship (Pagosa Springs, CO: 2006).

want to stop! At this point, he has accepted your leadership and will be more responsive to work with you instead of against you.

The left brain introvert is perhaps the most intelligent of the four horsenalities, as he, like the left brain extrovert is very busy, but with his mind, not his body. He will pretend to ignore you (but he is not) and focus all of his attention on putting as little effort as possible into what you ask of him. This is the kind of horse that takes a lot of energy, on the traditional horseman's part, to get moving. He is very calm and confident, which usually makes him the perfect horse for children or the inexperienced trail rider. Treats and scratches can be used by the horseman as effective incentives to motivate and encourage the horse. Treats should only be given as a reward after the performance of a desired behavior or this type of horse will get pushy for the treat and try to dominate you. His work will not be focused on doing the best that he can at what the horseman asks in order to get the treat, but bullying the person for the food. Treats should not be given as a bribe (for example, the handler gets into the trailer with a treat to entice the horse into following). If a horse has fear issues with something, food will not work to boost his confidence. Food may bribe a left brain introvert into doing something that he is terrified of because as a predominantly calm and brave horse, he often (like left brain extroverts) oversteps his threshold of fear. The horseman must use approach and retreat with a left brain horse's fear, just like he would with a right brain horse's. Another way to get a left brain introvert to offer more speed, no matter the game, is to use reverse psychology and make him go even lower than his already plodding pace. Making him go slower will get him to want to go faster!

The right brain extrovert is that hot and flighty horse that spooks easily. This animal often takes its traditional horseman on runaways if the horse has had no preparation with lateral flexion training and continual practice of using this method to disengage the hindquarters of the

animal to stop. This horse has a lot of energy like the left brain extrovert and can for extended periods of time. This unconfident horse naturally seeks a leader, and more readily accepts the dominance of the human than the left brain equines because they want to be their own bosses. When in a running panic, the horseman should use reverse psychology and not try to stop the horse, but encourage the equine to keep running and direct the animal away from going in a straight line. Running in a straight line is the flight instinct that requires no thinking for horses. They run blindly. Making them perform half circles will require them to think by using the left sides of their brains and calmness will return.

The right brain introvert is the most misleading and difficult to read of all the horsenalities if the horseman does not know what signs to observe. Traditional horseman get into highly dangerous situations with this horse because they misinterpret the animal's behaviors. The traditional horseman can be riding along a trail and the horse seems to be very calm and quiet, and then suddenly erupts into a series of bucking, rearing, and/or running. Traditional horsemen who own this type of horse can often be heard saying that they saw nothing to make the horse panic and did not expect the panicked behavior because the horse had seemed so calm. The reality is that the right brain introvert, like the right brain extrovert, becomes easily afraid. Like the left brain introvert, this horse does not have a lot of physical energy. When this horse becomes afraid, it goes inside of itself to find a place that feels safe. After the fear mounts to a high enough level, the horse will snap out of its introversion and physically react. The horseman needs to maintain a safe distance from the right brain introvert when it goes into that mental state and use reverse psychology. Instead of trying to move the horse or get the animal to do something different, the horseman should just stand by and wait with patience. Once the

horseman becomes skilled at recognizing the behavior that horse displays before going internal, he can direct the horse to something else so the animal does not do this.

The Scandinavians knew how to read body language and distinguish between the horsenalities. They did not want horses with right brain tendencies as their frequent, fearful reactions were dangerous. Once a horseman knows how to recognize the horsenalities, he must address and act upon his horse's body language appropriately to earn the animal's trust and willingness to become his partner in every moment the pair spends together. Every moment means that even if the horse is 50 feet away in a pasture, without a lead rope, the horseman should read the equine's body language and know how to entice the horse to come to him. Groundwork is the most essential part of all horses' training and should begin at the moments of their births with imprinting. Dr. Robert Miller, famous for making imprint training popular in the twentieth century, writes "Scientific studies have shown that the imprinting and bonding period occurs right after birth and lasts only for an hour or two. After that, the presence of strangers elicits a fear reaction in the foal".[13] Horsemen need to take full advantage of these hours, as they set the horse up for the rest of its life. Imprint training cannot go wrong as long as people do not let the foal escape, go through the repetitions enough times, and give the baby practice with the repetitions in the first week of life and periodically while the animal remains a suckling. Traditional horsemen who oppose imprinting have not experienced an imprinted horse that received the proper treatment. Bad training makes the animals into greater escapists and they fight against pressure. Horses that have gone through the process correctly are confident, calm, well-mannered, and easily allow people to touch them on any part of their bodies. This is

[13] Robert Miller, *Imprint Training of the Newborn Foal: A Swift, Effective Method for Permanently Shaping a Horse's Lifetime Behavior (*Colorado Springs: Western Horseman, 1991), 12.

an important feature when the veterinarian, dentist, and farrier must work on the horse. Groundwork should continue throughout the horse's life, but is most important in the first three or four years of the horse's life, when the animal should learn to be sensitive to pressure and become desensitized to potentially frightening situations and things (motorcycles, snapping towels, lawnmowers, power tools, tight spaces, etc.). Sensitization to pressure in all of the zones will make the horse ready for rein, leg, and stick yields when he is a three or four year old and his back and joints are mature enough for him to be ridden. Desensitization creates a less spooky horse. Sensitization and desensitization create a much safer horse for the handler and/or rider, and horse in the human (predator) environment. The approach a retreat method should be used to gain the horse's confidence in the human and with whatever causes the animal to feel afraid, whether this is a human, object, or environment. For the approach, pressure should be applied until the horse shows the absolute slightest change towards being calm and then immediately be released from that pressure for the retreat.

Natural horsemanship respects the horse by putting the animal's needs above human interests of time and competition. The horse is not treated like a machine to tolerate humans' rude handling. The Scandinavians' effective use of phases is the strongest indicator of the respect that they had for their horses. When the horse has its needs met and feels understood, the animal becomes a willing partner and begins to offer the horseman more movements. To meet the horse's needs, a horseman must treat the horse as other horses would treat the animal. Horses ask their herd mates if they may visit with or touch them, while traditional horsemen barge right into the horse's stall without any greeting to gain permission and immediately halter the animal without inviting the horse to be haltered. If people treated people the same way that they treat horses, they would find themselves friendless. Horses that are handled naturally gladly

greet their horsemen at the pasture gate (often galloping to meet their favorite human that understands them like horses do), instead of having to be *caught*, as traditional horsemen refer to getting their horses from the fields. Natural horsemanship facilitates a strong bond between the two species and the horse enjoys human company. Should not all horsemen want their horses to enjoy the time they spend with them?

Chapter 3: The Viking Age Scandinavians' Horsemanship

As horses made up an important part of their lives, the Scandinavians practiced to become the best horsemen that they could be. Skill with horses, as well as in the art of riding, allowed them to care for their prized mounts. Natural horsemanship skills also allowed the Scandinavians to be safer and more effective in driving, riding, hunting, plowing, and even fighting in mounted warfare. Their style of horsemanship has many similar attributes to natural horsemanship today.

Evidence that strongly suggests those who were poorly skilled horsemen and riders in Viking Age society were not socially accepted. These men often met with derision from their peers. In the romance/legendary Icelandic *Njal's Saga*, a character named Otkel is an unsafe horsemanwho has two horses that he keeps with him. The horses are described as, "…[T]wo dun-coloured horses with a black stripe down the back. They were the best riding-horses in the district and so fond of each other that they always ran together".[14] At this part in the saga, the reader has his attention drawn to two factors that will set up a joke about Otkel in the next chapter. Otkel's horses are supposedly the best, but they are duns, an extremely common color (especially for this time period as most ancient horses were duns because this color, with its characteristic, barred striping [nearly similar to that in zebras, but much more minimal, of course] provided wild horses with the greatest camouflage). The horses also refuse to be separated from each other, which shows that they are not the brave and confident horses, which Scandinavians coveted. Otkel does not have the capability to be a sufficient leader for either horse, so he must ride one of them and allow the other to always follow him.

[14] Robert Cook trans., *Njal's Saga (Penguin Classics)* (London: Penguin Classics, 2002), 90.

Shortly after the description of Otkel's inadequate horses, Otkel rides with his brothers near Gunnar's home. He loses control of his horses because they take fright at something on the road. Otkel can neither stop his horse by using lateral flexion nor perform a dismount to avoid his danger. His poor horsemanship skills lead to him having to fight in a blood feud with Gunnar. "Then the two horses got excited and ran away from the road, up towards Fljotshlid. Otkel was going faster than he wanted to." Otkel, wearing spurs, does not know how to properly use them. Spurs should be used for refinement purposes only and applied to the horse's sides with extremely light pressure. Only horsemen who possess the best riding skills should wear them or the horse will receive unnecessary damage through misuse. When he rides, or rather gets run away with because at this point he has no control over his horse, he does not keep his legs in proper form. He rides by Gunnar and cuts the man's ear with his spur. Gunnar announces his intention of seeking vengeance with his halberd and the lengthy blood feud ensues with Otkel's death.

The contemporary *Kormak's Saga* also addresses poor quality horsemen. Kormak easily knocks the incompetent horseman, Narfi, from his mount and derides him.

> "Try this for a change: holding tight
> To your horse as well as your shield
> You will soon feel the touch
> Of my club upon your ear."[15]

Narfi's inability to remain seated shows that he would not be an effective mounted warrior and would die quickly in battle. Both of the unskilled horsemen, Otkel and Narfi, are the archenemies of the heroes of the sagas, Gunnar and Kormak. Gunnar and Kormak possess the

[15] Diana Whaley, "Kormak's Saga." In *Sagas of Warrior-Poets* (London: Penguin Classics, 2002), 20.

qualities of great horsemen, which further highlight their status as excellent men and warriors in their society. The poor horsemen's mistakes provide the comedy in the sagas.

The Scandinavians had great admiration for skilled horsemen, even of their enemies. At the Battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066, King Harold Hardrada of Norway spoke of his enemy, the English King Harold, and his horsemanship. The Norwegian king said, "That was a little man, but he sat firmly in his stirrups".[16] Harold Hardrada's statement proves that the Scandinavians held great riders and horsemen in the highest esteem because the English king was riding with contact and his Scandinavian counterpart noticed. When the feudal system began, men still judged others by their status obtained by owning and handling equines. Lynn White writes, "Those economically unable to fight on horseback suffered from a social infirmity which shortly became a legal inferiority".[17]

After establishing a close bond with their horses through countless hours of training, Scandinavian horsemen would naturally have wanted to take great care of their personal mounts. Owning horses was also a sign of one's social status, as the animals were very costly. In *Medieval Technology and Social Change*, Lynn White writes about the expense of a good horse. In 761 a man named Isanhard sold his lands and a slave to purchase a horse and sword.[18] Scandinavian laws against horse theft and injury under the Wergeld System were strict and testify to the animals' high monetary value. Under the Norwegians' Gulathing Law and Frostathing Law, the penalty for maiming another man's horse is severe.

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[16] Lynn White, *Medieval Technology and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 36

[17] Lynn White, *Medieval Technology and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 30.

[18] Lynn White, *Medieval Technology and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 29.

"If a man damages another man's horse, one that is rated at a mark or more in current coin [and he does it] with malice and hostile intent, and the guilt is proved against him, he shall be outlawed and all that he owns except his land, unless he acknowledges the deed and offers to pay the value [of the horse]. But if he denies the charge, a six fold oath [is required], and if the oath fails he is outlawed. And [the value of] the horse shall be paid, even if [the damage is due to] chance or carelessness."[19]

The Scandinavians kept their horses, aside from those that were needed daily for work or riding, loose all year round. This practice made rugged horses that could be dependable mounts because of their learned surefootedness over rough terrain. They would also experience naturally occurring things in the environment, such as creeks, and become desensitized to them. Keeping horses in constant pasture also allows them to have unlimited access to grazing multiple kinds of forage (variety enables horses to meet the amount of vitamins and minerals that their dietary needs require) and ensures that they will not colic from the wrong food proportions given by humans. "Icelandic-born Icelandic horses still have the mark of their breeder cut into one ear, and free-roaming horses, cattle and sheep on Gotland were identified in the same way before the introduction of fences."[20]

The Scandinavians addressed the problems that their native horses had with their hooves in the cool and damp climate of the area. Cold and warm-blooded horses have softer and wider hooves than their hot-blooded desert relatives, such as Arabians and Akhal-Tekes. Cold and warm-blooded horses' hooves develop splits, and their frogs can become sore, much easier than those belonging to hot-blooded equines. Horses that worked hard, either by plowing fields or carrying people and/or packs, were most likely in greatest need of shoes. This is largely because personal horses were kept stabled and ready for their owners' daily uses. Horses without training

[19] Laurence Larson, The Earliest Norwegian Laws; Being the Gulathing Law and the Frostathing Law (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1935), 289.
[20] Anneli Sundkvist, "Herding Horses: A Model of Prehistoric Horsemanship in Scandinavia – and Elsewhere?," http://www.isvroma.it/public/pecus/sundkvist.pdf, 244.

roamed free and had no need to be shod, as they did not stand in their urine and feces for many hours each day. Free horses developed harder and longer hooves with toughened frogs (the heart-shaped part of the hoof's underside) that would not bruise easily. Stabled horses stood for lengthy periods of time in wet litter, making their hooves vulnerable to bacteria that cause thrush (*pododermatitis*, also more commonly known as hoof rot, which is identifiable by its characteristically strong odor). Being kept in those conditions, along with working hard over harsh terrain, would easily degrade the personal horses' hoof quality. Shoes are used for protecting the hooves when horses are constantly being worked over harsh terrain, which causes substantial wear to the horn (the substance that makes up hooves) and the animals cannot grow them fast enough to compensate for the wear. If hooves are allowed to keep wearing away, horses will go lame from walking on their frogs, which are located in the center of the underside of hooves, and in horses that are stabled, become soft, spongy, and vulnerable to bruising. Riding and plow horses alike benefit from the extra traction that shoes provide. The *Sigurd Saga*, carved on a rock in Sweden, shows farrier tools.[21]

Most of the early bits that have been discovered from this period of time are snaffle bits. These are the gentlest bits, and they are still considered to be in their use today. The use of these gentle bits proves that the Scandinavians were excellent horsemen, with knowledge of how to get the desired performance from their horses without using harsh bits, which cause a lot of pain in the animals' mouths, to control their horses. Horsemen who are unskilled require the most controlling devices, while experts know how to work with their horses and achieve the same effects with the lightest possible touch. Traditional riders use harsh implements to achieve desired movement from their horses. Natural horsemen know how to properly motivate their

[21] Ann Hyland, *Horse in the Middle Ages* (New York: Sutton Pub Ltd, 1999), 52.

equine partners so the animals offer extended floating trots and gaits like the *tölt* and pace, complete with arching of the neck and a rounded top-line, instead of a hollow back. The Viking Age Scandinavians only had very simple pieces of tack, like the snaffle, but their outstanding horsemanship skills allowed them to extract high performance from their horses without causing the animals pain. Picture stones and the Bayeux Tapestry prove that they were gentle horsemen and used loose reins, but effective because of their ability to get their horses to produce various gaited movements while mounted. The bodies of the horsemen are in the correct position on the horses' backs. The men's backs are not rigidly straight, unlike many traditional horsemen's today.

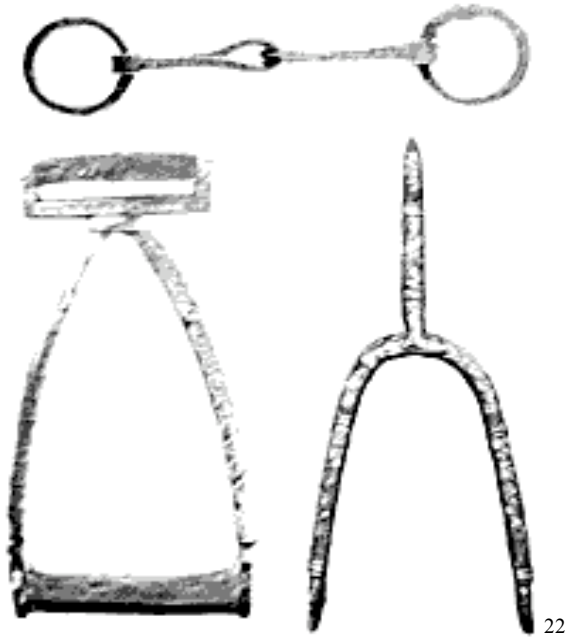 [22]

Fig. 3. This Viking Age snaffle bit is closely related to the modern day snaffle bit in Fig. 4.

Note the close similarity between the Viking Age snaffle bit in the top picture and the modern snaffle bit. The ancient bit has a harsher joint, but the horsemen rode with loose reins to avoid causing excessive pinching of the tongue when unnecessary.

[22] *Horse Stuff 1* http://www.hurstwic.org/history/articles/manufacturing/text/land_travel.htm.

[23]

Fig. 4. A modern, single-jointed snaffle bit.

The Scandinavians knew how to use light pressure effectively and lead their horses with plenty of rope in between them, as observed in the Bayeux Tapestry. They rode with loose reins and contact, achieving collection from their horses when the animals arched their necks and rounded their top-lines. The horses offered these things to their horsemen because felt understood and became willing to please their riders by working with them. The horses that possessed gaited abilities also offered their range of movements to the people on loose reins. Today, especially on the Icelandic horses, many traditional riders incorrectly use double reins with harsh bits that pull back so tightly to overdraw the lips and hyper-extend the horses' necks back to force the horse into performing its gaits. Horsemen who know how to read horses can observe these animals while they are being ridden and see the pain that they display on their faces. The types of saddles that are used on Icelandic horses by these gait-forcing riders also pinch the horses' backs.

[23] *Myler Loose Ring Snaffle Bit.* http://www.doversaddlery.com/product.asp?pn=X1-01712&ids=562540609.

[24]

Fig. 5. The riders have attained collection and their horses are performing gaited movement on loose reins.

The northern people also knew how to handle donkeys. Donkeys and mules are far more intelligent than horses and while inadequate horsemen may achieve mediocre success with handling horses clumsily and rudely, they will not succeed with these animals. As a general rule, donkeys and mules are left brained. They take their time to think their ways through problems and act calmly. Some traditional horsemen want nothing to do with them because they believe these animals are stubborn, lazy, and boring, but nothing could be further from the truth if they receive proper handling and motivation. Donkeys and mules are disregarded in the context of history and receive little of the recognition that horses are given. The Bayeux Tapestry, however, depicts a donkey in a farming scene. The donkey works hard, with obvious strain, to pull a two-wheeled type of plow. His handler and driver holds only a stick, having no reins present, to direct the donkey. The man pays no attention to the animal and instead looks back over his shoulder to converse with someone. The horseman has given his instruction to the donkey as a leader and trusts the animal to follow through with the work as a perfect partner,

[24] *The Prisoner*. http://www.bayeuxtapestry.org.uk/Bayeux4.htm.

until otherwise told to change gait or direction. The donkey knows his responsibility and the handler does not micro-manage nor constantly direct the donkey in the task.

[25]

Fig. 6. This man and donkey have a trusting relationship.

In the late medieval fictional *Grettir's Saga*, Grettir shows his understanding and mastery of applying direct, steady pressure to Zone five with Game 2 by pulling on his horse's tail to back up the animal during a horse fight. Grettir also uses his staff to drive his opponent's horse away from his equine. "Odd drove on his horse with all his might, but Grettir held back, and seized the tail with one hand, and the staff wherewith he goaded the horse he held in the other."[26]

[25] *Tappisserie Agriculture,* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Tapisserie_agriculture.JPG.

[26] Eiríkr Magnússon. Grettis Saga: The Story of Grettir the Strong (First Edition) (Boston: F. S. Ellis, 1869), 88.

Some historians believe that Odin's eight-legged horse, Sleipnir, may be depicted with double the amount of limbs because another horse stands beside him. This is undoubtedly false. The Scandinavians prized horses for their athletic abilities, especially those animals that were gaited. To the northern people, Sleipnir was the best horse ever created. Many stone carvings show other horses performing gaits and Sleipnir, being the greatest horse, would naturally possess all possible gaits. The legendary horse's eight legs most likely demonstrate his perambulating abilities. This stone carving originates from Gotland, Sweden, in the eighth century.

 [27]

Fig. 7. Sleipnir shows gaited movement.

The Scandinavians developed confident, intelligent, and athletic breeds of horses. Natural horsemen choose horses with these qualities for breeding purposes as well. The breeds that the Scandinavians in the Viking Age created still exist today and testify to the ancient people's knowledge of how to select the best horses by assessing the animals' horsenalities. Taking horses on voyages while they are boarded in confined areas takes a lot of preparation and

[27] *Ardre Odin Sleipnir,* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ardre_Odin_Sleipnir.jpg

knowledge on the parts of humans. Being prey animals, horses are terrified of enclosed spaces that offer no exit for a quick escape from predators. The Scandinavians took their horses with them across the seas on their long ships, as the presence of Icelandic horses in Iceland today confirms and the Bayeux Tapestry illustrates. Being confined and rocking on churning seas was not for unconfident, right brain horses and the Scandinavians picked calm, left brain horses as their travel companions.

The two sagas that concern the horses Freyfaxi and Grani prove that the Scandinavians' relationships with their horses were close. The people understood and paid attention to their equines' body language just as natural horsemen do today. In the fictional Icelandic *Hrafnkel's Saga* the main character Hrafnkel, Freyfaxi's owner, possesses a close partnership with his horse and has the ability to recognize his stallion's neigh from all of his other horses. A man in Hrafnkel's service rides the horse, despite Hrafnkel's warning that he would bring death to anyone who would ride his stallion, and over exerts the animal. Hrafnkel notices the distressed neigh and sees the poor state of his quality horse and becomes enraged. He tells his horse, "It grieves me to see how you have been treated, my fosterling".[28]

In the *Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún,* Sigurd chooses Grani as his horse because Grani chooses him. Unlike the rest of the herd of horses, Grani crosses the water and comes to Sigurd. Grani displays confidence, bravery, and friendliness towards people. Horses chosen for breeding were selected for their bravery and confidence as well. There is a strong misconception that exists today among traditional horsemen, which leads to ill-matched pairs of stallions and mares being mated. Many breeders, and mare owners who want their horse to foal, make the mistake of finding a great stallion but neglect to choose the correct mare that possesses the suitable

[28] Hermann Palsson, trans., *Hrafnkel's Saga and Other Icelandic Stories (Penguin Classics)* (London: Penguin Classics, 1971), 42.

requirements of a broodmare. In *Kormak's Saga*, Kormak's enemies develop a slanderous piece of poetry to tell Steingerd, his intended fiancée. They tell her that he wrote the poem for her so she will get mad and no longer want to marry Kormak. The poem, although bawdy, emphasizes the importance of broodmares.

> I would have wished Steingerd,
> that mighty goddess, as an old
> and proud mare for mating
> - and myself a stud-stallion.[29]

The poem's mare is described as old and proud, which means quality broodmares with good natures were most likely valued by Scandinavian horsemen and kept in foal each year until the horses could no longer conceive. The northern breeds of horses are capable of foaling nearly their entire lives, a period of around thirty years. Foals learn and develop their traits and personalities from their dams, or mothers. Calm, brave broodmares with athleticism and a fondness for people will have foals that exhibit the same characteristics. On the other hand, broodmares that are spooky, flighty, and intolerant of humans will raise poor foals. These mares should not be used for breeding. Colts of poor natures, and/or conformation, should be gelded before they become sexually mature.

The Scandinavians are responsible for producing two of the most wonderfully confident, athletic, and intelligent breeds of horses in the world. The Icelandic and Norwegian Fjord horses grow to an average size of 12 to 14 hands high. The Fjord horse has thicker bones and a stockier build than the Icelandic. Both breeds have an old look, much like the Przewalski horse, and are well-muscled, small, and short-backed, with larger heads. These breeds are probably two of the most ancient and pure types of horses in the world. The Icelandics and the Fjords have been

[29] Diana Whaley, "Kormak's Saga." In *Sagas of Warrior-Poets* (London: Penguin Classics, 2002), 52.

selectively bred for thousands of years to possess high confidence, little fear, strength, and athletic ability, exhibiting left brain characteristics. Some Scandinavian people ride their horses on ice today, which is dangerous for the horses. Horses have often fallen through the ice and into the cold water without showing any signs of fear. The Fjords and the Icelandics have great athletic ability and spirit. The Icelandics are a gaited breed and apart from the regular walk, trot, canter, and gallop, many (but not all) also display the *tölt* and pace. When the horses perform the *tölt,* while they are alone in their pastures, they carry their heads higher than at the normal walk but keep their top-lines rounded. To achieve this gait, many traditional horsemen pull their horses' necks into this position by using short reins to force the animals to perform this movement. Unfortunately, this practice makes the horses hollow their backs (instead of assuming a rounded top-line), which causes muscle atrophy in their backs and the top of their necks, while their front neck muscles over develop into what are referred to as bull necks in today's horse world. The Scandinavians of the Viking Age used loose reins at the *tölt* and their horses performed with rounded top-lines because they were not forced into the movement, but offered it willingly when asked politely.

While the Scandinavians of the Viking Age understood that only horses with left brain characteristics should be bred and chosen as partners, they were fully aware that humans needed to be skilled horsemen for their horses. In *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*, Gunnar is a poor horseman and he is contrasted with Sigurd, who has great horsemanship skills. Gunnar's horse will not listen to him and he borrows Sigurd's brave Grani. Neither Goti nor Grani respond to Gunnar's commands to jump the fire to reach Brunnhild as she sleeps. Gunnar is a weak character in the story and the horses can sense his fear. They do not respect his leadership because he is afraid, and abusive, and not exhibiting the fearless and confident behaviors that

leaders have. Sigurd agrees to change his appearance to look like Gunnar in order to reach Brunnhild, so she would think that Gunnar was her rescuer.

> In Gunnar's likeness
> on Grani jumped he;
> gold spurs glinted
> With sword smitten
> snorting leapt he,
> Grani Greyfell;
> the ground trembled[30]

Grani jumps for Sigurd, even though he looks like Gunnar at this point in the story, because the horse senses his confidence and accepts his leadership. Neither of the horses would move a single step for Gunnar.

Today, all horsemen take pride in owning talented and beautiful equines. No matter the style of riding, whether English or Western, people like to buy pretty pieces of tack and ride nicely groomed horses. If the horse is beautiful, the tack should be too. The Scandinavians believed wholeheartedly in this. They were a people who loved to own many riches and elaborately ornate items. The sagas describe various beautiful colors of horses, including different varieties of duns, blue roans, blacks, etc. Like today, showing off a horse with brains and beauty, fitted with fancy tack, demonstrated a horseman's wealth and status in society. Ship burials such as Sweden's Oseberg and Gokstad, and Denmark's site at Ladby contained luxurious pieces of tack. Anneli Sundkvist writes about tack finds from these ship burials. "The bridles from the boat graves are often of exquisite manufacture as well as material. The leather straps are long gone, but the ornamented gilded strap-mounts of bronze till exist. Garnets are

[30] J.R.R. Tolkien, *Legend of Sigurd and Gudún* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009), 148.

often placed on the mounts in cloissoné-technique, which further stresses the exquisite handicraft of the bridles."[31]

In addition to being recognized for their skilled in fighting, the Viking Age Scandinavians should be appreciated for their excellent horsemanship and taking care of their animals. These people judged others' characters on their horsemanship skills. They understood horses and took pride in their animals' abilities, natures, and appearances, breeding only the best stallions to the greatest broodmares. These are the same qualities that natural horsemen possess and strive for in their horses today.

[31] Anneli Sundkvist, "Herding Horses: A Model of Prehistoric Horsemanship in Scandinavia – and Elsewhere?," http://www.isvroma.it/public/pecus/sundkvist.pdf, 242.

Chapter 4: Horses in Scandinavian Religion

Horses played such an important rule in the Scandinavians' culture that the animals made their ways into the people's religious beliefs and practices. The information known about ancient Scandinavian religion mostly comes from archaeological evidence and literature, but there are many aspects of Scandinavian religion and practices that remain unknown. The conversion to Christianity in Scandinavia, which occurred during the eighth through twelfth centuries, was a slow process among the large majority of the people, who continued to practice sacrificial rites for many years after the new religion's advent.

Equine sacrifices were performed by horse cults for the gods. Like other ancient cultures, the Scandinavians believed that it was necessary to give sacrificial offerings to the gods to ensure that the deities would favor them with bountiful crop harvests and high rates of animal reproduction. Horses were buried alongside of both dead men and women, showing the great need for the animals to travel with their owners into the next world. Horse burials were performed in various ways. In many archaeological sites, complete horse skeletons have been unearthed while other discoveries revealed the remains of equines that had had their heads severed for burial. William Short writes that, "Of the 157 pagan graves studied in Iceland, 84 contained horses, and many contained more than one".[32] Some burials took place in the ground while others were performed in ships.

Horses killed for burial ceremonies most likely had a largely different significance to the Scandinavians than those animals that were sacrificed in cult rituals. A warrior would want his best horse, the one that he formed a very close relationship with over many years, to carry him to Valhalla. The sacrificial horses would be of lesser quality in breeding and strength. They would

[32] William Short, *Icelanders in the Viking Age: The People of the Sagas* (Jefferson, NC, 2010), 153.

also be eaten at the feasts. If horse fights had occurred before the sacrifice, the losing stallions were probably the horses that got sacrificed, while the victorious males would be regarded as prized specimens for breeding stock. An equine that someone had invested countless hours of valuable training time in would not be selected for slaughter. Archaeological evidence from the third to fourth century horse cult site at Skedemosse, located on the Swedish island of Öland, provides the bones of hundreds of animals, mostly belonging to horses. "The name Skedemosse is thought to be formed from *skeid*, which could be used either for a fight between stallions or a horse-race, and it has been suggested that races took place on the long ridge near the lake, or that horse-fights were held there, to decide which animals should be killed and which kept for breeding."[33]

The meat and blood of the horse were important in cultic, sacrificial feasts. In *The Saga of Hákon the Good,* from the book *Heimskringla* (meaning "World Encircler"), the men involved in the cult-feast partake both of the horse's flesh and blood. The blood may have been of greater importance than the meat, as it receives more attention than the meat. The men in *Sturluson's Saga* spray the blood around the room and over themselves like paint.

> "Earl Sigurd upheld all feasts of blood-offering there in Thrandheim on the king's behoof. It was the olden custom that when a blood-offering should be, all the bonders should come to the place where was the Temple, bringing with them all the victuals they had need of while the feast should last; and at that feast should all men have ale with them. There also were slain cattle of every kind, and horses withal; and all the blood that came from them was called *hlaut*, but *hlaut*-bowls were they called wherein the blood stood, and the *hlaut-tein* a rod made in the fashion of a sprinkler. With all the hlaut should the stalls of the gods be reddened, and the walls of the temple within and without, and the men-folk also besprinkled; but the flesh was to be sodden for the feasting of men. Fires were to be made in the midst of the floor of the temple, with caldrons thereover, and the health-cups should be borne over the fire."[34]

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[33] Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Myth and Symbols in Pagan Europe: Early Scandinavian and Celtic Religions* (Manchester: University Press, Manchester 1988), 55.
[34] Snorri Sturluson, *The Stories of the Kings of Norway Called the Round World, Volume 1 (Heimskringla)* (London: Chiswick Press, 1893), 165.

By eating the flesh of horses and drinking their blood, the Scandinavians believed that they would attain the valued characteristics of horses, such as strength.

Horse remains are very prominent in the findings of ship burials. Perhaps this is why many of the kennings (two words, sometimes joined by a hyphen, that are used in place of a single, common noun) present in Scandinavian literature link horses to ships or the sea. Kennings for ships often appear as sea-steed or wave-steed, but there is no interchangeability with the vessels and animals, as horses are not bestowed with ship kennings in the literature. This may indicate that northern people favored their horses over their ships.

Despite the importance that ships played in the Scandinavians' lives and funerary practices, the ship burial sites always contain horses to serve the deceased as the transportation to Valhalla. The Scandinavians do not sail there. This may be linked to the horses of the gods being able to travel back and forth from the spiritual to the earthly realms. Odin's horse, Sleipnir, and those belonging to the Valkyries rode in the skies. The people must have believed that once their equine companions were dead, the animals also possessed the same ability as the horses of the deities. Some type of passageway from the mortal world into Valhalla was believed to exist in the sky. In *A Second Poem of Helgi Hundingsbani*, Helgi dies and goes to Valhalla, but he returns on his horse to visit with his bride. When he has to leave her he speaks about a passageway.

> 'It is time for me to ride along the blood-red roads,
> to set the pale horse to tread the path in the sky;
> I must cross the bridge in the sky-vault,
> before Salgofnir awakes the victorious people.'[35]

[35] Carolyne Larrington, *The Poetic Edda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 140.

The ship found at the Gokstad burial site, from the early tenth century, is a *karve*. These ships were used by chieftains as private vessels and the one at Gokstad held the remains of 12 horses and was built with excellent materials and craftsmanship.[36] The man that died had to have been very wealthy for so many expensive horses to be sacrificed at his funeral. In the *Prose Edda*, written down by Sturlusson in the thirteenth century, horses are not mentioned in the daily fighting that the spirit men in Valhalla engage in as preparation for Ragnarök, the battle at the end of the world, in which Loki (the trickster god) and his dreaded wolf son, Fenrir, will enter combat with Odin and the other gods in the Scandinavian pantheon. Horses only take the men back to Valhalla in the edda. Not only does this reflect that mounted combat was not popular when the tales in this work originally developed, long before Sturlusson recorded them, but it suggests that horses served as the necessary sources of transportation for warriors' spirits to travel to Valhalla upon their deaths.

Adam of Bremen, a German chronicler, lived in the eleventh century and wrote about the customs of the Scandinavian people. He wrote about a sacrifice that was performed for Odin, which involved the ritual killings of various animals and humans as well. Hilda Ellis Davidson uses a passage from her history.

> "It is the custom moreover every nine years for a common festival of all the provinces of Sweden to be held at Uppsala. Kings and commoners one and all send their gifts to Uppsala, and what is crueler than any punishment, even those who have accepted Christianity have to buy immunity from these ceremonies. The sacrifice is as follows: of every living creature they offer nine head, and with the blood of those it is the custom to placate the gods, but the bodies are hanged in a grove which is near the temple: so holy is that grove to the heathens that each tree in it is presumed to be divine by reason of the victim's death and putrefaction. There are also dogs and horses hang along with men. One of the Christians told me that he had seen seventy-two bodies of various kinds

[36] Phillip Pulsiano and Kirsten Wolf, (*Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia (Encyclopedias of the Middle Ages)*. 1 ed. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 232.

> hanging there, but the incantations which are usually sung at this kind of sacrifice are various and disgraceful, and so we had better say nothing about them."[37]

The number nine recurs many times throughout Scandinavian literature. The sacrificial rites that Adam of Bremen describes were most likely associated with the cult of Odin, as he sacrificed himself on a tree, and these dogs, horses, and men had been hanged in the grove.

Frey was also a popular god to whom people sacrificed their horses. He was a fertility god and people are believed to have sacrificed to him to ensure a good harvest. In *Hrafnkel's Saga*, Hrafnkel worships the god Frey and favors this deity over all of the others in the pantheon. Hrafnkel, however, does not sacrifice his horse to Frey, but instead pledges that half of his horse, Freyfaxi, belongs to the god. Hrafnkel swears to Frey that he will kill any man whoever rides Freyfaxi other than himself. "He called the horse Freyfaxi and gave his patron Frey a half-share in it. Hrafnkel loved this horse so passionately that he swore a solemn oath to kill anyone who rode the stallion without his permission."[38]

Aside from sacrifice, horses were used in company with curses for protection. A *Nithing* pole consisted of a wooden pike with a horse head placed on the top of it and the skin of the animal could also be draped over the wood. In *Egil's Saga*, after Egil and his men raid a home, he constructs a *Nithing* pole to ward off his enemies through the use of evil spirits (this is similar to the purpose that beast heads served on the prows of Viking war ships).

> "They prepared to sail, but when they were ready to set out Egil went ashore onto the island, picked up a branch of hazel and went to a certain cliff that faced the mainland. Then he took a horse head, set it upon the pole and spoke these formal words: 'Here I set up a pole of insult against King Eirik and Queen Gunnhild' then, turning the horse head towards the mainland'and I direct this insult against the guardian spirits of this land, so that every one of them shall go astray, neither to figure nor find their

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[37] Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Myth and Symbols in Pagan Europe: Early Scandinavian and Celtic Religions* (Manchester: University Press, Manchester 1988), 59.
[38] Hermann Palsson, trans., *Hrafnkel's Saga and Other Icelandic Stories (Penguin Classics)* (London: Penguin Classics, 1971), 38.

> dwelling places until they have driven King Eirik and Queen Gunhild from this country'. Next he jammed the pole into a cleft in the rock and standing there with the horse head facing towards the mainland, and cut runes on the pole declaiming the words of his formal speech. After that he went aboard".[39]

Horses' spirits may have been thought to be great protectors, as the animals traveled into the next world with their humans. Another possibility could be that the Scandinavians combined the curse on the nithing pole with horses because they believed that certain horses were bad omens. The *Second Lay of Gudrún* is one of many poems in *The Poetic Edda*. This poem is a narrative of the suffering that she endures. At the end, when she learns that her sons will meet with ill fates, she mentions the sacrifice of white animals.

> '"That means men will discuss sacrifice
> and cut the heads off white sacrificial beasts;
> doomed, they will, in a few days,
> be consumed by the retinue."[40]

White horses were associated with death. Riders on white horses frequently appear as harbingers of death throughout many stories in Scandinavian literature. Perhaps sacrificing white horses, the symbols of death, to the gods was a way of asking the deities to keep the people and their families safe.

In Scandinavia, the conversion process from the pagan religion to Christianity happened slowly and Northern Europe was the last area to experience the advent of the new religion. Even after Iceland, the last of the Scandinavian countries to be converted in 1000 A.D., adopted Christianity, many of the new converters were slow to adapt to the Christian way of thinking, which was so different from the beliefs that their culture had instilled upon them. Christianity

[39] Snorri Sturluon and Hermann Pálsson, trans., *Egil's Saga* (London: Penguin Books, 1976), 148.

[40] Carolyne Larrington, *The Poetic Edda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 202.

took a few hundred years to change the Scandinavians' beliefs. They had clung to their pagan ways and continued to practice horse sacrifice in cult worship.

"The Christian regional laws of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries still included an explicit prohibition of the practice of *blót* or sacrificial feasting."[41] The presence of these laws indicates that although Christianity was in widespread practice during these centuries, cult practices were still being performed as the importance of the horse remained high in Scandinavian society. Those who still clung to these practices were not of the presumable?, uneducated, lower classes, but held elevated positions in society, as they were the only people who could afford to sacrifice these expensive animals. According to Sawyer, overlordships did not need religious uniformity, although a kingdom's unity depended on the acceptance of the same religion by its king and jarls.[42] Kings converted to Christianity long before their people did. Until Christianity took on a firmer hold over the majority of Scandinavians, the rulers did not have strong control because jarls, influential men in society, were often involved in sacrificial practices as pagan cult members. These people, not the king, held the loyalties of many.

> "It was not until the pagan cult of Uppsala was finally suppressed toward the end of the eleventh century that Christian kings could begin to claim direct authority in the whole of Svealand [Sweden], but in the early twelfth century, as in the eleventh, kings in Sweden had direct control over only part of the country; elsewhere they were little more than overlords, largely dependent on local rulers called jarls or, in Latin, duces."[43]

Sweden had been converted to Christianity around a hundred years before the cult's collapse. This indicates how much power the cult had. Christian converters denounced the pagans for

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[41] David M. Wilson and Ole Klindt-Jensen, *Viking Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), 32.
[42] Birgit and Peter Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia: from conversion to Reformation, circa 800-1500* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota,1993), 58.
[43] Birgit and Peter Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia: from Conversion to Reformation, Circa 800-1500* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota,1993), 58.

consuming the blood and flesh of horses and in essence, worshipping the animals. The people probably felt conflicted by Christianity, as this new religion required them to ignore the importance of horses in their culture, and they either refused to convert to the new religion or adopted the Christian god as another deity in their pantheon and continued to make their sacrifices.

The Scandinavian culture's close relationship with horses manifested itself in their religious beliefs and practices. These people relied on their horses to take them into the next world after they died, so horsemen had good reason to treat their personal mounts as well as they did. Horses' attributes were admired and cult practices intended to capture these characteristics for the human participants through consumption of the animals' flesh and blood. Christianity met with aversion in Scandinavia partly because the religion condemned the manner in which the people had interacted with their horses.

Equines played a huge role in the lives of the Scandinavian. Horses were great assets to all of the early cultures that owned them, but the Viking Age Scandinavians especially realized the salience of the horse in their culture. These people possessed every capability of surviving and prospering without their horses, but if they had not been blessed with these animals, the imprint they made on history would be considerably smaller. The world would also be without some of the best breeds of horse.

The horsemanship that the Scandinavians demonstrated was exemplary and many traditional, present-day horsemen would do well to follow their ways. From the suggestion of evidence in art and literature, Scandinavian horsemanship in the Viking Age was like natural horsemanship. The people valued their horses, treated them with love and respect, rode gently, used horse-friendly tack, and chose and bred only the most confident horses.

One would not expect to discover that a culture remembered all over the world for raiding, pillaging, and raping medieval Europe would be so in tune with their horses needs. Archaeological, art, and literary evidence aside, the Scandinavian horse breeds that originated from this period in time testify to the skill level that the horsemen had. Like current natural horsemen, the Scandinavians had a deep understanding of their horses' body language and how to use that knowledge in their favor. They knew about the zones on their horses' bodies and how to extend their reach by using sticks to solve the problem of the animals having long bodies while humans have tall forms. Achieving gaited movements, without the aid of harsh devices, from horses should not be taken lightly. People must learn to become great riders and also develop strong bonds with their equine partners for the animals to be willing to perform.

The aspects that exist in a particular culture's religion are the things of the utmost importance to people. Horses' presences in religious practices like sacrificial rites and funerary

customs prove that the Viking Age Scandinavians held their horses in high regard. This has not changed much for the country of Iceland, as the island has almost as many horses as people.

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