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Evaluation of the dissertation:

**“Hver er sterkastr?” The Sports and Games of the Northmen in the Middle Ages.**

**Roles, Rules and Aspects: A Study into Old Norse Saga Literature with a Special focus on Saga-Age Iceland.**

**by**

**Remigiusz Gogosz**  
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The PhD thesis presented here falls both in size and in scope well within what is expected of a serious piece of scholarship in Old Norse studies, and it has the great advantage of choosing a subject for which the sources allow only relatively limited scope of study, so that in just over 300 pages the author can deal with virtual all aspects of this subject.

In a long introductory chapter, he discusses three theories (or rather: classifications) of play and game, and this “laudatory” theories are not just a review of research history, but are repeatedly taken up throughout the thesis.

More to the point, the author proceeds to define the Old Norse terminology for play, game, and sports, including the term *íþrottir*, for which he quotes Gunnell in saying that “*íþróttir* might be said to apply to the physical or mental activity in itself”, whilst *leikr* has a performative aspect to it (p. 24f). He correctly states (p. 25) that the *íþrottir* can mean “accomplishments”, “skills” or “sports”, and one may add that it also refers to personal talents, something implied in the two poems quoted there, but not expressly explained. -

The chapter on terminology (“1.3 Terminology: *Leikr* – *íþróttir*, pp. 24-28) strangely lacks a discussion of the term *skemmtan* “entertainment, amusement”, although it actually crops up in most quotations he presents, but no explanation is given for this omission of an important term in the word-field investigated.

This section is again followed by a discussion of possible classifications of play and sports (pp. 28-31), before entering the far more principal question (in Old Norse scholarship) of the historicity or fictionality of the Icelandic family sagas (“2. Methodology and the Sources”, pp. 32-41). It has to be pointed

out that in the discussion of saga scholarship in the 20th century (p. 38), out of the 13 names of scholars listed here, four are unfortunately misspelt.

The discussion of *place vs. space* in Chapter 3.2 “Places of Play” follows trendy anthropologic theories, but is in my opinion totally dispensable and could to a large degree be removed for a printed version of the thesis. On the other hand, what the author has to say about the audiences of games (pp. 55- 67) is in my eyes interesting and innovative, as it puts the outsiders/bystanders reactions to games it into focus – something easily forgotten when dealing with sports,

The long chapter on the Icelandic type of wrestling, the *Glíma* (pp. 68-96) is indeed also interesting and very detailed, but as I am no expert whatsoever on this type of medieval and modern entertainment, I am in no position to judge its quality.

Swimming is then dealt with on pp. 97-112, with many fine examples from the Kings’ sagas, which give an excellent picture of what medieval Icelanders thought important in sport – right down to the attire and fitness of a hero (cf. the quotation on p. 102f), The one quotation from *Grettis saga* on p. 104 could be augmented by several others about the swimming strengths of this particular hero, by the way, from the same saga. An illustration like Fig. 9 on p. 109, however, is unnecessary and unfitting for an academic piece of work, Similar criticism is due for the quotations from Björn Bjarnason in chapter 7 on the ballgame called *Knattleikr* (pp. 113-142): This author, although writing several works on this game, can hardly be called a scholar and has some very strange and outdated theories about the sagas – which may not come as a surprise, writing at the turn from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century; however, more care is needed by the candidate to weed out such unfitting sources.

As for the next section, 8.2 “*Skinngleikr* and *toga-hönk*”, the author has many valuable comments to make and introduces a wealth of quotations from the *Islandinga sögur* and other sagas. However, as for the game called *skinndáttur*, he seems to mistake it for a variant of *skinngleikr* – but the latter is (as correctly described) a throwing game (in English known as “piggy-in-the-middle”), whilst the former is a type of tug-of-war, in which a skin is pulled by its four corners by four contestants; another quotation from *Barðar saga* would have cleared up that confusion.

The two following main chapters, “9. Chess and *Hnefatafl*: Two main board Games in Old Iceland Literature” (pp. 180-207) and “10. Horse Fights: The Brutal Entertainment of the Saga Age Icelander” (pp. 208-228) profit from the insight of the author, here finally more obvious, that we are dealing with literary creations of scenes, not reports from Icelandic history; only occasionally he makes remarks which seem to apply that he takes the textual evidence for its historical face value. One caveat however must remain, in the case of the chapter on horse fights: whatever previous authors may have guessed at, there is absolutely no evidence for a cultic origin of such fights, and the candidate would be well advised to cut out all such references to spurious opinions of that sort (see e.g. p. 209).

The main part of the thesis is rounded off, in possibly more detail than necessary, by a section of dog fighting, of which there is only a single instance in saga literature, and even that instance plays in Giantland ! (pp. 229-235).

The conclusion (pp. 236-241) has, in my opinion, to be completely rewritten for a published version: although it addresses many relevant points, it appears quite unstructured and needs more details, more statistics, and possibly subheadings for different aspects (literary models; social status; women, etc.).

There are three appendices at the end of this thesis: the first two have only indirectly to do with sports, insofar as they apply to the "comparison of men" by other means (verbal duelling; comparative description), but the third "Appendix 3. Games and sports database" (254-264) is a table of several hundred (!) instances of sports mentioned in Old Norse saga literature. This is actually very useful work, and a lot of effort seems to have gone into it, but to be properly useable it needs several improvements before one could even consider it ready for publication: 1. As opposed to the main text, many of the terms used here are Icelandic, some of these quite colloquial, unhelpful or unusual (e.g. *Kveðskapur* for Skaldic and Eddic poetry, or *Fræðirit* for a theoretical text like Snorri's *Edda*). 2. The descriptions of genres have not been proofread, there are lots of spelling mistakes. 3. (and worst): the referencing system is totally useless in its present form: it refers to publishers (!) and year, thus giving no indication what the volume or series may be called! 4. Sagas are quoted from a number of different edition series instead of sticking to the most reliable ones, and some important sagas are even quoted from (usually unreliable) online-resources, without pages or proper reference. – If these points can be remedied, the database could be a quite helpful tool when dealing with this aspect of saga literature!

As for the formal aspects of a PhD thesis, the number of 775 footnotes (mainly used for referencing sources, but with helpful excursions as well) and a bibliography of 34 pages, divided into primary and secondary literature, testify to the author's ability to produce an academic piece of work of this size and quality. However, not only the main text, but also the bibliography contains many small mistakes, of the type of typographical errors and misspellings of names: Kirsten Hastrup is called Hastup (pp. 44 and 290), Gerd Wolfgang Weber is Gred on p. 289, and worse, Andreas Hausler (for Heusler!!) on 290. Especially in the bibliography, I find this annoying and unnecessary

The English used in the thesis is of quite a high standard for a non-native speaker, with only occasional wrong choice of words (such as "fragment" when actually "passage" is meant.) Having said that, the thesis could have profited greatly from being checked by a native speaker of English, because especially in the second half of the thesis there are several grammatical lapses, as well as incomplete sentences, odd expressions (e.g. "fragment", when "passage" is meant) and Polonisms.

Summing up, it is fair to say that the candidate has invested a great effort into collecting all possible material on games, sports and other entertainment in

medieval western Scandinavia. The thesis also shows the will and the ability to organise the material logically and coherently as well as providing the necessary methodological and theoretical backdrop for the various – quite wide-ranging - parts of the thesis.

The weaknesses are, in my opinion, a certain lack of critical distance to secondary literature, where the candidate seems to have had difficulties distinguishing between serious scholarship and (at least partly) outdated or simply crazy ideas. The second weakness is a certain sloppyness in proof reading and in the bibliography, and before print this has to be remedied.

In view of all that I consider this thesis acceptable as a PhD dissertation, and also would recommend it for printing, but only with the above mentioned corrections and a thorough proofreading before publication.

Bonn, 12th April 2016

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'R. Simek'.

R. Simek