



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

HOLM-GOING

TRIAL BY COMBAT IN VIKING SOCIETY

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Holm-Going – Trial by combat in viking society

Introduction

There were two type of duels that were fought in the Viking period amongst Scandinavians. The practice was made unlawful sometime in the 11th century, but the two types were called einvigi and holmgang respectively.

Einviigi (Trial by Combat)

Einviigi (Trial by combat) was a fight to the death with the loser being killed even if he sued for mercy whilst holmgang was fought to strict rules and overseen by a referee and did not always result in the death of the loser.

In an age when personal honour mattered to individuals a casual remark or a perceived insult was likely to result in a challenge to fight a duel by the offended individual. The issue with this, was that many experienced warriors, skilled in using weapons would often purposely insult and provoke men who were not equal to them, into fighting a duel because they could not be seen to be dishonourable. Invariably, these men usually died or lost all their wealth.

To be seen or marked as a coward was socially unacceptable and to refuse to fight in order to protect personal honour was deemed an act of unmanliness and outright cowardice. If someone refused a challenge he was seen as a coward, mocked by the community and forbidden to speak at any assembly such as at the Ting. They could also never swear an oath as a known coward's loyalty could never be trusted.

Failure to respond to a challenge resulted in the individual being declared an outlaw who anyone could kill with impunity.

The Duels

The duels had to take place in public and were usually fought in places that people frequented, like crossroads or places where people gathered.

If the originator of the insult won the duel it was considered that the said insult was justified and that the loser deserved his fate. If the offended party won, then the insult was seen as unjustified and was deemed to have been withdrawn.

Of course if this was fought as an 'Einviigi' duel the loser, whether the perpetrator or the offended party died.

If the duel was 'Holmgang' the loser had to pay compensation to the victor which often impoverished them.

Holmgang

In Holmgang or Holmgoing, the combatants had originally fought on small islands (Holmes). The duellists took it in turns to strike each other. The recipient of a strike was expected to hold his ground and not to retreat. Each combatant could also change a damaged shield twice during the combat and call for a period of rest in order that they could take a drink and recover their breath.

Holmgang eventually evolved into a form of military training where the fighters had to fight within a small marked out square. If forced out of the marked area, then you were deemed to have lost the fight.

The combat area was usually fought in a square of three metres by three metres which was marked out with poles made out of hazel wood. A hide covered the interior of the square.

The provoked combatant took the first strike. Once a man was injured and blood spilt onto the hide he could sue for peace and pay three silver coins as compensation to the winner. Often the men would fight on with both receiving several wounds until the fight was halted. The man with the most wounds was deemed to be the loser and had to pay the three silver coins. (An amount that would have purchased ten cows). Many people must have died after these encounters whether from the injuries they had suffered or from infections that manifested in due course.

Local Variations

There were local variations with regards to 'Holmgang' and several sagas report that battlefields would be marked with hazel poles and that the battle had to be fought within the enclosed area. Brunanburh was said to be such a battle but it is highly unlikely that this occurred. The marking of a specified area most likely had pagan religious origins and was clearly a practice that had been used by Germanic peoples since time immemorial. Roman historians had recorded the practice since the first century.

It is possible that the legend of battles having been fought within an area marked out with hazel rods relates to one on one combat between the respective side's champion warriors or even that the practice was employed as a means to avoid a full scale battle by just having the champions fight a duel. There are precedents for this in Celtic and Germanic histories.

It can be imagined that a lot of highly trained and experienced fighting men accumulated great wealth by provoking individuals to accept a duel, especially 'Holmgang' when defeat didn't usually result in outright death. Easy pickings if they picked their mark.

The conversion to Christianity and the banning of pagan practices supposedly brought an end to both types of duel but the early medieval period remained one where brutality and violence was an everyday aspect of life.