

# Viking Weapons

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## Bows and arrows

Bows were used both for hunting and in battle. They were made from yew, ash or elm trees. The draw force of a 10th-century bow may have reached some 90 pounds, resulting in an effective range of at least 250 m. A bow found at Viking Hedeby with probably was a full-fledged war bow and arrow, had a draw force of well over 100 pounds. A unit of length used in Icelandic law called a bowshot corresponded to 480 m. Illustrations from the time show bows being pulled back to the chest, rather than to the corner of the mouth or under the chin, as is common today. Arrowheads were typically made from iron and produced in various shapes and sizes according to place of origin. Most arrowheads were fixed onto the arrow shaft by a shouldered tang that was fitted into the end of a shaft of wood. Some heads were also made of wood or antler. Evidence for eagle feather flights has been found with the feathers being bound and glued on. The end of the shaft was flared with very shallow self nocks, although some arrows possessed bronze cast nocks. The historical record also indicates that Vikings may have used barbed arrows, however the archaeological evidence for such technology is limited.



## Sword

The Viking sword was for single-handed use with a shield, with a double edged blade length of around 90 cm. Its shape was still very much based on the swords of the Dark Ages and on the Roman spatha with a tight grip, long deep fuller and no pronounced cross-guard. This was in keeping with the rest of Europe as, at that time, this design of sword was the most widespread. The double-edged blade design hints toward combat based on thrusting as opposed to hacking. Swords were very costly to make, and a sign of high status. They were worn in leather-bound wooden scabbards suspended from a strap across the left shoulder. Early blades were pattern-welded, a technique in which strips of wrought iron and mild steel were twisted and forged together, with the addition of a hardened edge. Later blades of homogeneous steel, imported probably from the Rhineland, bore inlaid makers' marks and inscriptions. Viking craftsmen often added their own decorated hilts, and many swords were given names, such as Leg-biter and Gold-hilt. Swords with pattern-welded cores gave greater strength and flexibility. The sword grip was usually made of an organic material such as wood, horn, or antler and may well have been wound around with textile. Owning a sword was a matter of high prestige. Persons of status might own ornately-decorated swords with silver accents and inlays. Only the wealthier Viking jarls and sometimes freemen could afford swords. The rest of the adult male population carried axes or spears into battle. One sword mentioned in the Laxdoela was valued at half a crown, which would correspond to the value of 16 cows. Constructing



such weapons was a highly specialized task and was likely outside the skill of an average Norse smith so many sword-blades were imported from foreign lands such as the Rhineland. Swords could take up to a month to forge and were of such high value that they were passed on from generation to generation. Often, the older the sword, the more valuable it became.

## Spear

The spear was the most common weapon of the Viking warrior. They consisted of metal heads with a blade and a hollow shaft, mounted on wooden shafts of two to three metres in length, and was typically made from ash wood. The spear heads could measure between twenty and sixty centimetres with a tendency towards longer heads in the later Viking age. Spear heads with wings are called *krokspjot* in the sagas. Some larger-headed spears were called *hoggsjot* and could also be used for cutting. The barbed throwing spears were often less decorated than the ostentatious thrusting spears, as the throwing spears were often lost in battle. The spear was used both as a throwing weapon and as a thrusting weapon, although there was some specialization in design. Lighter, narrower spearheads were made for throwing; heavier broader ones, for stabbing. Most evidence indicates that they were used in one hand. Limited evidence from a saga indicates that they may have been used with two hands, but not in battle. The head was held in place with a pin, which saga characters occasionally pull out to prevent a foe from re-using the weapon. Compared to a sword, the spear can be made with inferior steel and far less metal overall. This made the weapon cheaper and probably within the capability of a common blacksmith to produce. Despite this, the spear held great cultural significance to the Viking warrior, as the primary weapon of Odin, the king of the Norse gods and the god of warfare, was the spear *Gungnir*. The *Eyrbyggja Saga* alludes that a customary start to a battle included throwing a spear right over the enemy army to claim it for Odin. Possibly due to its cultural significance, pattern-welded blades are common in spear heads, and the sockets of were often decorated with silver inlaid patterns.



## Axe

Perhaps the most common hand weapon among Vikings was the axe. However, the commonness of axes in archaeological sites can be attributed to its role as not just a weapon, but also a common tool. This is supported by the large number of grave sites of female Scandinavians containing axes. Several types of larger axes specialized for use in battle evolved, with larger heads and longer shafts. The larger forms were as long as a man and made to be used with both hands, called the *Daneaxe*. Some axe heads had silver designs. In the later Viking era, there were axe heads with



shaped edges measuring up to 45 cm, called a broad axe. The limitations of the weapon are limited reach and a slow recovery time after striking a blow. The double-bitted axes depicted in modern "Viking" art are likely pure fantasy. Vikings most commonly carried sturdy axes that could be thrown or swung with head-splitting force. The *Mammen Axe* is a famous example of such battle-axes, ideally suited for throwing and melee combat. An axe head was mostly wrought iron, with a steel cutting edge. This made the

weapon less expensive than a sword, and was a standard item produced by blacksmiths, historically. Like most other Scandinavian weaponry, axes were often given names. According to Snorri Sturluson's Prose Edda, axes were often named after she-trolls.

By Euan Mcguire

Sources

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