

Rigging Norse Ships in Vinland, ca. 1000 AD: The Halyard Block

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Historical, archaeological, narrative, iconographical, and philological evidence, along with technical reasoning, is brought to bear on the terminology for what appears a vital piece of rigging gear on early Norse ships. Called a húsasnotra or simply snotra, the object is here identified as an encased halyard block, mounted, knob-like, at the top of the mast above the ship's single square sail. The burl from a hardwood like a maple (explicitly named in narrative texts), with its dense, swirling grain, would have been suitable material for the housing and would provide an attractive ornamental effect at a prominent spot on war ships and cargo ships from about the year 1000 AD.

Cet essai puise dans des informations historiques, archéologiques, narratives et philologiques, ainsi que dans le raisonnement technique afin d'identifier un terme nautique pour un élément essentiel du gréement des navires norrois du bas moyen âge. Dit húsasnotra ou simplement snotra, l'objet se révèle être un palan à poulie encastré qui reçoit la drisse. Le palan, en forme de pommeau, fut monté en haut du mât, au-dessus de la seule voile carrée du bateau. Un burr d'un bois dur comme l'érable (nommé dans les textes narratifs), à grain dense et ondoyant, aurait été une matière convenable pour le palan et aurait réalisé des effets ornementaux à un endroit éminent des bateaux de guerre et des navires marchands norrois d'autour de l'année mille.

The medieval sagas of Icelanders and histories of Norwegian kings often deal with maritime matters, whether raiding, trading, tax collection, or general travel to a king's or jarl's court, but, in keeping with the narrative economy of *The Northern Mariner / Le marin du nord* 33, no. 3-4 (Fall-Winter 2023), 369-382

these tales, nautical details are rarely given unless they contribute directly to advance the plot. In *Fóstbræðra saga* (*The Saga of the Foster-brothers*), for example, a sail-yard breaks at sea on a voyage from Iceland to Greenland and is scarfed together by no less eminent craftsmen than the disguised god Óðinn and the poet Þormóðr Bersason with the aid of practical wood-working skills and word magic.¹ Miniature portraits of warships, intended to reflect on the status their masters, are also found at key moments in the narrative but these are limited to size, number of rower-warriors, the artistic quality of the carved stem and stern posts, and expanse of sail, e.g., the celebrated *Orminn langa* (“Long Serpent”) of the Norwegian king Óláfr Tryggvason.² There is also selective evidence from the archaeological record of ship burials and ships lost or intentionally scuttled to form barriers to waterways leading to trading towns. The hulls of ships are often surprisingly well preserved, splayed out from the separation of floor timbers and hull planking. Masts and yards are rarer finds.³ Conclusions can often be drawn from the rust marks left by the iron nails and rivets employed to assemble the clinker-built strakes. On the other hand, nautical gear made of other organic matter, such as standing and running rigging, and sails, has left little testimony, although the layout of the rigging can often be determined on the basis of fastening points in the timbers. There is a large nautical vocabulary in Old Norse-Icelandic but lexical elements are seldom found in conjunction with one another, and must often be deciphered from circumstantial evidence. Lexical loans into Old English, Norman French, and Middle Irish complement our knowledge of the Scandinavian vocabulary.⁴

One exception to this general practice of isolated use of the nautical vocabulary is found in the poets’ handbook, *Skáldskaparmál*, of the thirteenth-

¹ William Sayers, “Scarving the Yard with Words (*Fóstbræðra saga*): Shipbuilding Imagery in Old Norse Poetics,” *Scandinavian Studies* 74 (2002): 1-18.

² Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (ed.), *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, in *Heimskringla, Íslensk fornrit* 26 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1979), 336.

³ For detailed information on recovered ships’ parts, see Ole Crumlin-Pedersen, *Viking-Age Ships and Shipbuilding in Hedeby/Haithabu and Schleswig, Ships and Boats of the North, Vol. 2* (Schleswig and Roskilde, The Viking Ship Museum, 1997), and Ole Crumlin-Pedersen and Olaf Olsen, *The Skuldelev Ships I. Ships and Boats of the North, Vol. 4.1* (Roskilde, The Viking Ship Museum, 2002). For a succinct overview of rigging, consult Arne Emil Christensen, Jr., “Rigg,” in *Kulturhistorisk lexikon för nordisk medeltid*, ed. John Granlund, Vol. 1, (Malmö: Allhem, 1969), cols. 191-196, and, more recently *Vikingetidens sejl. Festskrift tilegnet Erik Andersen*, eds. Morten Ravn, Lone Gebauer Thomsen, Eva Andersson Strand, and Henriette Lyngstrøm. Arkæologiske Skrifter 14.1 (Roskilde, Viking Ship Museum, and Copenhagen, Arkæologi på SAXO-Instituttet ved Københavns Universitet, 2016).

⁴ Comprehensive lexical studies based on literary sources include Hjalmar Falk, *Altnordisches Seewesen* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1912), and Judith Jesch, *Ships and Men in the Late Viking Age: The Vocabulary of Runic Inscriptions and Skaldic Verse* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, and Rochester, New York: Boydell and Brewer, 2001).

century Icelandic chieftain, politician, and man of letters, Snorri Sturluson. One of the distinctive stylistic devices of the early medieval Norse poets or skalds was metonymy, the use of the part for the whole, as when, for example, the “sword-tree of the stem” designates an armed fighter at the prow of a warship. Called *skipaheiti* (“ship synonyms”) Snorri assembled technical and other vocabulary in alliterating and rhythmical stanzas or *nafnaþulur* (“name lists”), where terms for ships’ parts seem gathered by rough location, e.g., a stanza may seem organized from high to low.⁵ Stanza 5 reads as follows, with a single term – the focus of this study – left in its original Old Norse: sail, lapped joint, stilling spar, planking, rivet row, plank seam, sheet, stay, stem, rudder tie, support post(?), buntline, *snotra*, sheerstrake, rower’s bench, stern, cables.⁶

Snotra is also mentioned in two narrative contexts: in the compound variant *húsasnotra* in an Icelandic romance, *Qrvar-Odds saga* (*The Saga of Arrow-Oddr*), set in a legendary past, and in *Grænlendinga saga* (*The Saga of Greenlanders*). Along with *Eiríks saga rauða* (*The Saga of Erik the Red*) the latter work goes under the name of *Vinland Sagas*. The scholarly debate on the *húsasnotra* as concerns function goes back to the lexicographer Johan Fritzner, who in 1867 and with little justification identified this ship’s part as a decoration mounted on the stem of the ship or other prominent place.⁷ This has prompted English-language translators and scholars to speak of a “gable head,” some imaginary carved and perhaps colored, non-functional, wooden, decorative item mounted prominently at the prow of the ship.⁸ Common to

⁵ English equivalences from William Sayers, “The Ship *heiti* in Snorri’s *Skáldskaparmál*,” *Scripta Islandica* 49 (1998): 45-86. For a recent edition and study, see Elena Gurevich (ed.), “Skipaheiti,” in *Poetry from Treatises on Poetics*, ed. Kari Ellen Gade, Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 3 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), Part 2, 861-877. Earlier edition and English glossing in Snorri Sturluson, *Skáldskaparmál*, edited by Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1998), and Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, translated by Anthony Faulkes (London: Dent, 1987).

⁶ Sayers, “Ship *heiti*,”; cf. Gurevich, 861, st. 495, where this stanza reads in the Old Norse original:

segl, skǫr, sigla, sviðvíss, stýri,
sýjur, saumfǫr, súð ok skautreip,
stag, stafn, stjórnvíð, stuðill ok sikulgjörð,
snotra ok sólborð, sess, skutr ok strengr. (st. 495)

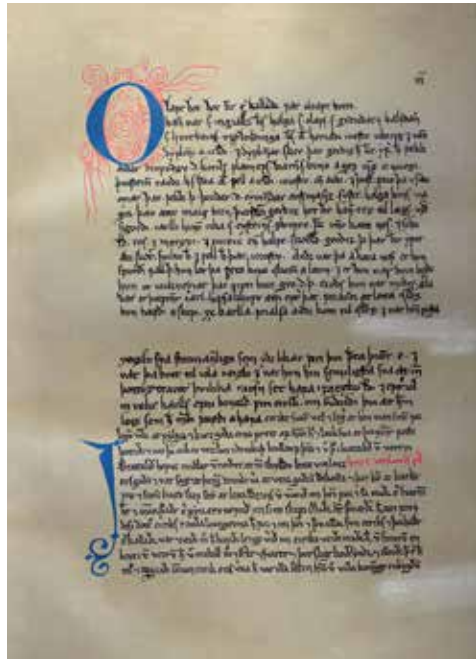
⁷ “Fløi eller anden Prydelse paa et Huses Gavlspids eller et Fartøi”; Fritzner, s.v.; see, subsequently, Falk, *Altordisches Seewesen*, 12.

⁸ Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (trans.), *Arrow-Odd*, in *Seven Viking Romances* (London: Penguin, 1985), 25-137, at 60. For a listing of other solutions proposed in the last century, see William Sayers, “Karlsefni’s *húsasnotra*: The Divestment of Vinland,” *Scandinavian Studies* 75 (2003): 341-5, at 344, n. 7, to which now add Kuneva Kunz (trans.), *The Saga of the Greenlanders*, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, edited by Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), Vol. 1, 32 (“a carved decoration”), and James Knirk *et*

most of these explanations is a disregard for any practical function the *húsasnotra* might have had, despite textual evidence for how urgent its replacement might have been when this piece of gear was damaged. “Prow decoration” seems almost frivolous in this intensely practical environment.

In this article, the narrative contexts in which this enigmatic term is met will be examined, prior to more strictly philological analysis and speculation. From this, a hypothesis will emerge that the *húsasnotra* was both a central and vital part of the ship’s rigging gear and a valued decorative item, the product of careful material choice and craftsmanship.

In *Qrvar-Odds saga*, more an adventure story than the more realistic sagas of Icelanders, the eponymous hero is on a viking raid in the Danish islands. The ships are at present beached for the night. Oddr’s ship carried thirty rower-fighters. Such a small warship may be imagined as about twenty meters long, with appropriately proportioned mast and yard, perhaps eight and five meters respectively. “*En þat hefir at gengit um daginn á skipi Odds, at húsasnotra hefir í sundr gengit. En er morgunn kemr, ganga þeir á landi Oddr ok Hjálmarr at höggva sér efnitré*” (“It had happened on Oddr’s ship during the day before that the *húsasnotra* had broken apart and Oddr and Hjálmarr went up on land to cut themselves suitable timber [to fashion a replacement]”.⁹ Old Norse-Icelandic *efni* means “makings” as in *árefni*, a commercial term for oar blanks whose blades and handles still need to be fully fashioned. The use of *efni* suggests that the shipboard store of reserve planks, hull timbers, and the like would not have been adequate to make the repair. In



A page from Eiríks saga rauða. (Wikimedia Commons)

al. (eds), *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* (København: Arnamagnæanske Kommission, 1989-), s.v. (“decorative item near juncture of keel and stem”). The present study supersedes Sayers, “Karlsefni’s *húsasnotra*,” in respect to the identification of the ship’s part.

⁹ Guðni Jónsson (ed.), *Qrvar-Odds saga*, in *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda 2* (Reykjavík: Edda, 1950), 199-363, at 250-251; my translation.

passing, we might wonder how a hull decoration might break into pieces. We later learn, in the context of just how well armed the two men are, that Oddr was carrying only a small hand-axe (*bastöx*), not a weapon such as a battle-axe but a tool for cutting branches and perhaps debarking.¹⁰ This would seem to rule out the possibility that Oddr intended to fell a tree in order to fashion a new *húsasnotra*.¹¹

The other mention of *húsasnotra* in medieval Norse letters is in *Grœnlendinga saga* in connection with the voyage of the leader Karlsefni from Vinland in North America to Norway. Karlsefni had returned with some sixty settlers after the failed settlement attempt in North America but with a rich cargo, conceivably hardwood timber and furs. His ship would then not have been a sleek warship like *Qrvar-Oddr*'s but rather a broader-beamed cargo vessel, of a type call *knorr*, and employed in the Greenland trade. He overwinters in town and in the spring prepares his ship to return to Iceland.

*Ok er hann var alþúinn ok skip hans lá til byrjar fyrir bryggjunum, þá kom þar at honum suðrmaðr einn, ættaðr af Brimum, ór Saxlandi. Hann falar at Karlsefni húsasnotru hans. 'Ek vil eigi selja,' sagði hann. 'Ek mun gefa þér við hálfu mörk gulls,' segir suðrmaðr. Karlsefni þótti vel við boðit, ok keyptu síðan. Fór suðrmaðr i burt með húsasnotruna, en Karlsefni vissi eigi, hvat tré var; en þat var mōsurr, kominn af Vínlandi.*¹²

When he was quite ready and his ship was lying at the wharf waiting for a favorable wind, a southerner came up to him, a man out of Bremen in Saxony. He asked Karlsefni whether he could purchase his *húsasnotra*. 'I don't want to sell,' said the latter. 'I will give you half a mark in gold,' said the southerner. Karlsefni thought this was a good offer and so sold it. The southerner went off with the *húsasnotra* but Karlsefni didn't know what kind of wood it was made of. It was in maple and had come from Vinland.¹³

Learned tradition preserved an account of the circumstances under which the *húsasnotra* came into Karlsefni's possession. One manuscript of the encyclopedic text known as *Alfræði íslenzk* recounts Karlsefni's outward

¹⁰ For a replica of such a light trimming axe, see *Welcome on Board!*, 52.

¹¹ It should be noted that a different manuscript of the saga than that followed by the editor at this juncture has the word *hnísa*, the normal term for a dolphin, in place of *húsasnotra*.

¹² Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Mattías Þórðarson (eds), *Grœnlendinga saga*, in *Eyrbyggja saga* (Reykjavík, Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1935), 244-269, at 268.

¹³ My trans. but see, too, Kunz.

passage south along the coasts of Helluland (“Slab-land,” perhaps Baffin Island) and Markland (the forested Labrador coast):

Þat er sagt, ath Þorfidr karls-efni hioGi husa-snotro tre ok fèri sidan ath leita Vinlandz ens goda ok kièmi þar er þeir ètludu þat land ok nadu eigi ath kannu ok eingum landzkostum.¹⁴

It is said that Þorfinn Karlsefni hewed timber for a *húsasnotra* and then sailed to search for Vinland the Good, and that he came to where he thought this land lay but was unable to explore it or to determine the resources of the land.

The *húsasnotra* was fashioned on the voyage to North America, once timber was available. As in the case of *Qrvar-Oddr*, the gear was subject to breakage, here, one may infer, after a rough crossing from the Arctic Islands, the skipper likely having first sailed due west from the tip of Greenland. A standard or other stem decoration of some kind is unlikely to have required such immediate replacement. To return to the saga, once back in Norway, the *húsasnotra* is judged an attractive and valuable piece of nautical gear, visible from the shore, and quite likely decorative as well as functional. After the sale, Karlsefni would have had to replace it with some less costly fitting, since it seems vital to effective sailing, although the saga makes no mention of how readily this could have been done in the Norwegian port town.¹⁵

As for the species of tree that was used in North America, maple is favored as an identification of *mqsurr*.¹⁶ This term is met today in English as *mazer* in refence to wooden vessels turned or carved in hard woods with prominent swirling grain patterns. The original meaning of the Germanic root behind this word was “growth” or “tumor.”¹⁷ The wood of the maple typically has a decorative grain, especially in the so-called burls. As a result, the word came to be applied to the tree as a whole. It is proposed that *Qrvar-Oddr* and the

¹⁴ *Alfræði íslenzk: Íslandsk encyklopædisk llitteratur*; 3 vols. (København: Møller, 1908-1918), Vol. 1, 12.

¹⁵ Hermann Pálsson and Edwards (71, n. 3) plausibly suggest that the craftsman who made the part was the German Tyrkir, who was part of the Vinland expedition. The Saxon purchaser may then have recognized a familiar decorative style.

¹⁶ “Mazer,” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mazer_\(drinking_vessel\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mazer_(drinking_vessel)), accessed 3 May 2023.

¹⁷ Guus Kroonen, *Etymological Dictionary of Proto-Germanic* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), s.v.: “ON *mqsurr* m. ‘burl wood; maple’, Icel. *mösurr* m. ‘maple’, Sw. *masur* c. ‘burl wood’, OS *masur* m. ‘swelling’, MDu. *maser* m. ‘burl’, OHG *masar* m. ‘speckle; burl, vein (of wood)’, G *Maser* f. ‘id.’ ... The word seems to have been in association with ON *mopurr* m. ‘maple’, OE *mapulder*, *mapuldor* m./f. ‘id.’, which is of unknown origin.”



Summer in the Greenland coast circa the year 1000 by Carl Rasmussen (1875).
(Wikimedia Commons)

fabricator of Karlsefni's *húsasnotra* would have chosen burl wood or crotch wood from a hardwood tree not only for the attractiveness of the grain but also for its density and hardness, resistance to shock, and good tensile and compressive strength. This too will assist in identifying this piece of gear.

In the following, a two-pronged argument, marine-technical and philological, will be mounted in order to identify the *húsasnotra* as a piece of rigging gear mounted on the mast top – what might be provisionally characterized as an “encased halyard block.” The yard and single square sail of medieval Norse ships were raised by a halyard running through the mast top. On smallish vessels the line ran through a hole in a part called the *húnn*. The term generally refers to something ending in a knob shape (another *húnn* with the meaning “bear-cub” may be a figurative use or a separate word). Thus, the *húnbora* passed through this reinforcement at the mast-top and carried the halyard. Evidence for such a well-made device in its simplest form has been recovered from a wreck site at Hedeby in southern Jutland, Denmark.

A third item [recovered from a land excavation] seems to have been the top of a mast of maple for a small boat where the mast was held in the maststep and a hole in the mast-thwart without the use of standing rigging, as there is no place for stays or shrouds to be fastened to the mast above the hole for the halyard. In the halyard-hole two treenails are criss-crossed in such a way that they provide as smooth a surface

as possible for the rope to pass over.¹⁸

These details are evident in the photograph accompanying this description, in which the mast-top is completed by an apparently non-functional but decorative knob, a miniature *húnn*. On larger ships, such as *Qrvar-Oddr*'s warship or *Karlsefni*'s cargo ship, however, the combined weight of the yard and sail would make for onerous work by the crew, if the halyard were running through a simple hole in the mast, albeit one carefully smoothed. A block or pulley would facilitate hauling the yard.

The last term listed in Snorri's ship parts and synonyms is *húnsþænir* (st. 10).¹⁹ *Spánn* generally meant "chip, shaving," but here seems to reference slat-like wooden shims or wedges, which were used to fix the detachable *snotra* in place atop the mast. We should then imagine the housing for the block as having a socket (*húnfalr*?) at the bottom to take the mast. This last, "clinging" detail in Snorri's listing seems to give the part added prominence. Despite the lack of archaeological evidence, the builders of the replica of *Skuldelev 2*, the thirty-meter-long warship, incorporated a housed halyard block at the top of the mast, as detailed in the photograph below.²⁰ The original warship was built in 1042 near Dublin, only a few decades after the dates of the Vinland voyages. Pulley technology was thus well known in western Europe around the year 1000.



Havhingsten fra Glendalough ("Sea Stallion from Glendalough") is a Danish reconstruction of *Skuldelev 2*. The original ship was built around 1042 near Dublin. The reconstruction was built at the shipyard of the Viking Ship Museum in Roskilde, Denmark from 2000 to 2004. (Wikimedia Commons)

¹⁸ "5. Parts of boats and ship - Masts and spars," in Crumlin-Pedersen, 131, and fig. 5.34.

¹⁹ Gurevich, 876-877, st. 10.

²⁰ *Welcome on board!*, front cover, 40, 54, 62, 54-55, and 66.

The second element of the term *húsasnotra* recalls Old Norse *snotr* (wise), the minor Norse domestic divinity *Snotra*, and familiar use of these concepts in words for domestic tidiness. This has prompted some scholars of the sagas to see in the *húsasnotra* the figuration of some kind of household cleaning utensil, the word glossed as “house-tidier, house-neat.” In the argument advanced here, *-snotra* may rather be related to the word *snúðr* (“twist, twirl”), which was also used as the headpiece of a spindle (going back to the basic verb *snúa* – “to turn”).²¹ Top-weighted spindles have been preserved. The act of rotation that gave its name to the spindle would here be realized in the rotating wheel which, along with sheaves and mortised (not made) wooden shell or case, formed the block or pulley that was encased in the *húsasnotra*, the block being perceived as “housed” (cf. ON *húsa* “to house”) in the knob-like wooden form.

However attractive this solution to the lexical problem, I rather suggest that the *húsa-* element of the compound (which reflects a genitive plural form) reflects an original *hún-* (< *húnn* “mast top”). We should recall that in Snorri’s list of ship parts, *snotra* alone suffices, suggesting that, unless this is an abbreviation, the *hús-/hún-* element was not the essential part of the designation. Phonological variation between /n/ and /s/ is encountered elsewhere in Old Norse, as we see in the pair *husl/hunl* (“sacrificial meal”) – of interest for a line of argumentation to be developed below. As originally conceived, the term **húnsnúðr*, eventually replaced by *húsasnotra*, could have quite accurately described a pulley mounted in a hollowed-out, knob-topped piece of gear at the head of the mast. An alternate name for this part, *hnísa* “dolphin,” may reference the chattering noise of the halyard suggesting its whistles, burst-sounds, and clicks (cf. the verb *hnísa* with Germanic reflexes that variously reference giggling, grinding teeth, and making scratching sounds). This theriomorphic synonym for the arrangement at the mast-top suggests yet another alternative explanation for *-snotra*, one unrelated to *snotr* and domestic tidiness but rather to a cluster of Old Norse words meaning “snout,” in this case the dolphin’s snout.²²

²¹ Richard Cleasby, Gudbrand Vigfusson, and William A. Craigie (eds), *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, Clarendon, 1956), and Knirk et al., s.v. More remote sources are discussed in Jan de Vries, *Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1962), s.v. De Vries associates verbs for sniffing and snuffling, *snúðra* and *snoðra*, illustrating phonological variation in a given semantic field that makes more plausible a later replacement of *snúðr* by *snotra*.

²² See *Welcome on Board!*, 54-55, for the dolphin resemblance; de Vries, s.v. *snaðr* (“eager,” as a snuffling tracking dog), where the form *snotra* is listed, along with *snata* (“tip, point”). Note, however, that de Vries, too, favors a prow decoration as the identification of the *húsasnotra*. The *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*, with no supporting evidence, tentatively identifies the single

To summarize the exclusively linguistic evidence, a number of lexical roots may have been in play in the designation, instrumental or familiar, of a key piece of nautical gear: *húnn* (“mast top, knob”), *hús* (“house, housing”), *snotra* (“tutelary domestic spirit, house-cleaning; snout”), *snúðr* (“spindle, rotary piece or part”), with possible influence from related terms. But how best to explain the transformation of any of these elements into *húsnotra*? Simple phonological drift or semantic slippage seems unlikely. In all of this speculation, we must allow for folk etymology (e.g., a technical term understood as something more familiar) or a more conscious substitution, whereby an analytical and descriptive technical term, **húsnúðr*, was replaced in general parlance by a less specific one, *húsnotra*, with its suggestion of domestic ornament. We should bear in mind that these terminological developments took place in a pre-literate world, without fixed linguistic forms. Yet, in the Norse instances, all these lexical elements would have been either well known or, in combination, easily understood.²³ To open a new perspective on such lexical interplay and apparent substitution process, we must consider other cultural forces that may also have been at work.

The language of the sea illustrates some of humankind’s concerns with the concept of taboo. Fishermen on the Shetland Islands continued to use a Norse-based language (Norn) at sea until the latter half of the eighteenth century, when Scots was being spoken on land.²⁴ Even within a language, a piece of gear may have one name on land and another at sea, as when in English ropes tied on land becomes lines bent at sea, or a pulley is known as a

instance of *hnísa* as the lower part of the fore-stem where it meets the keel, or a stem decoration of some kind.

²³ An analogy with another highly technical area may be illustrative of lexical modification in a pre-literate age. One of the poetic meters in Old Norse was called *kviðuháttir*, which would uncritically be interpreted as “song meter” (< *kviða* “song, epic poem”), even though such a designation seems rather unspecific for the kind of poetry composed in this meter, which is almost exclusively concerned with the life histories of early kings or comparable figures, e.g., *Ynglingatal*. Old Norse knew another word associated with the verb *kveða* “to say,” viz., *kviðr* “verdict.” The compound *orðskviðr* “proverb, saw” is incorporated in *orðskviðuháttir* as the name of a poetic form based on the use of proverbs but superficially seems to reference something like “word-song-meter,” which seems an indefensible signification. Circumstantial evidence then points toward **kviðsháttir* having been the original metrical term with a meaning “verdict form/meter,” appropriate for summarizing comment on a royal life and death. We cannot recover the exact social or other pressures that led to this semantic slippage and substitution but it does appear a move to a more popular, less technical, language, as is argued above for the antecedents of *húsnotra*. More fully treated in William Sayers, “The Old Norse Poetic Meter *Kviðuháttir* as a Medium for History’s Verdict,” *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik* 83 (2023), brill.com/view/journals/abag/83/2/abag.83.issue-2.xml.

²⁴ Laurits Rendboe, *Det gamle shetlandske sprog: George Low’s ordliste fra 1774* (Odense: Odense universitetsforlag, 1987).

block. Important gear may also have its essential nature and function masked by familiar, even demeaning, names. We think of cultures that avoid praising young children for fear of attracting the Evil Eye. The origins of the early medieval term *viking* may lie with a simple verb *vikja* meaning “to go off” and not with anything more specific that might overtly signal one’s intent to go raiding and pillaging.²⁵ Similarly, Norwegian fishermen ask each other in the morning “Are you going rowing (“*Skal du ro?*”)?” They do not ask “Are you going fishing?” If the halyard block and its housing were code-named as a “snout,” we might look elsewhere on board for similar lexical taboo-based avoidance and the extraction of *noa* or replacement names from a comparable corporal sphere of vocabulary. At the opposite end from the mast-head was the mast-step set in the keelson, into which the mast was inserted and secured in place with stays, shrouds, and mast fishes. The recorded Old Norse term was *kerling*, which, as “old woman, hag,” seems to reflect the vulgar sexual imagery and misogyny available in the mast-stepping situation. *Kerling*, so understood, might have been thought to have had its origin in *karl* (“man”). But more likely is a diminutive form originating in Old Norse *kar* (“receptacle, vessel”). Were this the case, the shift from technical language to popular would be analogous to the proposed replacement of **húnsnúðr* by *húsasnotra*.

Even the mast may have been the object of this treatment of lexical substitution. *Mastur* in Icelandic is a late import, most likely from Low German or English, but note the superficial resemblance to Old Norse *massa* “to whittle a length of wood.” The common term in the early texts is *siglutré* “sail-tree” or “sail-timber.” This is again an analysis of component parts, reminiscent of the poets’ kenning system, whereby two normally unassociated terms are juxtaposed to create a kind of metaphorical third, as in English’s *whale-road* (“sea”). In these three examples we see domestic and familiar terms serving as euphemism for important nautical gear that it may have been unlucky to name outright, just as the animal name *Úlfr* (“wolf”) might serve as a human personal name but the predator was called *vargr*. Even the term for the sail-yard, *rá*, had homophones meaning “corner, nook; berth in a ship; roe deer.”²⁶ *Húsasnotra* is then not alone as concerns a possible complex history informed by popular belief, whereby an original **húnsnúðr* was “veiled” in the name *húsasnotra* or in the pet name *hnísa* (“dolphin”), not as a result of phonological development but of humans’ mental interaction with the sea.

²⁵ William Sayers, “Old Norse *viking*: Etymology, Semantics, Semiotics,” *Journal of Indo-European Studies* 47, no. 3-4 (2019): 507-519.

²⁶ One may speculate whether the sea was a fully incorporated in the Christian view of the cosmos as it had been in pagan Norse religion. Were this the case – the open sea figures little in the Bible – the sea may have been sensed as more alien and threatening than in the prior dispensation, and thus requiring, more attentive placating.

This discussion requires us to return to the weaver's spindle. If we take into account some basic similarities between the rotating spindle and a block at the top of the mast, even down to the detail of an enlarged section on the shaft (mast, in the case of the ship), *snotra* might be conceived of as instruments for the production of household amenities, in particular textiles. We should then have the halyard block, the mast-step (as "old woman"), and the very sail itself, entirely the product of women's work, as three vital female presences concretized over the entire length of the ship's mast.²⁷ Situations like this discourage any identification of early Scandinavian men as simple misogynists. But surely the important observation here for the identification of the *húsasnotra* is the tendency to familiarize – domesticate – elements of the nautical vocabulary, perhaps to apotropaic ends. In all of this we should bear in mind that developments can have occurred over two centuries and more, from the construction of Skuldelev 2 in 1042 (to isolate a signpost) to the inception of saga writing in the early thirteenth century.

To summarize the circumstantial technical evidence, the *húsasnotra* or *hnísa* was so vital a piece of nautical gear that a broken one had to be replaced in the middle of events of a marked conflictual character, suggesting that a warship would be impaired without it. The length of timber had to be chosen



Replicas at the Viking Ship Museum in Roskilde, Denmark. (Wikimedia Commons)

²⁷ On the second point, see *Vikingetidens sejl*.

carefully but could be harvested from a suitable tree with a small hand-axe. The prominence of the *húsasnotra* on a vessel was such that it could be seen from the wharf. It must have been both highly decorative (like the stem and stern posts) and functional to be worth a half mark in gold, but its sale would also have entailed its replacement. None of the previous identifications of this gear (gable-head, vane indicating status of prominent persons on board, weather vane, other prow decoration) satisfies these same criteria.²⁸ A last bit of circumstantial evidence: the replica builders of the Viking Ship Museum in Denmark have found it imperative to mount a halyard bock at the top of the mast of their larger vessels.

After this lengthy exercise in revisionist etymology, the combination of narrative, linguistic, and technical information points to the (*húsa*)*snotra* or *hnísa* as the halyard block at the top of the mast, a more elaborate piece than the simple *húnbora* (“bore-hole in the mast-top”) that was found on smaller vessels. The terminological history is tentatively established as an original **húnsnúðr*, literally “mast head rotary device,” being replaced, under largely social (as distinct from nautical) pressures and indeterminate circumstances, by *húsasnotra* – “encased/housed clatterer” or “decoration or instrument” for its production as might be found in a domestic setting, or even the steeped effect of a roof or the spire-like effect of a stave church. More ship wrecks and ship burials are likely to be discovered in the future than narrative Old Norse-Icelandic manuscripts, but preserved evidence for standing and running rigging, and sail handling, except in the form of holes for, and wear from, lines, will probably remain scant. All of it will be required to further advance our knowledge of medieval Norse rigging and sea-faring in both in Europe and America, and of the attendant terminology.

In conclusion, by identifying the *húsasnotra* as the substitute name for an encased halyard block, *húnsnúðr*, a number of narrative and other details can be assembled into a coherent whole: the block was essential to the forward progress of all but the smallest vessels on which a simple hole through the mast-head served to carry the halyard; its replacement after breakage was imperative, especially when outside the home port; carved in a patterned hard-wood like maple, it was an attractive, beacon-like object on board, even becoming the the focus of a monetary transaction.²⁹

²⁸ Ironically, Hermann Pálsson and Edwards’s “gable head” is not all that wrong, if *gable* were understood as a variant of *cable*, yet still lacks precision.

²⁹ The reader of an early draft of this essay leveled criticism against its two main thrusts: the identity of the *húsasnotra* in the context of early medieval nautical architecture and technology, and the putative introduction of what appears a familiar domestic designation (gable ornament?) in place of a more strictly technical, function-oriented term such as **húnsnúðr* “mast-top pulley.” On the first count, the technology of the block and tackle was certainly known in western Europe

We may here move from the technical to the symbolic and question why the halyard block should have been singled out for the narrative treatment seen in two accounts of the Vinland venture. The housing for the block on Karlsefni's ship appears to have broken on the approach to North America. If this is a portent, it is well borne out. Despite the natural richness of the new country, relations among factions of settlers deteriorated into murderous violence and the Indigenous population was alienated, initially as a result of cultural misunderstandings. The halyard block is key to the ship's forward progress but a replacement cannot assure other human progress. The pulley seems like a miniature wheel of fortune. Karlsefni's fortunes turn for the better only when the Vinland venture has been renounced.³⁰ The ornamental but practical block can be surrendered in return for the coin of the new age, European gold. The divestment of the mast head block at the close of *Grœnlendinga saga* – otherwise a curious authorial choice of episode with which to conclude the work – can be seen as a kind of inversion or rejection of the type scene found in the opening land-taking episodes of many sagas of Icelanders, in which the carved high-seat posts from a former residence in Norway are dropped overboard from the emigrant ships so that their power, inherent from the old country, will assist in finding a suitable site for settlement in the new. But Vinland and its timber were not called to play such a role in Iceland's Christian, European future. Similarly, the nickname of Þorfinnr Þórðarson, *karlsefni* (“makings of a man”) – a parallel to the *efnitré* from which a new halyard block might be carved – is fully realized only in the forward-looking context of a newly Christianized Iceland.

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around the year 1000, the archaeological record has a prototype complete in all respects save for the pulley wheel, and the fastidious replica-builders of viking-era ships judged themselves justified in including this piece of gear in the context of yard and sail handling. On the second count, the present argument proposes not an implausible phonological overlay, whereby *húnsnuðr* had its constituent phonemes (gradually?) replaced by others, but the wholesale substitution of the technical term for a vital piece of gear that might attract bad luck if named too explicitly at sea, thus warranting a replacement by a familiar, perhaps somewhat dismissive, domestic referent.

³⁰ William Sayers, “Psychological Warfare in Vinland (*Eiríks saga rauða*),” in *Papers in Honor of Jaan Puhvel*, eds. Edgar C. Polomé and John Greppin, 2 vols, Vol. 2, *Studies in Indo-European Mythology and Religion* (Washington: Institute for the Study of Man, 1997), 235-64.