

# DISPATCHES

NEWS AND NOTES FROM AROUND THE WORLD



NORWAY

## Norse Code

At the annual Viking festival in Gudvangen, many traditions are kept alive, including the ancient art of jabbing your thumbs into someone's eye

In the jagged shadow of Bakkanosi Mountain in central Norway, beside the dark waters of Nærøysfjord, a strapping man wearing nothing but a pair of linen trousers approaches a woman and whispers in her ear. “I heard that you are interested in deeper meanings,” he says. “I am a Viking sorcerer.”

This isn't as creepy as it sounds. Once a year, the Norwegian village of Gudvangen hosts a Viking Market, a six-day festival in which participants revive the trades and traditions of their ancestors. Lars Magnar Enoksen, the sorcerer, is also a noted practitioner of Glima, a Viking fighting technique dating back 1,200 years.

“Eye gouging is permitted,” he says with a grin, having just familiarized his opponent with this painful technique during a streetside demonstration. “Being skilled in Glima,” he adds, “means you're well prepared to survive a street fight.”

Not every aspect of Viking life involved gratuitous violence. Also doing their thing at the event are scores

of blacksmiths, needle binders, rune readers, bakers, musicians, storytellers and leather workers. The festival is headed by the bushy-bearded Georg Hansen, a local cabbie who holds court on a traditional longship sporting a fur hat and a large sword in a scabbard. “I am made to be a Viking,” he says, “not a taxi driver.”

After nightfall, Magnar retires to a wooden shelter to instruct a small group in the art of Galdr, a kind of pagan incantation. “The Galdrs have powers that are stronger than physical strength,” he says in the flickering firelight. “They can be used for blessings, or they can be used against an opponent who wants to harm you.” Then, drinking mead from a horn, he leads the group in a low, monotone chant intended to foster wisdom and strength.

“People sometimes ask me if I am a reincarnated Viking,” he says later. “I am quite sure I was happily gouging eyes a thousand years ago while singing the Galdrs of the day.”

—JUDITH FEIN