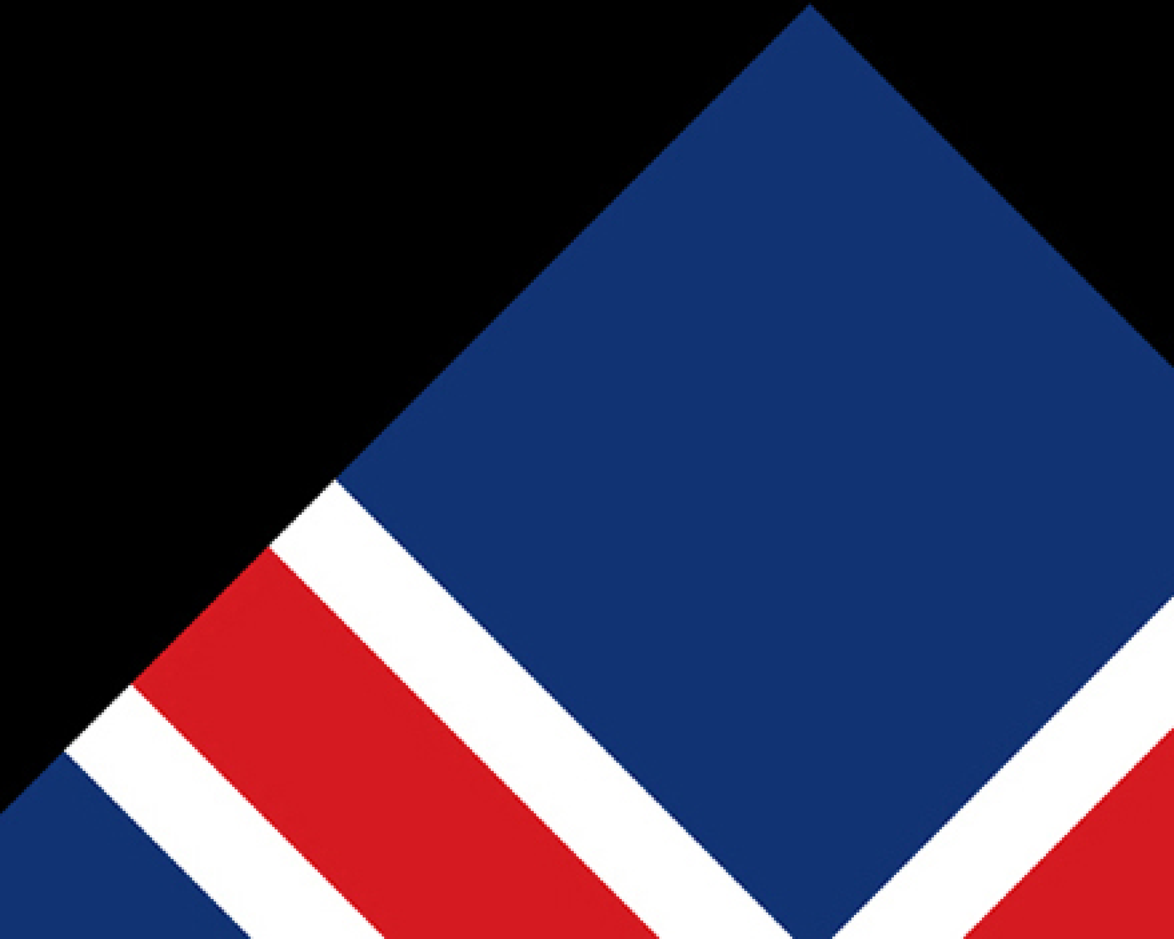
A HISTORY *of* ICELANDIC LITERATURE

Edited by Daisy Neijmann

(Vol. 5 of Histories of Scandinavian Literature)



A History of Icelandic Literature

Histories of Scandinavian Literature

Sven H. Rossel, General Editor

VOLUME 5

A History of Icelandic Literature

Edited by Daisy Neijmann

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Acknowledgments

This project has been realized against all odds. It was started a long time ago and then abandoned for many years, until Helga Kress from the University of Iceland made me aware of it and suggested that I explore the possibility of taking it on. I am very grateful to her for her suggestion and her encouragement. I am also very grateful to the Fund for the Promotion of Icelandic Literature for its financial support in the form of a grant.

It is never easy to revive a project, neither for the editor nor for the contributors, especially a project that lay dormant for so long and that has involved so many people. I extend my sincere thanks to all those who have granted me their cooperation, goodwill, and trust. Ástráður Eysteinsson has been particularly helpful and supportive throughout the editorial process, for which I owe him a debt of gratitude. I am also very grateful to the staff at the University of Nebraska Press for their friendly assistance and their patience as well as to Dan Ross and Sven Rossel, both of whom have been exceptionally supportive, helpful, and kind. The press's freelance copyeditor Joe Brown did a fine job editing the text, and I am also grateful for his good work.

Expertise in the various areas of Icelandic literature, particularly after the Middle Ages, remains largely located in Iceland as yet, and this in some cases necessitated the assistance of translators. Translating academic prose is by no means an easy task. I extend thanks to Joe Allard from the University of Essex and Alison Tartt from WordWorks for their efforts as well as to Rory McTurk for his poetry translations in chapter 4. Special thanks must go to Gunnþórunn Guðmundsdóttir at the University of Iceland, who took on the remaining bulk of the translations when no one else would, and whose comments, constructive criticism, and moral support throughout have been invaluable.

I am grateful to Catherine D'Alton from the Department of Geography at University College London for the maps of Iceland included in this book.

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Introduction

Literary histories of the Icelandic Middle Ages have been fairly readily and consistently available in the English language. The same cannot be said for histories of Icelandic literature that include the postmedieval period. Stefán Einarsson's 1957 *History of Icelandic Literature* has been virtually the sole resource in this respect, and, despite its undisputed value for everyone interested in learning more about Icelandic literature beyond the sagas and the Eddas, it has long been both out of date and out of print. This fact is revealing of what has shaped the position and study of Icelandic literature, no less than the literature itself, to a considerable extent. Postmedieval Icelandic literature has had to live and develop "in the shadow of the sagas," as the contemporary author Thor Vilhjálmsson once called it in an article for the *Times Literary Supplement* (10 September 1971, 1093). Whereas Old Icelandic prose and poetry have enjoyed both scholarly and general interest and recognition, there long remained a perception that what happened afterward was of little consequence. Situated on the periphery of Europe, and with a population of less than 300,000, Iceland has traditionally occupied a position even more marginal than that of the other Scandinavian countries in the European cultural consciousness, where it remained stuck in the Middle Ages. Nor was this perception entirely without foundation: socially and economically, Iceland was long out of sync with the rest of Europe as its society remained resolutely rural and virtually untouched by modernity. While this created unusual conditions that importantly shaped the nature, development, and dissemination of Icelandic culture, it should be emphasized that, culturally, Iceland has, throughout its history, neither been isolated nor remained untouched by currents and ideas holding sway elsewhere in Europe. Iceland was part of the Danish realm from the end of the fourteenth century until 1944, when full independence was achieved, and Copenhagen was the cultural center for Icelanders during those centuries. Those with the social status and financial support would go to study at the University of Copenhagen, bringing back new ideas and fashions.

Like the cultures of other countries, that of Iceland has been both inward and outward looking, adapting new ideas and perspectives to its own situation. Not until recently, however, has this fact translated into changed scholarly approaches and perceptions. During Iceland's long struggle for independence during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, its literary heritage, which had remained a living tradition in part thanks to the fact that the language spoken by the common people had remained largely unchanged, became a powerful weapon, testimony to Iceland's cultural distinctiveness. Nationalist scholars emphasized Iceland's uniqueness, playing down, if not ignoring altogether, the links with and influences from other cultures. During the last several decades, however, a sea change has taken place. Following its rather sudden and drastic "leap" into the modern world, Iceland has recently called attention to itself as a nation and a culture fully abreast of current developments — and not infrequently ahead of them. Halldór Laxness, Iceland's twentieth-century Nobel Prize–winning author, has fully secured his place in world literature, his works now widely and generally available in translation, while younger authors like Einar Már Guðmundsson and Hallgrímur Helgason are also commanding attention in the international literary arena. At the same time, new generations of Icelandic scholars are reassessing traditional views of Icelandic literature, subjecting it to new approaches, and examining aspects that had previously been ignored.

Such profound changes clearly called for a new history of Icelandic literature, and the five-volume work on the histories of the Scandinavian literatures undertaken by the University of Nebraska Press provided the perfect opportunity. Although the project had to be put on hold for several years and incurred a long delay, the initial efforts of the previous editor, Patricia Conroy, were the inspiration for a new history of Icelandic literature in Icelandic — the five-volume *Íslensk bókmenntasaga* (1992–2006) — while the current volume aims to fill the gap for those unable to read Icelandic. The authors, all experts and fully versed in contemporary ideas, are in many cases representative of the changed and diverse views of Icelandic literature, including much that was previously excluded, and bringing a fresh, international perspective to their area of discussion. Readers may, nevertheless, detect a remaining thread of cultural nationalism, at least in some cases.

Like many "small" countries producing literature in "small" languages across our globalized world, Iceland finds itself in a defensive, if not threatened, position with regard to the preservation of its language and culture. This concern is both general and real in contemporary Iceland and affects author and scholar alike.

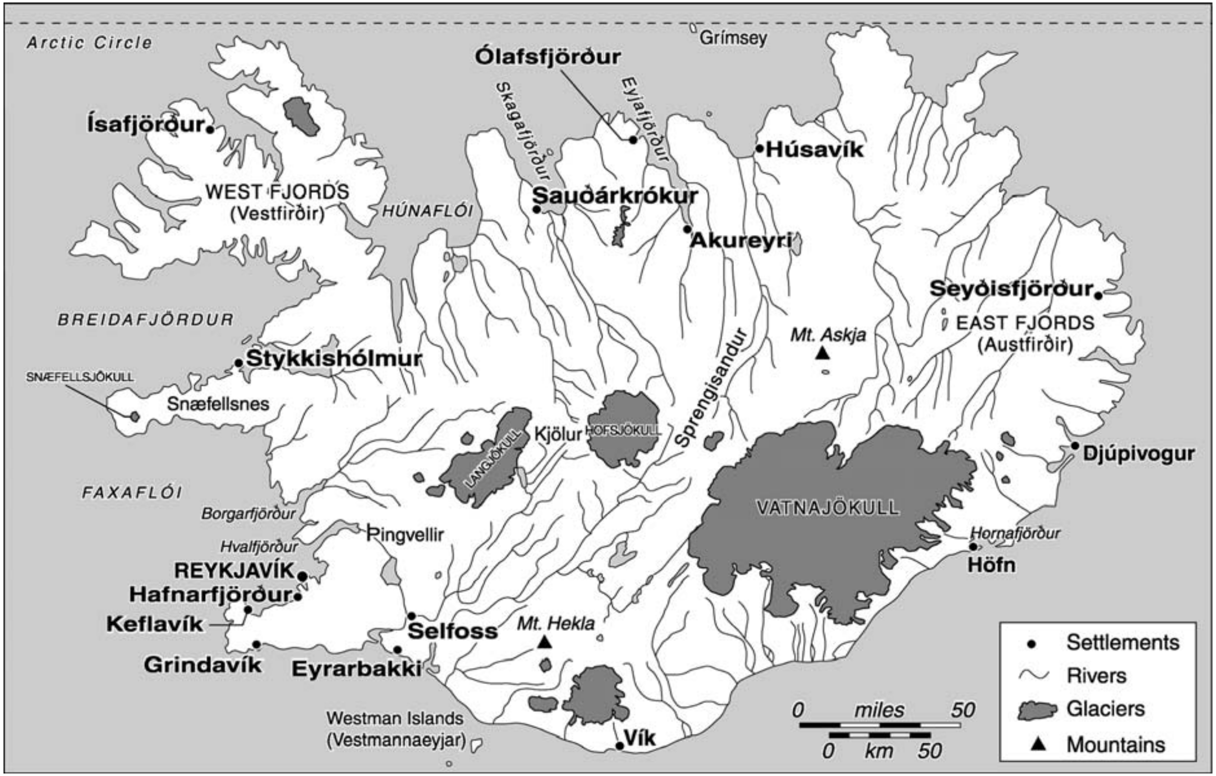
The editorial policy for this volume has been the same as that for the series in general and has allowed for methodological and stylistic pluralism to reflect the diversity of current Icelandic scholarship. Authors were, nevertheless, strongly encouraged to view authors and works in a larger sociocultural and ideological context, both national and international, and always to keep the general reader's interest in mind and make their chapters above all clear and informative. The international status of Old Icelandic literature posed certain problems in this respect, however. Whereas post-medieval Icelandic literature is largely unknown and the main thrust of its presentation can, thus, be informative, Old Icelandic literature has its own scholarly tradition within the English-speaking world, which means that a reader may be looking for different kinds of information, such as the history of different critical approaches or a history of the reception of certain works. While a literary history such as this could never hope to provide a survey of that scope, the discussion of Old Icelandic literature in this volume does reflect this.

In the present volume, Icelandic orthography has been retained, and the spelling of Icelandic names has not been Anglicized, except in those cases (confined to Old Icelandic) where a name has a tradition in English. For reasons of user-friendliness, however, the Icelandic convention of using first names has been abandoned, and authors are listed by their last name in references and in the bibliography, with the exception of medieval authors, where the general convention of going by first name has been followed.

Literary histories cannot avoid the problems and shortcomings inherent in the process of selection and exclusion or those of the ultimate artificiality of labeling and periodization, but they can, and should, foreground them. Authors were given the freedom to make their own selections based, first, on the needs of the reader and, second, on their own expertise in the field and choice of methodology. Most contributors display a keen awareness of these issues and address them in their discussions. Literature is a living and fluid entity, and one movement seldom "ends" conveniently where another is perceived to have its inception. Similarly, certain authors are discussed in several chapters because their careers span more than one period, because their work was (re)discovered at a later time, or because they contributed to more than one genre or movement. To facilitate usage, internal references have been included throughout the volume. Authors may also reappear in one of the four chapters that have been included to introduce the reader to areas of Icelandic literature that traditionally have often been overlooked: women's literature; theater; children's literature; and emigrant literature. Rather than emphazing their exclusivity and/or precluding their inclusion in the mainstream literary tradition, their discussion in separate chapters is meant to allow the opportunity to view authors, works, and ideas on their own terms, from a different critical perspective, and from within the framework of their own individual tradition instead of from canonical margins.

The size of this final volume in the series may seem incongruous in relation to the size of the country, as compared to that of the other Scandinavian countries. It should not, however, surprise anybody even slightly familiar with Icelandic literature. Quite aside from Iceland's medieval contribution, on which subject alone many volumes larger than the current one have been written, literature has constituted the country's main, and for part of its history virtually the only, form of cultural expression. As has often been pointed out, Iceland lacks the museums filled with works of art from previous centuries and the imposing buildings and castles from times past that are found in most other Western capitals. Until the twentieth century, a musical or visual arts tradition in the general European sense was almost entirely absent. Iceland's monuments are its literature, its cultural heritage is the written word.

Recently, there has been a remarkable upsurge in the interest in things Icelandic, not least in its literature. Most of Halldór Laxness's major works are, again, in print and available in English translation, and increasingly so are those of other contemporary authors. I feel safe in saying that it is the hope of all who have contributed to this volume that it will help promote this interest and the knowledge of Icelandic literature outside Iceland as well as assisting the inclusion of the various aspects of Icelandic literature in the increasingly numerous comparative studies of literatures across national and linguistic boundaries.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Skagafjörður
Eyjafjörður
Húsavík
WEST FJORDS
(Vestfirðir)
HÚNAFLÓI
Sauðárkrókur
Akureyri
Seyðisfjörður
EAST FJORDS
(Austfirðir)
BREIDAFJÖRDUR
Mt. Askja
Stykkishólmur
Sprengisandur
SNÆFELLSJÖKULL
Snæfellsnes
Kjölur
HOFSJÖKULL
LANGJÖKULL
Djúpivogur
VATNAJÖKULL
FAXAFLÓI
Borgarfjörður
Pingvellir
Hvalfjörður
Hornafjörður
REYKJAVÍK
Höfn
Hafnarfjörður
Keflavík
Selfoss
Mt. Hekla
Grindavík
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Settlements
Rivers
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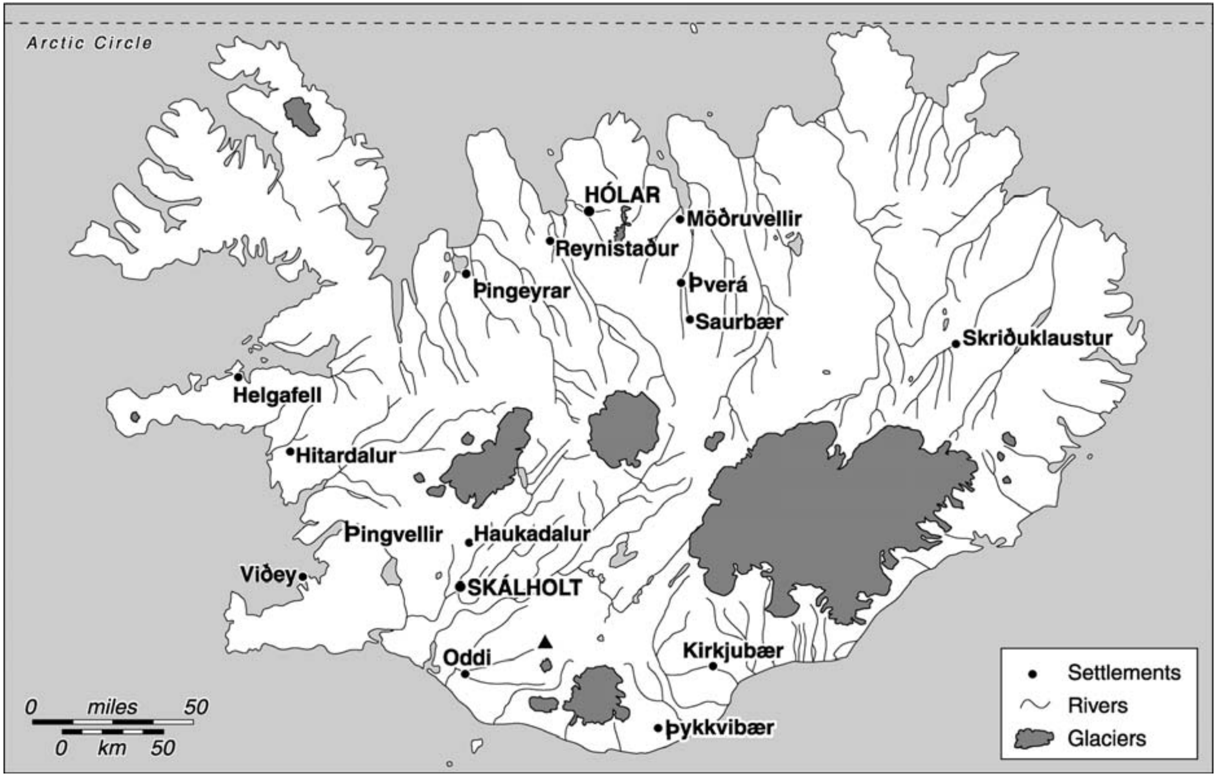
Map 1. Iceland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Skriðuklaustur
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Hitardalur
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Settlements
Rivers
Glaciers

Map 2. Medieval Iceland

A History of Icelandic Literature

The Middle Ages

Vésteinn Ólason
and Sverrir Tómasson

1

Old Icelandic Poetry: *Vésteinn Ólason*

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Iceland was settled between ca. AD 870 and ca. AD 930 by people predominantly of Norwegian origin. Many of the settlers had come to Iceland after living for a time in the Scandinavian colonies of the British Isles, and Celtic influence is evident in personal names and place-names. Although there is historical as well as genetic evidence that a substantial percentage of the original settlers were of Celtic origin, the dominant social elite was Norse in language and culture. While they obviously had to take along some cattle and rudimentary equipment for the kind of farming they expected to do in the new country, no less important were the ideas and ideologies dominant in the places of origin at the time of settlement. The most important ideas were those that were embedded in their traditions, in their religion and customs, and in their poetry and tales.

The Scandinavian countries and the Scandinavian settlements in the British Isles were converted to Christianity during the tenth and eleventh centuries, with the Icelanders formally accepting the Christian faith at the

Note on the text: This text was originally drafted in English by the author, but it was thoroughly edited by Patricia Conroy, for which he owes her a debt of gratitude, in particular for the translations of quotations, which are hers, excepting the quotations from Eddic poetry. James E. Knirk read the text in an early version and Gísli Sigurðsson in a late one, and both made valuable suggestions toward its improvement. Direct quotations from Old Icelandic poetry are from the standard editions listed in the bibliography and appear here with normalized Icelandic spelling and Modern Icelandic orthography; thus, ö stands for ø and ǫ, while æ stands both for æ and for œ.

General Assembly or Althing in the year 1000. The new religion was to have a revolutionary effect on Icelandic secular society as well as on religious beliefs and institutions. Despite the decision at the Althing, people did not empty their minds of pagan ideas all at once: the understanding and reception of Christianity was, no doubt, conditioned by previous habits of mind; and, in society at large, some pagan ideas and institutions were eradicated completely, while others were only modified.

The earliest extant documents written in Iceland in the vernacular date from the second half of the twelfth century. After Iceland's adoption of Christianity, some of the most important chieftains in the country had sent their sons to England or the Continent to be educated in clerical institutions. Once the first Icelandic bishop had been appointed in 1056 and the church began to organize itself in the country, the education of clerics was quickly established on the basis of the learning introduced by the church.

Iceland differed from its neighboring countries in that it had no king or any other centralized authority or public executive power; it was, instead, an unstable federation of chieftaincies accepting a common law and a common system of courts. The status of the church in Iceland was different as well. Since Icelandic literature, too, was unlike any other European literature of the High Middle Ages, it is only natural to assume that there was a connection between the particular social and religious aspects of society and the unique character of the literature that it produced.

The old social and ethical order that obtained in Iceland between the time of settlement and the Norwegian hegemony, established in 1262, held freemen to a stringent code of heroic conduct. In the absence of public executive power, men of all social ranks had to be responsible for their own safety and might often have to risk their lives when their family's interests and honor, or those of the family of their chieftain, were at stake. The heroic tenor of Icelandic society coexisted with a literary culture brought about by the church. The flowering of that literary culture was the product of a fortunate cooperation of a national church, which brought learning to the country, and a ruling class that accepted the church and its learning eagerly without giving up its respect and love for traditional culture, even if much of it was pagan in origin. The result of this cooperation can best be evaluated by taking a closer look at the literature itself.

It is impossible to know how much of the literature of medieval Iceland was actually based on traditions brought by the settlers. By the time these traditions were written down, they had been adapted and re-created by Icelanders for over two centuries, under the influence, not only of the social structure, history, and natural surroundings of Iceland itself, but also of the poetry and legends that reached the country through its foreign trade and through the church and its clergy. Comparative historical analysis has revealed that Iceland's literature has numerous links with the Germanic past — not only with the early Viking Age (beginning about 800), but also with the Migration Period (ca. 400–600). In this remote island with its harsh natural conditions, a remarkable amount of poetry was preserved orally; and, owing to an unusual alliance between the church and a native ruling class, much of oral tradition came to be recorded.

Old Icelandic poetry is by far the richest source preserving the pre-Christian mythology of the Germanic peoples as well as their heroic legends. Obviously, the information that these poems yield bears most directly on the mythology and religion of the Icelanders and other Norsemen, but comparative studies show that Norse religion shares its roots with the pre-Christian mythology of other Germanic peoples and is similar even to the religions of more remotely related cultures of Indo-European descent in several ways. The heroic lays of the *Poetic Edda* — a collection of poetry preserved in an Old Icelandic manuscript that scholars in the seventeenth century named *Sæmundar Edda* (Sæmundur's Edda), incorrectly attributing it to Sæmundur the Wise (see p. 60) — record more fully than any other source the characteristics of a relatively homogeneous Germanic poetic culture that is also evident in such works as the Old English *Beowulf*, the Old High German *Hildebrandslied*, and the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied*. Legendary rulers from the Migration Period, such as Ermanaric, king of the Ostrogoths (d. 375), Attila, king of the Huns (d. 453), and Theoderic, king of the Ostrogoths (d. 526), presented as contemporaries in a remote past, work out their disastrous conflicts of pride and ambition, love and jealousy, in the sturdy verse lines of Eddic poetry, where the same metrical principles apply as in the poetry of other Germanic peoples. In addition to heroic legends, the *Poetic Edda* contains poems based on mythological lore and gnomic wisdom and composed in the same meters as the heroic lays.

POETIC FORM

The metrical form of narrative poetry about gods and heroes, as well as of didactic poetry, seems to have been the same all over the Germanic world: a line in which there are four strong beats and in which certain stressed syllables alliterate with each other. It should be noted that, apart from stress, syllable quantity plays a role in the structure of the verse. The alliterative four-stress line is divided by a medial caesura into two half lines or short lines. The alliteration falls on the third stressed syllable (i.e., the first stressed syllable in the second half line), called the *head stave* (*höfuðstafr*), which alliterates with one or both of the stressed syllables of the first half line, thus creating one or two *stuðlar* ("props" or "supports"). Another, related meter where the stanza is only four lines (six short lines) and lines 2 and 4 have only two props but no head stave and no caesura (see below) is known only from Old Norse. Old Icelandic poetry in these two meters is referred to as *Eddic poetry*.

Eddic poems differ from *Beowulf* and the *Hildebrandslied* by being stanzaic. The most common Eddic meter is called *fornyrðislag* (old epic meter), in which the stanzas have eight short lines (for practical reasons, each pair of lines is here presented as a long line with a caesura), that is, four alliterating pairs, which can be divided into two half stanzas (*vísuhelmingar*):

> Ár var alda, || þar er Ymir byggði:
> vara sandr né sær || né svalar unnir.
> Jörð fannsk æva || né upphiminn:
> gap var ginnunga || en gras hvergi.
> ("Völuspá," st. 3)

> Young were the years when Ymir made his settlement,
> there was no sand nor sea nor cool waves;
> earth was nowhere nor the sky above,
> chaos yawned, grass was there nowhere.
> (*Poetic Edda*, trans. Larrington, 4)

In this example, the first head stave is the *y* in *Ymir*, showing that the first stress in a line need not fall on the first word, and the prop alliteration is carried by the initial vowels in *Ár* and *alda*. The next pair of half lines is linked by alliteration on *s*, the head stave being *svalar* and the props *sandr* and *sær*. There are no strict rules governing the number and distribution of unstressed syllables, although they commonly number two or three in a short line, depending on the quantity of the stressed syllables; however, the occasional practice of regularly adding one or two unstressed syllables to the *fornyrðislag* line is called *málaháttur* (speech meter).

Another common Eddic meter is *ljóðaháttur* (chant meter), most frequently used in dialogue or gnomic poetry. Each stanza is divided into two halves, each half consisting of one pair of half lines linked by alliteration as in *fornyrðislag*, plus a somewhat longer line with three (occasionally only two) stressed syllables and its own internal alliteration:

Ungr var ek forðum || fór ek einn saman;
þá varð ek villr vega;
auðigr þóttumk || er ek annan fann;
maðr er manns gaman.
("Hávamál," st. 47)

I was young once, I travelled alone,
then I found myself going astray;
rich I thought myself when I found someone else,
for man is the joy of man.
(*Poetic Edda*, trans. Larrington, 47)

In the first half stanza, the pair of half lines is marked by alliteration on vowels, *u* and *ei*, while, in the third line, the alliteration is on *v*. In the second half stanza, the half lines alliterate on vowels again, *auðigr* and *annan*. The alliteration in the long line is on *m*.

Although the typical *fornyrðislag* stanza consists of eight half lines, stanzas may vary in length from four to twelve lines. The free distribution of stressed syllables coupled with the alliteration of important words makes the lines of Eddic poetry very different from those of modern verse: instead of modifying and regularizing the rhythm of the spoken language, as most verse of later times does, the Eddic meters exaggerate it and make it more staccato.

Not all Old Icelandic literature concerned itself with mythological or legendary figures or themes; the poets and storytellers of Iceland followed events in the rest of Scandinavia with keen interest, composing new works about contemporary matters. Icelandic professional poets, called *skalds*, traveled among the courts of Scandinavian kings and noblemen, composing and performing verse in praise of their hosts. This type of praise poetry had been composed in Norway before the settlement of Iceland, but, in time, Icelandic skalds came to monopolize the function of court poet in Scandinavia, and the sagas also tell of their visits to the courts of kings and earls in the British Isles. Skaldic verse demands of its practitioners the skillful use of an intricate metrics and a highly conventionalized style, and it also assumes the poet's familiarity with a vast amount of traditional lore — mythological, heroic, and historical. The existence of this class of Icelandic professional court poets may be one of the reasons why traditional poetry was preserved in Iceland longer than in other places, and the perseverance of traditional poetry may also have influenced the development of uniquely Icelandic forms of oral narrative in prose. In contrast to the narrative mode of Eddic poetry, skaldic poetry is mainly in a lyric mode. The skalds do not link the events they describe; rather, they dwell on isolated moments or phenomena, in an attempt to render a subjective response, strong emotions such as admiration of bravery or splendor, the terror of battles and birds of prey, and also, in the case of more personal poetry, feelings of love or hate, joy or sorrow.

The more intricate forms of line and stanza used in skaldic poetry seem to have been an indigenous Norse development, although the possibility of Irish influence cannot be excluded. Whatever their origins, the skaldic verse forms depart radically from earlier Eddic traditions, being much more bound by rules with regard to rhythm, number and quantity of syllables per line, alliteration, and rhyme. The heavy internal rhyming and alliteration within the six-syllable, three-stressed line of the common skaldic meter called *dróttkvætt* (court meter) make it much more ponderous and difficult to enjoy than the Eddic meters and nigh impossible to translate metrically:

Fullöflug lét fjalla
framm haf-Sleipni þramma
Hildr; en Hropts of gildar
hjalmelda mar felldu.

The very strong valkyrie of the mountains [giantess] made Odin's horse of the sea [ship] lumber forth; and Hroptr's [Odin's] players of helmet fires [warriors] felled her steed.

In this half stanza from Úlfur Uggason's "Hússdrápa" (House lay), describing a scene from Baldur's funeral, two out of three stressed syllables in the first line alliterate on *f*, and the second line is linked to the first by the head stave in *framm*. In the odd lines of an entire *dróttkvætt* stanza (1, 3, 5, 7) there is assonant rhyme on consonants (e.g., *full-* and *fjall-* in the first line), while in the even lines (2, 4, 6, 8) there are full rhymes (e.g., *framm* and *þramm-* in the second). In its use of disharmonious and even cacophonous effects, skaldic verse at times resembles modernist poetry.

Eddic and skaldic verse differ, not only in meter, but also in style. Eddic word order and sentence structure are relatively straightforward. Eddic diction is marked by the use of *heiti*, nouns used only in verse. *Heiti* may be archaic words that survive only in poetic use (e.g., the English *swain* for "young man"); they may be metonyms (e.g., words like *surf*, *wave*, or *tide* used to mean "ocean"); or they may be common words that have different meanings in poetry (e.g., English *maid*). Eddic verse also uses special names for the gods: Odin may be called Sigföður (father of victory), Valföður (father of those slain in battle), Grímnir (masked or helmeted one) or Gangleri (traveler). Usually more concrete than abstract, Eddic verse also makes limited but effective use of metaphoric language. Its most striking characteristic is the economy of language. In an Eddic poem a long journey or fierce battle may be treated effectively in one stanza. The one Eddic technique that appears to modern readers to be generous or even wasteful of words is the series of varied appositives, a technique found throughout Germanic epic verse and used texturally to sharpen focus or, indeed, to freeze the flow of events for a moment. The four-beat alliterative meter allows the Eddic poet easily to emphasize important words and concepts, and it imparts to the poetry an unmistakable dignity that coexists with simplicity of sentence structure and laconism of style.

Skaldic verse, on the other hand, is characterized by the interweaving of sentences and by complicated and often obscure imagery. It is marked by the use of a paraphrastic device, the kenning, or compound poetic name (e.g., *baugbroti*, "breaker of rings," to refer to a leader or chieftain who is assumed to demonstrate generosity by distributing gold among his followers). Originally, the kennings were permeated by allusions to pagan mythology, and, although such allusions never disappeared, the advent of Christianity changed the style considerably. The main skaldic forms later on became the vehicle of Christian religious themes, and it was not until the late Middle Ages that Icelandic religious poetry adopted meters with end rhyme and easy rhythms common in Christian poetry throughout Europe.

EDDIC POETRY

Most of the Eddic poetry that has come down to us is preserved in a small, unpretentious vellum manuscript, the Codex Regius (King's book), so-called because, after its discovery in seventeenth-century Iceland, then a part of the kingdom of Denmark, it was donated to the king and remained for three centuries one of the jewels of the manuscript collection in the Royal Library in Copenhagen. In 1971, when Iceland had been an independent republic for a quarter of a century, the Danish government restored the Codex Regius to Iceland as part of the first shipment of approximately eighteen hundred Icelandic manuscripts from Danish collections to be handed over to the University of Iceland. The manuscript was produced in Iceland in the second half of the thirteenth century, copied from older manuscripts from the period 1200–1240 that have since been lost. These lost manuscripts are commonly considered to have been Icelandic too, although the oral origins of some of the poems may lie elsewhere. A few of the poems and individual stanzas are found in other Icelandic manuscripts. In the seventeenth century the collection was given the name *Edda* by scholars who connected it with the Edda of Snorri Sturluson (1178–1241), a work also known in English as the *Prose Edda* (see also pp. 151–58). While the expression *Poetic Edda* refers to the collection of poetry in the Codex Regius, scholars also apply the label *Eddic* to several poems in Eddic meters found only in manuscripts produced somewhat later than the Codex Regius.

There is no doubt that most of the Eddic poems were recorded from oral tradition. With the exception of "Völuspá" (The seeress's prophecy), which has come down to us in three seemingly independent versions, we have only one manuscript version of each poem, and, thus, we lack sufficient evidence from which to construct a notion of the character and history of the oral tradition behind the manuscript texts. Theories about the nature of oral transmission that have been formulated in the study of other oral cultures can be consulted for what they may have to tell us about the prehistory of Eddic poetry. The Eddic lays are relatively short, and, although they contain a considerable number of formulaic expressions, there is also great variation in structure and style from one poem or group of poems to another. Moreover, there are numerous expressions that seem to be unique to the places where they are found. Consequently, it is not very likely that the Eddic lays were composed in performance at the time of their recording in the same way as Parry and Lord propose for the Homeric and South Slavic epic poems (on Parry and Lord, see, e.g., Foley).

On the other hand, skepticism about the relevance of a radical "oral theory" to Eddic poetry should not lead to the uncritical acceptance of a literary model for its origin and transmission. The idea that each poem was composed by a certain poet at a particular time and subsequently transmitted with only small, accidental changes down to the time of recording is untenable. Not only must a practicable theory of the prehistory of Eddic poetry do justice to the variety within the corpus and to the unmistakable individuality of many poems, but it must also take into account the creativity within the conventions of a culture that preserved great amounts of anonymous traditional material. Here, the position will be taken that the narrative structure and verbal expression of an individual poem must in principle be dated to the thirteenth century, when it was written down, although the myths and legends on which it is based are clearly much older. It must, however, be considered very likely that some Eddic poems have been preserved so well from the time of composition, which happened long before they were written down, that the thirteenth-century texts give a tolerably good impression of the conceptions and style of composition of poets of the Viking Age.

With regard to those epic poems, or lays, considered to have originated in the Viking Age (ca. 800–1066), it is difficult, if not impossible, to find criteria for whether they may have led a previous existence as verbally constructed unities, not in Iceland, where they were recorded, but in Norway, the British Isles, or elsewhere. When scholars have surmised, for example, that "Völuspá" was composed in Iceland and "Hávamál" (Sayings of the High One) in Norway, they have often based their arguments on the descriptions of natural and social phenomena found in the poems. But these arguments are superficial and unconvincing, for both poems were without doubt composed by people whose knowledge of the world extended beyond their own native places. The traditional wisdom cataloged in "Hávamál" cannot have been the product of one individual mind or generation. When a poem is considered late and even literary, as is "Alvíssmál" (All-wise's sayings), for instance, the likelihood of Icelandic composition is overwhelming. In the discussion that follows, however, the likely place of a poem's composition is not of importance. What makes Eddic poetry part of Icelandic literary history is the fact that it was a living part of the cultural heritage of the Icelanders during the first centuries they lived in the country.

Because Eddic poetry is anonymous and most of it is relatively easy to understand, it may reasonably be considered popular poetry. But some of the poems, not least some of the heroic lays, seem to be inscribed with the worldview of the ruling class in Viking Age society. There are close ties between skaldic and Eddic poetry because in their kennings skalds often refer to myths and legends told in Eddic poetry and the same code of heroic conduct informs both heroic lays and court verse. Within the corpus of Eddic poetry itself tastes and attitudes vary, and in some cases this variation is most clearly explained with reference to social setting. The mythological lays have their roots in religion, but in their preserved form they are not likely to have been ritual songs, although performance in a ritual context in pagan times should not be excluded. The narrative is comic as often as it is tragic, and the poems were probably used for entertainment as well as instruction at all levels of society.

Dialogue is a prominent feature in most of the Eddic lays, and some poems consist exclusively of direct speech, sometimes connected with short narrative passages or commentary in prose. In dialogue poems it is not always easy to decide who speaks, and the scribe of the Codex Regius has sometimes systematically added marginal notes indicating who speaks in each stanza in the same way that contemporary Continental scribes marked the texts of works intended for dramatic performance. It has been proposed that such poems were presented as drama by people impersonating the various characters.

Mythological Poetry

The Codex Regius contains ten mythological lays, while three others are preserved elsewhere. These poems vary greatly in structure. "Þrymskviða" (Þrymur's poem) and "Rígsþula" (List of Ríg) use a mixture of dialogue and objective narrative to tell a single coherent tale. "Skírnismál" (Skírnir's journey) also tells a single tale, but presents it through dialogue only, apart from a short prose introduction and brief explanatory comments in prose. Some of the poems make use of frame stories that provide an occasion for question-and-answer contests concerning mythological lore, including "Vafþrúðnismál" (Vafþrúðnir's sayings), "Grímnismál" (Grímnir's sayings), and "Alvíssmál." Other poems stage dramatic encounters that illustrate the nature of individual gods or other mythological figures who refer to various myths in their dialogues: "Hárbarðsljóð" (Hárbarður's song) and "Lokasenna" (Loki's flyting). "Völuspá" stands apart because it encompasses cosmology, creation, and eschatology. Many of these lays have a didactic element, while didacticism dominates "Hávamál," which is probably a late compilation of various wisdom poems of different ages and origins.

Elements of pagan Scandinavian mythology are found in a variety of sources, but the idea we have of it as a coherent view of the world is mainly based on three poems, "Völuspá," "Vafþrúðnismál," and "Grímnismál," that were also among the sources for Snorri Sturluson's systematic presentation of the mythology in his *Prose Edda* (see p. 155).

"Völuspá" is a poem of great contrasts in style and theme. It presents a vision of the beginning and the end of the world in the form of a monologue in which the seeress addresses an audience of humans and gods, including Odin, and describes her knowledge of the past and a vision of the future of the gods and the cosmos. She tells how Odin and his brothers create the world, making a cosmos out of chaos, and how Odin and his kin go to live in Ásgarður. Ásgarður is threathened by giants from without and by the moral shortcomings of the gods within. The one who seems to possess moral as well as physical perfection, Baldur, is killed by his brother through the scheming of Odin's evil foster brother, Loki. Though Loki is caught and bound, nothing can stop the apocalyptic battle of Ragnarök. The destruction of the world in Ragnarök is described in a dramatic sequence of stanzas (sts. 50–58). The gods are attacked by giants and monsters, and toward the end destruction seems to be complete:

Sól tér sortna, || sígr fold í mar,
hverfa af himni || heiðar stjörnur;
geisar eimi || við aldrnara,
leikr hár hiti || við himin sjalfan.
(st. 57)

The Sun turns black, earth sinks into the sea,
the bright stars vanish from the sky;
steam rises up in the conflagration,
a high flame plays against heaven itself.
(*Poetic Edda*, trans. Larrington, 11)

This is not the end of the universe, however. In a beautiful, almost lyric final movement, it is described how the earth is seen to rise cleansed from the sea; Baldur and a new generation of gods return to begin a happy life in a world populated by good people. The final stanza is obscure and has been interpreted variously. It may be a return to the frame situation, the seeress's speech, or simply a reminder that the new world, too, contains evil:

Þá kömr hinn dimmi || dreki fljúgandi,
naðr fránn neðan || frá Niðafjöllum;
berr sér í fjöðrum || —flýgr völl yfir-
Níðhöggr nái. || Nú mun hún sökkvask.
(st. 66)

There comes the dark dragon flying,
the shining serpent, up from the Dark-of-moon Hills;
Nidhogg flies over the plain, in his wings
he carries corpses; now she must sink down.
(*Poetic Edda*, trans. Larrington, 13)

In part, the dramatic effect of "Völuspá" stems from its subject matter, but it is also a result of the magnificent language and memorable images in which the seeress expresses her visions. She variously refers to herself in the first or third person, and this feature, as well as the use of refrains reminiscent of skaldic praise poems, enhances the strong feeling of presence evoked by the poem; it is neither a tale from a far past nor a vision of a distant future; it all takes place in a moment of performance and participation. Yggdrasill, the tree that mysteriously unites all parts of the universe and reflects the state of all things, shows us that, in the place created in the empty gap between ice and fire, human life is entwined with the existence of the gods and man and god share the same fate. Although the poem is tragic, it contains passages that express pure joy of life. There is no doubt that the point of departure for the "Völuspá" poet is ancient pagan myth, and some of the phraseology probably goes back to old Germanic poetry about the creation of the world. Most scholars, however, are agreed that "Völuspá" also reveals a knowledge of Christian ideas.

The influence of Christianity might account for some of the moralistic elements in the poem as well as for the strong sense of drama and the persuasive contrast between the doomed present world and its cleansed successor. But are we to believe that the poet was a devout pagan, fighting Christianity with the full power of imagination and verbal skill, or a Christian who composed a moral fable or allegory out of old material? There seems to be very little reason to accept the latter explanation. A medieval Christian is unlikely to have composed such an allegory without providing any direct clues to its correct interpretation. That said, however, no precise conclusion about the poet's knowledge of or attitude toward Christianity seems possible, especially in view of the probability that in its preserved form the poem has been modified by generations of Christians and that some elements are late additions. While it is obvious that by itself the poem is not a reliable source of knowledge about the pagan worldview, the main constituents of its cosmology and world history are, nevertheless, corroborated by other sources. "Vafþrúðnismál" knows of the return of life after Ragnarök, and Ragnarök itself is mentioned on numerous occasions in various sources. Although "Völuspá" was not composed as a Christian allegory, it may have survived and found its way onto vellum precisely because Christians could interpret it as a symbolic drama about the contest of good against evil, the end of the world, and the resurrection of man.

Two other poems take up themes from the divine tragedy narrated in "Völuspá." A short lay not found in the Codex Regius, "Baldrs draumar" (Baldur's dreams), makes use of a frame similar to that employed in "Völuspá"—here Odin awakens a dead seeress and forces her to tell him about the future death of Baldur. The other poem, "Lokasenna," also evokes a world shadowed by the approach of Ragnarök, but its tone is satiric, even farcical. Each of the gods is mocked in this lay, which is entirely made up of dialogue in *ljóðaháttur*. Loki addresses each of the gods, accusing them of promiscuity, incest, and cowardice, among other things, and reminding them of past humiliations and situations that have made them more vulnerable as Ragnarök draws near. Many of the accusations find confirmation in other lays and myths. The poem ends with Thor's driving Loki away with threats.

"Lokasenna" has frequently been understood as a Christian diatribe against the pagan gods, and classical models have been suggested. It is tempting, however, to see the poem, or the myth behind it, as connected with some kind of cathartic ritual. The Menippean satires might be a parallel rather than a model. In many heroic poems a *senna*, or flyting, belongs to the preparatory stages of a battle, and many of the accusations made by Loki point toward Ragnarök, where he is on the side of the forces who, at terrible cost to the gods, suffer defeat.

The mythological lays, with their abundance of names of places and phenomena in the worlds of gods and men, provide a poetic topography of the mythical universe. "Grímnismál" and "Vafþrúðnismál" are good examples of the poetry of names, and both are most likely based on ancient material. "Alvíssmál," on the other hand, which makes a system of name giving, is probably literary and late (twelfth or early thirteenth century) since many of its names seem to have been especially created for it. The poem demonstrates a vivid feeling for the poetic qualities of names as well as a splendid command of the *ljóðaháttur* measure.

The god Thor plays a major role in many of the Eddic poems. In "Alvíssmál" he is quite out of character, using guile instead of the enormous strength that characterizes him in a number of lays. Although he perishes in Ragnarök, he is not as closely connected with the fate of the world as Odin. In "Hárbarðsljóð" the two are engaged in a flyting and presented as opposites. Odin is more intelligent but dangerously amoral, while Thor seems to be more like an innocent and good-natured farmer. The dialogue is farcical, and it has even been suggested that it parodies flyting poetry. In any case it is a comedy, as is another lay about Thor, "Þrymskviða," in which a giant steals Thor's hammer and the strongest and most masculine of gods must dress up as a bride to retrieve it. Some scholars think that "Þrymskviða" was composed in the thirteenth century, while others believe it to have originated in the pagan past. Although solid arguments for either position are hard to find, comparative study indicates that the comic treatment of a god need not in itself rule out the possibility of a work's pagan origin. Still another humorous poem about Thor, "Hymiskviða" (Hymir's poem), combines elements from several myths, but the climax is Thor's attempt to catch Miðgarðsormur, the World Serpent. The poem is probably rather late in its present form, but there is no doubt about the authenticity of the mythological elements; the catching of the serpent is treated by a number of skalds from Bragi the Old (Bragi Boddason; early ninth century) on and depicted on stones in both Denmark and Sweden and possibly also England.

The family of Norse gods consisted of two groups that had originally been enemies. The Vanir are less prominent than the Æsir (Odin, Thor, etc.) in our sources, but there is no doubt that their cult was strong in many areas of Scandinavia. Foremost among them are the sea god Njörður and his children Freyr, the god of fertility, and Freyja, the goddess of love, war, and magic. "Skírnismál" tells how Freyr fell in love with a giant maiden who refused both offers of gold and threats of violence but was at last won over by the curses and threats that magic would be used against her. At the end of the poem Freyr is impatiently awaiting his union with the maiden, which is to take place in a grove named Barri. The poem has been interpreted as a fertility myth, as a social myth dealing with the problems of exogamy, and most recently as part of a myth explaining the origin of the Swedish-Norwegian dynasty. These interpretations are not mutually exclusive, but they do not account for the emotional power of the poem. The maiden is described with images of shining light, and the god is possessed by his love. The maiden resists threats of torture and gives in only when threatened with the most extreme sexual humiliation. Although the poem may have been less mysterious to the people of the Viking Age, the terrible force and cruelty of divine desire must have stricken them with awe.

"Rígsþula" may also be connected to the Vanir. It tells the tale of a god (Heimdallur, according to an introductory prose passage, although he acts more like Odin) wandering around among humans, going to bed with couples, and laying the foundations of a class-divided society with slaves, farmers, and aristocrats. It is found in a fourteenth-century manuscript of Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*, although there is no clear indication that Snorri knew the poem, and some scholars have suggested that it is a learned construction from the thirteenth century. The poem is repetitive and formulaic, but the descriptions of the supposed forefathers are vivid and the differences between the classes clearly marked. The poet shows great inventiveness in his name giving. Several elements in the poem have been considered to be of Celtic origin, which would support its claim to a background in the early oral tradition.

Didactic Poetry

There is a didactic element in many of the mythological lays, but nowhere is it as prominent as in "Hávamál," spoken by Odin, the "High One." As preserved, the poem is a written compilation based on older oral poetry. Until recently scholars thought that in large the poem was composed in pagan Norway, but its origins are probably mixed, and the learned Christian compiler of the version that has come down to us may have been a poet in his own right. It has been maintained that the lonely wanderer who speaks reflects the rootlessness created by the Viking Age, but there is nothing about warfare in the poem, and, although there is much common wisdom of the kind also found in writings in medieval Latin, the emphasis in the poem is on practical and secular issues. The main moral message is that everyone must take care of himself first: there is nothing about loving your neighbor, let alone God.

The 164 stanzas of "Hávamál," mainly in *ljóðaháttur*, can be divided into several parts that differ in content and style. As it exists today, "Hávamál" seems to have been made up of several shorter poems, but it is not always easy to tell where one of these shorter pieces ends and the next one begins. The first seventy-seven or perhaps eighty stanzas constitute a gnomic or proverbial poem supposedly spoken by Odin but without any narrative or dramatic frame. The speaker reveals no divine wisdom but appears as a wise wanderer who has seen much of the world and whose theme is human relations and human happiness. He advocates caution and moderation in all situations. Loyalty to friends is essential, but one should also know one's enemies and be their enemy in turn. Wisdom is necessary, but too much wisdom does not make anyone happy. Although good health and a good life are the highest values, they are transitory; it is only fame that is immortal:

> Deyr fé, || deyja frændr,
> deyr sjálfr it sama;
> en orðstírr || deyr aldregi
> hveim er sér góðan getr.
> (st. 77)
>
> Cattle die, kinsmen die,
> the self must also die;
> but glory never dies
> for the man who is able to achieve it.
> (*Poetic Edda*, trans. Larrington, 24)

Although the ethics of the poem are self-centered and egotistical, humility is also in evidence, along with a genuine respect for life, even the life of the very poor.

The second and third poems of the compilation tell tales about Odin's erotic adventures; they are surrounded by loosely connected verse, often with an antifeminine bias. The first tale, in which Odin is cheated by a woman, may be late and literary in origin, but the story about his dealings with Gunnlöð, a giant's daughter with whom he slept and from whom he stole the "precious mead" (identified by Snorri Sturluson as the "mead of poetry"), is no doubt based on genuine myth.

Stanza 111 marks a break in the poem, indicating that, henceforth, it will deal with Odin's special knowledge. However, what immediately follows is another gnomic poem, of poorer quality than the first one.

Stanzas 138–41 are among the most interesting in the poem. Here, Odin describes how he acquired wisdom, runes, and magic through a symbolic sacrifice of himself to himself by hanging, wounding, and fasting. During his hanging for nine nights (and days), he visited the world of the dead. The pagan and shamanistic origin of this poetry can hardly be doubted. The description of the god's sudden intellectual growth as a result of the ordeals is poignantly phrased:

> Þá nam ek fræðask || ok fróðr vera
> ok vaxa ok vel hafask;
> orð mér af orði || orðs leitaði,
> verk mér af verki || verks leitaði.
> (st. 141)

> Then I began to quicken and be wise,
> and to grow and to prosper;
> one word found another word for me,
> one deed found another deed for me.
> (*Poetic Edda*, trans. Larrington, 34)

The poem ends with an enumeration of the magical chants known to Odin and with a declaration by him that his last poem will never be taught to anybody.

"Hávamál" contains some of the most frequently quoted stanzas in Old Norse poetry and is a unique source of information about the mentality of the Icelanders and the Norwegians in the Viking Age and the following centuries.

Legends with Mythological Overtones

There are a few Eddic poems that tell tales neither about gods nor about the usual type of human hero and seem to be based on legends rather than myths. The only one preserved in the Codex Regius is "Völundarkviða" (The lay of Völundur), and there it is placed among the mythological poems, although scholarship has defined it as heroic. It combines the fairy tale motif of the swan maiden and a Germanic version of an ancient legend about a fabulous smith, Wayland or Welent, known also from Old English and Old German sources. In a prose introduction, Völundur is said to be the king of the Lapps, while he and his brothers are described as hunters and craftsmen living in the forest with their swan maidens, who eventually leave them. Völundur is maimed and imprisoned on an island by an enemy king, but, after killing the king's two sons and getting his daughter pregnant, he flies away, presumably by means of a device of his own making. Although the poem as we have it is probably incomplete, it is strongly unified, and the poet's careful diction yields individual stanzas of striking beauty.

Völundur seems more akin to the shamans found in the *Kalevala* than to Germanic heroes. His craft, which enables him to fly in defiance of the laws of nature, makes him somewhat of a magician. Like Daedalus, he belongs to a category of famous smiths appearing in myths and legends that probably express the wonder aroused by early metallurgy in the cultures it was changing. The Old English poem "Deor" refers to the main events related in the second half of "Völundarkviða," and there seems to be some verbal correspondence between the two poems. An English casket from the eighth century or earlier, the Franks Casket, is engraved with pictures from the tale.

Also from the border area between heroic and mythological poetry is "Grottasöngr" (The song of Grotti), preserved only in two manuscripts of the *Prose Edda*. It tells of two giant maidens who are enslaved and forced to grind gold for the legendary Danish king Frodi. The maidens tell their story and describe their plight in picturesque stanzas and predict the fall of the king. The poem seems to be based on an old myth relating how the greed for gold causes the end of an early golden age of peace. The mill, as well as the smithy, is a powerful symbol of early means of cultivating natural products.

Another poem in Eddic meter that is not included in the Codex Regius and may, indeed, be of later date is "Svipdagsmál" (Svipdagur's poem) — itself made up of two parts, "Grógaldr" (The magic of Gró) and "Fjölsvinnsmál" (Fjolsvinnur's sayings). Found only in paper copies from the seventeenth century, the poem can, on the evidence of its style and language, hardly be later than the thirteenth century or possibly the early fourteenth. The first part of the poem tells of a young man under a spell from his stepmother who seeks advice from his dead mother and gets charms from her that protect him on his journey to the maiden he is to marry. The second part deals with a contest of question and answer in which the young man must prove himself before he is accepted by the maiden. This story, also told in the Danish ballad "Ungen Svejdal" (Young Svejdal), contains so many Celtic elements that it must have been brought from that quarter to the North, where it was re-created by an Icelandic poet drawing heavily on

Eddic tradition. The poem or its motifs may be connected in some way with initiation rites, and the maiden, Menglöð, is reminiscent of a goddess. However, Svipdagur himself is a typical fairy tale hero who succeeds through a woman's assistance and his own verbal skills. The union of the lovers in the end is beautifully described, and the poem would have been excellent entertainment at weddings.

Heroic Poetry

The drama and tragedy of what is left to us of the heroic poetry and legends of the Germanic peoples rise from the inhuman demands made on the heroes by their code of conduct. The only objective of a hero is honor, and the heroic quality of a man or a woman can be measured only in the face of death. Strength of will and integrity of character are the essential characteristics of a hero, and, thus, the poetry pays minimal attention to physical superiority, which is taken for granted. Strong female characters arouse admiration and awe no less than do male heroes.

Much of the subject matter of the heroic lays preserved in Iceland deals with characters from the Migration Period and evidently reached the North from more southern locations, primarily Germany. There is material that originated in mainland Scandinavia too, however, making clear references to the Viking Age, and often exhibiting supernatural motifs. The Icelandic tradition brought these separate strains together by making family and in-laws of all the major figures in the heroic lays. The heroic poems in the Codex Regius have been linked together with prose passages in an effort to organize the material and make it cohere. As far as can be judged, however, the "editor" of the Codex Regius recorded his sources faithfully and allowed the old poems to retain many of the repetitions and inconsistencies that arise when they are grouped together. The final phase of this merger was achieved in the thirteenth-century *Völsunga saga* (The saga of the Völsungar), a prose narrative that may be based on a collection of lays slightly older than the Codex Regius but closely related to it (see p. 147).

The heroes of "Helga kviða Hundingsbana" (The lay of Helgi Hunding's killer) I and II and "Helga kviða Hjörvarðssonar" (The lay of Helgi Hjörvarðsson) are not, as in the other heroic lays, Hunnish, Burgundian, or Gothic but Nordic. The common theme of the Helgi lays is the love between a warrior prince and a young woman who is a valkyrie. The story is tragic because the prince falls in battle and his beloved cannot go on living after his death. In all three lays, high points in the conflict are preceded by a coarse flyting, which serves as comic relief and a warming up for battle. "Helga kviða Hundingsbana" I, the best preserved of the Helgi lays, comes to an end before the prince's fall in battle. It is an eloquent and lofty poem whose emphasis is on the victorious prince and his happy love. Because its style is often reminiscent of skaldic praise poetry, it has been tentatively attributed to an eleventh-century skald. The two other Helgi lays are made up of a mixture of prose narration and dialogue in verse form. "Helga kviða Hjörvarðssonar" does not fully develop the tragic potential of its story, but the economy and pointed phrasing of some of the stanzas are noteworthy. The vulgarity of a flyting scene between a warrior and a giantess seems inconsistent with the rest of the poem. "Helga kviða Hundingsbana" II is the most uneven of the Helgi lays, but it contains some of the most memorable stanzas and scenes in Eddic poetry. Before he can marry his beloved Sigrún, Helgi must fight her family and ends up killing her father and all but one of her brothers. Sigrún persists in her love for Helgi in spite of this, and she fiercely curses her surviving brother after he kills Helgi in revenge. When Helgi appears to her after his death, she spends a night with him in his burial mound. Her praise of him after his death is expressed in exquisite epic similes:

> "Svá bar Helgi || af hildingum
> sem ítrskapaðr || askr af þyrni,
> eða sá dýrkálfr || döggu slunginn,
> er öfri ferr öllum dýrum
> ok horn glóa við himin sjalfan!"
> (st. 38)
>
> "So was Helgi beside the chieftains
> like the bright-growing ash beside the thorn-bush
> and the young stag, drenched in dew,
> who surpasses all animals
> and whose horns glow against the sky itself!"
> (*Poetic Edda*, trans. Larrington, 139)

As is the case with "Helga kviða Hjörvarðssonar," parts of "Helga kviða Hundingsbana" II are mediocre and in dubious poetic taste. There is reason to believe that what has been edited under this title in the Codex Regius are, in fact, the remains of more than one poem.

According to the Codex Regius, Helgi Hunding's killer is the half brother of Sigurd the Dragon-slayer (see also p. 147), and poems about Sigurd follow the Helgi lays. The first of the Sigurd poems, "Grípisspá" (The prophecy of Grípir), is a prophecy in *fornyrðislag* about Sigurd's life. It is late, based on other Sigurd poems, and probably originally composed, not orally, but in writing. After "Grípisspá," a long section of the manuscript contains prose mixed with poetry, just as in two of the Helgi lays. It can be read as a kind of Legendary Saga with only the dialogue in verse, and editors have separated it into three lays named after Sigurd's speech partners—"Reginsmál" (The lay of Reginn), "Fáfnismál" (The lay of Fáfnir), and "Sigrdrífumál" (The lay of Sigrdrífa). These poems tell the story of how Sigurd avenges his father; kills the dragon Fáfnir and takes his treasure; kills Reginn, who intended to betray him; and then meets a valkyrie, Sigrdrífa, who, in a long final monologue, teaches him magic. Its supernatural themes and many didactic passages bring this section of the Edda closer to mythological poetry than do other heroic lays. Although there are some beautiful stanzas—particularly noteworthy is the tenderness expressed in the passage where Sigurd and Sigrdrífa meet-the verses overall do not give the impression of being part of a single composition, and they may, indeed, be relatively late or of differing ages and origins. Although a legend about Sigurd as a dragon killer and the owner of a treasure existed as part of an old Germanic heritage, this poetry does not indicate that the legend had a fixed form in the Norse tradition.

Not only do the Helgi lays and the poetry about Sigurd's youth contain mythological elements, but they also explore the interpenetrability of mythical and human realms. Valkyries are both semimythical beings and human princesses, humanized, in fact, by their love for their young men. In turn, because of the valkyries' love, young heroes are enabled to reach higher levels of potentiality and individuality. Thus, Helgi Hunding's killer is protected in battle, Helgi Hjörvarðsson receives his proper name, and Sigurd learns hidden wisdom. The extraordinary nature of this love is underlined by the extreme reaction of the valkyries to the deaths of their lovers. The poetic portrayal of love as a civilizing influence superseding family ties may be a Viking Age phenomenon. It may also be connected with the feminine point of view that is prominent in much of the Eddic heroic poetry (see pp. 509–10).

After "Sigrdrífumál," several leaves (eight of the original fifty-three) are missing from the Codex Regius, and what they might have contained can be reconstructed only with the help of *Völsunga saga*. The poems after the lacuna deal with the death of Sigurd and subsequent events. It is characteristic of this poetry that great events are mentioned only in passing and that the main emphasis is on the emotional reactions of the people involved, especially the women. An important feature of these poems, sometimes the structuring principle of a whole piece, is the flashback, usually in the form of a monologue by a suffering woman.

The first poem after the lacuna, "Brot af Sigurðarkviðu" (Fragment of a Sigurd lay), lacks its beginning, probably no more than a few stanzas. It has a few relatively archaic features and shows considerable economy of expression in its mixture of narration and direct speech. It does not give the impression of being old, however. The focus is domestic: Brynhildur, who has been duped by Sigurd into marrying Gunnar, the brother of Guðrún and Högni, forces her husband to attack Sigurd. The murder takes place offstage, and Högni, who has helped Gunnar, breaks the news to Guðrún, who is Sigurd's wife:

> "Sundr höfum Sigurð || sverði högginn,
> gnapir æ grár jór || yfir gram dauðum."
> (st. 7)
>
> "Sigurd we hacked into pieces with a sword,
> the grey horse droops his head over the dead prince."
> (*Poetic Edda*, trans. Larrington, 175)

Guðrún's sorrow and Brynhildur's gloating are effectively portrayed, whereupon the focus moves to a rather pathetic Gunnar. The poem ends with Brynhildur's revelation in a monologue of several stanzas that she lied to Gunnar in order to bring about revenge for her deception and hurt pride. Interest in the psychology of the characters is even more pronounced in "Sigurðarkviða skamma" (The short lay of Sigurd), which, at more than seventy stanzas, is, in fact, one of the longest lays. The poem tells the story from the moment Sigurd arrives at the court of Guðrún's father, but the main theme is Brynhildur's passion and conflicts. Brynhildur's initial youth and purity are emphasized, until Sigurd's betrayal transforms her; in the last half of the poem, Brynhildur dominates the stage and ends by having herself burned on Sigurd's pyre. The poem mixes narration and direct speech, and it ends with a long monologue in which Brynhildur predicts the fate of the other characters and prescribes the arrangements surrounding her own death. The text of the poem is well preserved and shows no clear signs of oral composition. It may well be a literary composition of the early thirteenth century.

The origins of seven short lays centered on the experience of female characters from the heroic legends have been a matter of much scholarly dispute. These lays have often been called *elegies* because many of them thematize the sorrow of bereft women and their main structural device is the flashback in monologue. They are, however, too structurally different from each other to qualify as a specific subgenre. Andreas Heusler (*Die altger-*

manische Dichtung) considered these poems — "Helreið Brynhildar" (Brynhildur's ride to hell), "Guðrúnarkviða" (The lay of Guðrún) I, II, and III, "Oddrúnargrátr" (Oddrún's lament), and "Guðrúnarhvöt" (Guðrún's inciting) — to be of late origin, like "Sigurðarkviða skamma" and "Atlamál in grænlensku" (The Greenland lay of Atli), all products of an indigenous Icelandic development under the influence of oral sagas that had, Heusler thought, flourished in the eleventh century. Other scholars have pointed out similarities between these elegiac lays and the ballad genre, similarities that might in both cases be the result of influence from chivalric and religious literature, and such influence is, indeed, possible in Iceland from ca. 1200 on. Although the emotional and elegiac features of these seven poems may be taken as indicative of late composition, it should be kept in mind that elegy and exploration of emotion are prominent features in the other rich tradition of Germanic poetry that has come down to us, the Old English one.

"Guðrúnarkviða" II, structurally the most complex of these poems, the richest in narrative material, and probably the oldest, seems to be an attempt to reconcile different traditions about the life of the heroine. A striking feature of the poem is its description of ladies sitting and making tapestries, a scene common in both chivalric literature and ballads. In "Guðrúnarkviða" I, which is tightly constructed and literary in flavor, a number of women tell of their sorrows, but the climax is Guðrún's weeping and her final monologue, in which she laments Sigurd. The poem takes Guðrún's part against Brynhildur, who is portrayed as monstrous. In "Helreið Brynhildar," Brynhildur gets a chance to defend herself. "Guðrúnarkviða" III and "Oddrúnargrátr" are more balladic and more novelistic than the other elegiac poems. Heroines play an important role in most Eddic heroic lays, and it is likely that this poetry was popular among women. But in this group the feminine point of view is exceptionally strong, so it is possible that these works originated as women's poetry. None of them bears traces of a long life in oral tradition, and influence from chivalric literature is, indeed, most likely to have taken place about or after 1200. In the Legendary Sagas (*fornaldarsögur*; see pp. 145–51), there are a few poems in monologue spoken by men, but these are different in style and content from the so-called women's elegies: a hero looks back on his life at the hour of his death, and the resulting elegy tends to become a catalog of battles and ordeals.

The oldest of the ancient tragedies dealt with in Eddic poetry are the death of the Ostrogothic king Ermanaric, or Jörmunrek (d. AD 375), and the conflict between the Huns, whose most famous leader was Attila, or Atli (d. AD 474), and the Burgundian dynasty, whose most famous king was Gundaharius, son of Gibicha, or Gunnar Gjúkason, killed in a battle with the Huns in AD 437. The death of Ermanaric is referred to in very old skaldic poetry and dealt with at greater length in "Hamðismál" (The lay of Hamðir), a poem with many archaic features. The defeat of the Burgundians, a prominent theme in old Germanic poetry, is the subject of "Atlakviða" (The lay of Atli) and "Atlamál in grænlensku." In "Hlöðskviða" (The lay of Hlöð), a large number of names point back to the ancient history of the Goths and their battles in Central and Eastern Europe. These names, along with archaic stylistic features, have tempted scholars to search for historical events at the root of the narrative, but the results are highly speculative. Although the historical basis of the legends treated in these poems is slender indeed, they all embody a form of the Germanic heroic spirit so extreme that it has been suggested that one of them, "Hamðismál," may be a parody, a demonstration of the absurdity of the uncompromising demand for blood vengeance at any cost.

According to "Atlakviða," Guðrún, daughter of Gjúki, was married to King Atli after the death of her first husband, Sigurd. Her new husband invites her brothers, Gunnar and Högni, to a feast, captures them, and tries to force them to give him the Nibelungen treasure. When they refuse, he has them tortured and killed. In revenge, Guðrún kills her two sons by Atli, makes him eat their flesh and drink their blood, and afterward kills him and sets fire to his hall. "Atlakviða" is an aristocratic poem, honoring the dignity of kings and heroes in descriptions of magnificent halls, weapons, gold, and jewelry. Gunnar's sense of his own heroic stature is such that, despite a warning from his sister, he does not hesitate to risk his life, kingdom, and possessions by accepting Atli's invitation. One of the puzzling features of "Atlakviða" is that, in the narration of the brothers' fight to defend themselves, Högni kills eight people while Gunnar's feats are not mentioned. Gunnar ends his life playing a harp in a snake pit, having first ensured that his brother is killed before him. The greatest achievement of the poem is to deal with Guðrún's revenge in such a way that she appears, not as a monster, but as an impressive tragic figure. Nothing is done to reduce the horror of her deed, but the final stanza expresses a mixture of admiration and awe:

> Fullrætt er um þetta; || ferr engi svá síðan
> brúðr í brynju || bróðr at hefna.
> Hún hefir þriggja || þjóðkonunga
> banorð borit, || björt, áðr sylti.
> (st. 44)

> Now this story is all told; never since has a bride
> in a byrnie acted so to avenge her brothers;
> she brought death to three great kings,
> that bright woman, before she died.
> (*Poetic Edda*, trans. Larrington, 216)

"Atlakviða" is characterized by passionate concentration and speed. The characters are stylized in the extreme, delineated only through action and speech. For instance, we hear nothing about Guðrún's feelings when she kills her children, yet her address to Atli describing the deed leaves no doubt of her awareness of the dimensions of what she has done. The poem's narrative economy is such that images emphasizing the splendor and passion of its subject do not interfere with the speed at which the action unfolds. There is more variation in the length of the verse lines than in any other Eddic poem; the effects of the variation are often striking, although it is hard to tell when they may be the result of a deliberate artistic plan. It has been suggested that "Atlakviða" was composed by one of the poets of Haraldur Fairhair (d. ca. 930), and it does, indeed, seem a poem more likely than any other to have been the product of the cultural milieu that produced early skaldic praise poetry, the court of a Viking king. However, theories of such a great age for this poem have recently been contested (see Wolf's "Mythisch-heroische Überlieferungen").

"Atlamál in grænlensku," the longest of the heroic lays of the Edda, tells the same story as "Atlakviða," but it expresses a totally different worldview and artistic aspiration. The setting is rural and narrow, and the heroes are peasants. Ursula Dronke has pointed out that the treatment can be compared to many modern works in its attempt "not to render the legend mundane, but invest the everyday world with drama" (*The Poetic Edda*, 1:99). On the other hand, the amount of detail in the narration has been viewed by W. P. Ker in *Epic and Romance* as evidence that "Atlamál" was beginning to develop along the lines of an epic. The realistic, occasionally pedantic narration in no way mitigates the horror of the story, as, for instance, a scene in which Guðrún describes her plans to her sons before she kills them. Although "Atlamál" tells a coherent story in regular *málaháttur* meter and the poet shows a knowledge of older Eddic poems such as "Atlakviða," the rather prosaic style and peasant-like world of the poem makes it tempting to assume that the poet was familiar with prose sagas, in which case the poem must be very late and have been written down at the same time as or soon after it was composed. The issue is complicated by the fact that, in the Codex Regius, both "Atlakviða" and "Atlamál" are said to be "Greenlandic." As far as "Atlakviða" is concerned, most scholars have disregarded this, while it is not unlikely that the tradition on which these poems are based, if not the poems themselves, actually came to Iceland via Greenland.

One of the lays about the Gjúkungar family is "Hamðismál." Not so well preserved as "Atlakviða," it is more difficult to interpret because of its fragmentary state. Although the historical Ermanaric died approximately sixty years earlier than Gundaharius, son of Gibicha, the Edda makes him a son-in-law of Guðrún, daughter of Gjúki, and he is killed by her sons, Sörli and Hamðir, in revenge for their sister Svanhildur. Svanhildur was Ermanaric's wife, and he had her cruelly killed because he suspected her of infidelity. According to "Hamðismál," which differs from "Atlakviða" in this, Guðrún marries for the third time after killing Atli and in this marriage produces the two sons who are the protagonists of "Hamðismál." She eggs them on to avenge their sister, knowing that they will not come back. Although they blame her for sending them to certain death, they go and are killed. We find Guðrún's egging speech again at the beginning of another related poem, "Guðrúnarhvöt," an elegy in which Guðrún looks back on her tragic life at the hour of death.

An account by the medieval historian Jordanes on the origins and deeds of the Goths and the Huns shows that a legend about the death of Ermanaric containing many of the names and events found in "Hamðismál" was known by Germanic peoples as early as the sixth century. The legend is referred to in Bragi Boddason's "Ragnarsdrápa" (A poetic tribute to Ragnar), and it is, therefore, likely that it was well known in Norway in the ninth century. Most scholars believe that "Hamðismál" dates from that time, but recently it has been argued that the poem is very late and is to be interpreted as criticizing the ideology of revenge. It is most likely that the extant text is a mixture of very old and somewhat later elements.

"Hamðismál" has some fine stanzas that can compare with the best in "Atlakviða" and "Völundarkviða," although the text is corrupt. Its comments on the consequences of revenge at any cost do show an awareness of the absurdity of the blood feud when carried to extremes, and it is not unlikely that they are influenced by Christian ethics. The penultimate stanza, however, seems to confirm the fact that, in the milieu of the poem, the heroes, however far removed they are from everyday life, evoke admiration:

> Vel höfum vit vegit, || stöndum á val Gotna,
> ofan eggmóðum || sem ernir á kvisti,
> Góðs höfum tírar fengit || þótt skylim nú eða í gær deyja.
> Kveld lifir maðr ekki || eptir kvið norna.
> (st. 30)

We have fought well, we stand on Goth corpses,
weary from the sword-edge like eagles on a branch;
we have won great glory if we die now or yesterday,
after the norns have given their verdict, no man outlasts the evening.
(*Poetic Edda*, trans. Larrington, 242)

With "Hamðismál" the Codex Regius comes to an end; all heroes and heroines are dead, and one-third of the last page is blank. Although this collection forms an impressive whole that has been composed by an editor in the thirteenth century, a few poems that are not part of the collection have been discussed here in accordance with scholarly tradition. Some poems and fragments incorporated into the Legendary Sagas also show so many affinities with the poems in the Codex Regius that it is natural to discuss them in the same context.

Eddic Verse in the Legendary Sagas

The mythic-heroic Legendary Sagas contain a considerable amount of Eddic verse in addition to the previously mentioned men's elegies. The heroic poem "Hlöðskviða" is found in a thirteenth-century Legendary Saga, *Heiðreks saga* (The saga of King Heiðrek). The poem is incomplete, the connections between the stanzas that are preserved being supplied in a prose commentary by the saga writer. The poem is full of ancient lore, and individual stanzas have the same kind of suggestive power as is found in other archaic Eddic lays. More epic in scope than the lays of the Codex Regius, "Hlöðskviða" describes a battle between two nations, the Goths and the Huns, in which thousands are killed, but the basic conflict is interpreted in ethical and personal, not political, terms. It is seen as stemming from the individual pride of the leaders of each army, and, because these leaders are half brothers, the poem conveys a powerful sense of tragedy.

There are in the Legendary Sagas a number of poetic fragments that, like "Hlöðskviða," must be older than the sagas in which they are preserved. "Bjarkamál" (The lay of Bjarki), which is preserved among legends about Danish kings, was translated into Latin by Saxo Grammaticus around 1200, and a few stanzas of the poem are preserved in Snorri's *Prose Edda*. "Dánaróðr Hildibrands" (Hildibrand's death song) in *Ásmundar saga kappabana* (The saga of Asmund the champion slayer) refers to persons and events described in the Old High German *Hildebrandslied*, and the early Legendary Sagas can, indeed, be seen as a continuation of the Germanic heroic tradition. The harshness of the old lays rapidly softened after their inclusion in prose literature, and the resulting poetry is often beautiful and even sentimental, as, for instance, in a poem called "Dánaróðr Hjálmars" (Hjálmar's death song), preserved in *Örvar-Odds saga* (The saga of Arrow-Oddur; see p. 148) and *Heiðreks saga*, both probably composed in the thirteenth century.

Although Eddic poetry shares two important characteristics with folk poetry — anonymity and origins in oral tradition — much of it was undoubtedly composed among a social and intellectual elite, as mentioned above. This applies particularly to the heroic lays as well as to poems like "Völuspá" and "Hávamál." There are, however, a few examples of poetry of a more popular kind, such as the comic stanzas referring to an ancient phallic cult that are found in *Völsaþáttr* (The tale of Völsi). The riddles collected in "Gátur Gestumblinda" (The riddles of Gestumblindi) in *Heiðreks saga* contain miniature pictures from nature and the daily life of common people. Some of these are genuine folk riddles, although they have been given poetic form by a practiced poet; some have parallels in the riddles of other countries; and a number have been found in the later Icelandic folk tradition.

The impossibility of making a clear separation between Eddic poetry, often accompanied by short prose passages in the Codex Regius, and the *prosimetrum* (mixture of prose and verse) of the early Legendary Saga is the kind of difficulty that comes about whenever we consider the birth of a literary tradition from its parent oral culture. The dialectics of oral versus written are at work in the entire corpus of early Icelandic poetry.

SKALDIC POETRY

Court Poetry

There are many kinds of secular skaldic poetry, but for the sake of convenience I shall here divide them into two main categories, court poetry and personal poetry. Court poetry was composed for princes and other rulers and includes, in addition to laudatory verse, genealogical and mythological poetry. Personal poetry consists mainly of single stanzas, *lausavísur* (sg. *-vísa*; "loose verse"), but does include several longer poems or fragments of such poems. It treats such themes as fights and travels, love and grief, and ranges in tone from the mocking of an enemy to the celebration of the art of poetry. The preservation of skaldic poetry is to a large extent accidental; that is, it has been preserved because it was either quoted as source material or incorporated for other reasons in sagas more or less historical in nature or because it was used as an example in treatises on poetics. A large proportion is ascribed to named poets, but this information is often unreliable. The arrangement of stanzas into poems is frequently the work of modern editors and should in such cases be accepted only as hypothetical. The normalized texts found in most editions are established usually by a conflation of texts from more than one manuscript and sometimes even by conjecture based on emendation of the manuscript record.

In one of the manuscripts of the *Prose Edda*, and in one manuscript of *Heimskringla* (see p. 101), there is preserved a catalog of skalds or court poets, *Skáldatal*, that is arranged chronologically according to the kings and other magnates praised by the poets. First mentioned is Ragnar Loðbrók (Hairy-Leg), the legendary ninth-century Danish Viking king; his skald is Bragi Boddason, often called Bragi the Old. More than twenty stanzas or half stanzas are ascribed to Bragi in the *Prose Edda*; one of them is explicitly said to be from his "Ragnarsdrápa," although most of these stanzas are generally thought to belong to this poem. Scholars agree that, while "Ragnarsdrápa" is most likely very old, it is doubtful that the Ragnar addressed there is, in fact, Ragnar Loðbrók. Several other early Danish or Swedish kings, along with their skalds, are mentioned in *Skáldatal*, but no other poetry has been preserved that praises either Danish or Swedish kings before the Golden Age of Icelandic court poetry, about AD 1000. There is much stronger evidence for the practice of praise poetry in the skaldic style at the courts of Norwegian kings from the time of Haraldur Fairhair on. Haraldur's skalds were Norwegian, but after his rule the only Norwegian court skald we know of is Eyvindur skáldaspillir (the plagiarist), who praised King Hákon the Good (d. 960) and Earl Hákon of Hlaðir (d. 995) in the last decades of the tenth century. It may be that there was a great quantity of work by Norwegian skalds that has simply not survived, but, according to what has come down to us, Icelanders dominated court poetry from the late tenth century on.

The skald or "scop" had his place among Germanic peoples long before the Viking Age, either as a visitor or as a retainer at the royal court. The skalds were respected for their art, and, although lavish praise was well received by kings, there were some skalds who dared to criticize their king or praise his enemies. Skalds retained their importance into the twelfth century, but by then complaints of an ungenerous reception and competition from "low" entertainers like jugglers and clowns begin to appear. Norwegian kings accepted praise poems from Icelandic nobles throughout the thirteenth century, but perhaps for reasons of diplomacy rather than any appreciation of the art of the skald. By that time skalds such as Snorri Sturluson and Sturla Þórðarson (1214–84) were also historiographers and wrote sagas about the kings (see pp. 84, 101, 120). Praise poetry had a function in these sagas as the testimony of contemporary witnesses to events.

Since secular skaldic poetry is preserved almost exclusively in the form of quotations in prose works, the context should always be taken into consideration. Most court poetry is preserved in the Kings' Sagas (*konungasögur*), while numerous examples of both court poetry and personal poetry are preserved in the *Prose Edda* and in a treatise on rhetoric, *Málskrúðsfræði*, written by Snorri's nephew Ólafur Þórðarson (d. 1259), himself a court poet. A considerable amount of personal poetry is quoted in the Sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*) and other sagas with Icelandic themes, such as the Bishops' Sagas (*biskupasögur*) and contemporary sagas (see part two of this chapter). It is usually difficult to establish a good text for skaldic verse. Not only is there always the possibility that the verse was already corrupt when it was first recorded, but scribes of later centuries often misunderstood and rearranged what was already a difficult text. Manuscript sources usually ascribe certain poems to named poets and occasions. In the nineteenth century and the early twentieth, these datings were usually accepted by scholars. A more critical attitude has since been taken. There is no doubt that the style and diction of skaldic verse began their development in pagan times, and a good deal of the poetry ascribed to the early skalds shows its pagan origins sufficiently clearly to rule out composition by Christian skalds of later times. Scholars are willing to accept that the mythological poetry and much of the praise poetry in the Kings' Sagas is traditional and that what the sagas tell us about the context of composition can be used to date the poems correctly. Much of the skaldic verse in the Sagas of Icelanders—some of it court poetry, but most of it personal poetry—is more commonly thought to have been composed later than reported, even by the saga writers themselves. Sometimes linguistic criteria can be applied, and in some cases Christian influence is obvious. There are, however, no clear lines between what scholars can agree to be old and authentic and what they suspect to be falsely ascribed to skalds of the tenth and eleventh centuries.

A combination of intricate meter and complicated style characterizes skaldic verse from its earliest extant examples. Although there are a few anomalies in the rhyme schemes of Bragi Boddason's *dróttkvætt* when it is compared to the norm followed by later poets, the forms as well as the diction are fully developed in verse ascribed to the poets of Haraldur Fairhair around 900, and it is, thus, most likely that the development of the form took place at the courts of Norwegian petty kings in the ninth century. As pointed out by Hallvard Lie in the 1950s (see the essays reprinted in his *Om sagakunst og skaldskap*), there are definite affinities with the ornate style of visual art during the period, which distorts and defamiliarizes traditional motifs, although it is not easy to say exactly how these arts could have influenced each other or what habits of mind could have informed them.

There are several points of likeness to Irish verse from this period, and the question of Celtic influence has occupied scholars for more than a century. It would be tempting to connect the rise of court poetry with the growth of the dynasty of the kings of Viken in eastern Norway, who eventually conquered the whole country. The wealth and culture of this dynasty before the days of Haraldur Fairhair is witnessed by archaeological evidence, such as the magnificent finds from Vestfold, including the Oseberg and Gokstad ships. It is, therefore, remarkable that the settlers of Iceland, who usually came from western and southwestern Norway, sometimes actually fleeing the usurpation of their rights by ambitious kings, were so well versed in the art of the skald that their descendants became leading court poets. Southwestern Norway had early contacts with the British Isles, and an origin of skaldic poetry in that part of Norway, as well as its strong position in Iceland, would harmonize well with the Celtic theory.

There were two types of praise poem, the *drápa* (pl. *drápur*) and the *flokkur* (pl. *flokkar*). The word *drápa* must be derived from *drepa*, "to strike." A *drápa* had three sections, the middle one divided into subsections with a refrain (*stef*), and was considered more prestigious than the *flokkur*; it eventually became the only form used for the praise of kings. Although skalds used several stanza forms, the "court measure," *dróttkvætt*, was by far the most common for *drápa* and *flokkur* alike. The word *flokkur* means "group"; the name implies that there are no formal rules of composition above the stanza level. It is revealing in another sense too: praise poetry is usually rather incoherent. Although full of narrative material, skaldic poetry treats events in a lyric manner as a sequence of isolated incidents, more often than not connected only by one main actor, the recipient of the poem.

A particularized setting is rare. Instead, the skalds usually operate with stock settings. One of these is the battlefield with fighting men, showers of arrows and ringing weapons, masses of corpses and animals of prey (with slight modifications, the battlefield theme can also be used for encounters at sea). Another stock setting is the prince's banquet hall with drinking, the giving of gifts, and the reciting of poetry. These contrasting scenes have parallels in the world of the gods, where the *einherjar* (champions) in Odin's retinue go out and fight every day and come back to Valhalla for feasting and drinking in the evening, rising from the dead if they have fallen in battle during the day. These parallels are constantly reinforced by imagery alluding to martial gods, to goddesses and valkyries carrying drinks to the warriors, to the elements of the battle scene, and, last but not least, to the divine origin of poetry.

Compared with the poetics of the Eddic tradition and the Germanic tradition as a whole, skaldic poetics is distinguished by four unique features: (1) The lines of the most frequently used meters are longer than the short lines of Eddic verse, and they have a fixed number of syllables. (2) Each line has internal rhyme, and very early on it becomes the rule that lines 2, 4, 6, and 8 have full rhymes and the odd lines consonantal rhymes only. (3) The poets avoid using common words for the most frequently mentioned subjects, using instead words meant only for poetry, *heiti*, or paraphrases with at least two components, the kennings, frequently with mythological allusions. (4) Word order is extremely free, and the familiar features of spoken language are avoided through inversions and convolutions involving two or more sentences.

Of all the striking features of skaldic poetry, the kenning is the most complex. Many kennings, but not all, have a metaphoric component, for example, *unda gjalfr* ("sea of wounds," or "blood"). Because each component of a kenning can itself be replaced by a whole kenning, the resulting extended figures must be translated in order to make any sense within the sentence, for example, *unda gjalfrs eldi* ("fire of the sea of wounds," or "sword"). The effect often seems deliberately chaotic; in any case, it creates a remarkable contrast to the strict regularity of meter. Mythological allusions add a special dimension to this poetry and create the feeling that the worlds of gods and men are parallel: "the goddess of the goblet" is woman, "the Thor of the ship" is man. With Christianity this way of thinking became obsolete, if not heretical, and mythological kennings gradually developed into "dead," or arbitrary, signs, while some poets avoided them altogether.

Modern students of skaldic poetry have often been astonished by its complexity and asked whether the audience in a prince's hall could possibly have understood the poems while they were being recited. Here, the words of the great modern poet T. S. Eliot apply: "Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood" (*Selected Essays*, 200). The sound and fury of battle poetry, for instance, must have got through to the audience even when not every detail was immediately put in its right place for the decoding of the message. Skaldic poetry is made difficult by a special use of language, and one must assume that one of its pleasures for its audience was the satisfaction of cracking the code, even the feeling that one belonged to an exclusive group with access to sacred and secret messages. There is a curious contrast between the monotony of the content of skaldic poetry once the message has been decoded and the endless variety of its expression, a variety that obviously generates messages around and above the primary one. This contrast is natural: a sign system dealing with an infinitely varied world must be economical, but the sign system of skaldic poetry deals with a maximally stylized, simplified, and closed world and can, therefore, afford an almost unparalleled amount of variety and redundancy.

The creation of kennings is also based on systems; thus, the idea of gold as a fire or light that is not extinguished in water provides the basis for innumerable kennings with fire as one component and liquid as the other, for example, "bonfire of the Rhine" or "river fire." And gold (either the word itself or as a kenning) is, in turn, a frequent component of kennings; a woman is a goddess of gold (because of her gold rings or bracelets), whereas a king or a chieftain is a breaker or squanderer of gold (because of his generosity). The audience, experienced in skaldic poetry, knows basically what to expect, and the purpose of the skald's artistry is at the same time to satisfy their expectations and to surprise them with new combinations. Moreover, the distortions of syntax, extreme as they may seem, also follow certain patterns and rules. A qualified audience may, therefore, have understood much of a skaldic poem on first hearing. Additional pleasure was derived from learning poems by heart and thinking them over detail by detail until their complex messages had been decoded and the artistry of the skald revealed.

Among the oldest extant examples of skaldic poetry that have come down to us, we find descriptions of pictures of shield ornaments or other decorations that depict mythological beings or scenes. Two early shield poems from the ninth century, "Ragnarsdrápa" by Bragi Boddason and "Haustlöng" (Autumn-long) by Þjóðólfur from Hvinir-both preserved in the *Prose Edda*—contain mythological as well as heroic motifs, such as Thor's fishing expedition to catch the World Serpent, the rape of the goddess Iðunn, and the slaying of Ermanaric. Both poets make use of an archaic and complicated manner of creating kennings with great distortions of syntax. Bragi's images can strike one as wooden, but their disjointed stiffness nevertheless makes a strong impression. "Haustlöng" is somewhat more relaxed, and this allows for the play of humor. Its most impressive stanzas, however—those describing Thor's ride in his wagon to meet the giant Hrungnir—are unsurpassed in forceful aural and visual imagery and seem to express religious awe.

Mythological poems by two Icelandic skalds of the tenth century have also come down to us. In the *Prose Edda*, one whole stanza and eleven half stanzas, attributed to one Úlfur Uggason, all seem to be from his "Hússdrápa," a poem that is reported to have been composed about pictures decorating the hall of Ólafur pá (Peacock), whose story is told in *Laxdæla saga* (The saga of the Laxdælir). Someone named Ólafur is addressed, whatever his identity, and there can be no doubt of the pagan origin of this fragment. In imagery basically similar to Bragi's but more metaphoric in style, Thor is portrayed as he catches the World Serpent. There is also a glimpse of a fight between Loki and Heimdallur about which little else is known and a detailed description of Baldur's funeral that is the basis for Snorri's description of this event.

Somewhat unlike other mythological poems, and with no indications that it is ekphrastic in nature, is "Þórsdrápa" (A poetic tribute to Thor; late tenth century) by Eilífur Guðrúnarson, which is considered one of the most difficult skaldic poems. It is as if the skald is stretching to its limits the creation of far-fetched, even ridiculous, kennings, especially about Thor himself. At the same time the poet often plays consciously on the connotations — not least the sexual connotations — of the individual elements of his kennings and succeeds in conveying a complex message. The poem tells the story of Thor's journey to the giant Geirröð, a myth with many components that has been interpreted as the young god's initiation ordeal. In addition to the main conflict with the giant, the poem exhibits a great preoccupation with female forces. Because "Þórsdrápa" has a comic touch, the suggestion has been made that it is a parody, but there are no convincing arguments for this theory.

Constituting a distinct subgenre of skaldic poetry are the genealogical poems in *kviðuháttur* meter. The stanza consists of eight short lines of, alternately, three and four syllables, and enjambment across strophes is not uncommon. Þjóðólfur's "Ynglingatal" (List of the Ynglingar dynasty), supposedly from the late ninth century and tracing the genealogy of the kin of Haraldur Fairhair from the gods down through the Swedish dynasty of the Ynglingar, is the most archaic and interesting of these poems. Its descriptions of the deaths of individual kings often verge on the grotesque. "Ynglingatal" may not be as old as sources maintain, but attempts to date it to the twelfth century are not convincing. It was used by Snorri Sturluson as a source for *Ynglinga saga* (see pp. 105–7). "Háleygjatal" (List of the chieftains of Hálogaland) is traditionally dated to the tenth century and seen as an imitation of "Ynglingatal," connecting the earls of Hlaðir in Norway with Odin. In the Icelandic "Noregskonungatal" (List of the kings of Norway) from ca. 1200, which forms a continuation of "Ynglingatal," the dynasty of Haraldur Fairhair is traced down from his father to King Sverrir (d. 1202), concluding with a final section connecting the Icelandic Oddaverjar family and its great chieftain, Jón Loftsson, Snorri Sturluson's foster father, to this kin.

While the composition of praise poetry about princes may have begun earlier, the oldest extant fragments are from works composed by the poets of the court of Haraldur Fairhair. Indeed, "Glymdrápa" ([The] clangor poem), attributed to Þorbjörn hornklofi (Horn-cleaver), sets the standard for this poetry in content as well as diction for the duration of its practice. Only a fragment is preserved, and, therefore, we cannot know whether the poem was a regular *drápa*, although this seems likely.

Drápur by Icelandic court poets of the tenth century are only fragmentarily preserved, with the exception of "Höfuðlausn" (Head-ransom) by Egill Skallagrímsson (ca. 910–990), the authenticity of which has been called into question. This *drápa*—composed, according to *Egils saga*, in one night—devotes twenty stanzas in the end-rhymed meter *runhent* to a freely flowing, pleasant-sounding encomium of King Eirik Blood-ax (d. 954), who was holding Egill captive in York at the time. With a variety of simple kennings it praises Eirik in the most general of terms. For several reasons it has been suggested that the poem is a twelfth-century composition: it is absent from one of the most important manuscripts of *Egils saga*; its end-rhymed meter is unlikely to have been developed as early as the tenth century; and it presents some post-tenth-century linguistic traits.

The most impressive and genuinely pagan praise poetry by Icelandic skalds that has come down to us was composed by Einar skálaglamm (Goblet-ringer) and Hallfreður Óttarsson vandræðaskáld (the troublesome poet) about Earl Hákon of Hlaðir. Considerable sections of Einar's "Vellekla" (Lack of gold) are preserved. In the introduction the skald addresses the king and his court and asks them to listen to his poetry. Through the kennings expressing this message, images of the harsh viking life at sea are evoked, and the nature of poetry as a divine gift is emphasized. As the poem continues, Hákon's victories in battle and his struggle to uphold the cult of the Æsir are eulogized, and the kennings reveal a belief in the divine nature of kingship. Hákon is described as the representative and defender of the gods and is seen in especially close relationship to Thor.

The identification of Earl Hákon with divine powers is taken a step further by Hallfreður. Nine *dróttkvætt* half stanzas of his "Hákonardrápa" (A poetic tribute to Hákon) are preserved in the *Prose Edda*, and four of them are devoted to an extended metaphor: the basic statement is that Hákon has conquered Norway and become its ruler, but the conquest is described in terms of a love affair. The kennings refer to Odin's union with Jörð (Earth), from which, according to one myth, Thor was born, and they also emphasize the special relation between sacral kingship and the forces of nature:

Sannyrðum spenr sverða
snarr þiggjandi viggjar
barrhaddaða byrjar
biðkván und sik Þriðja.

With true words of swords, the keen owner of the horses of the breeze [ships] clasps under him the barley-haired waiting wife of Thridi [wife of Odin, i.e., Earth].

It can hardly be doubted that such imagery must have pleased the earl, who was a notorious womanizer and a fervent worshipper of the Æsir. The coordination of the kennings to form two or more parallel strata of reference through an extended metaphor in which several kennings and verbs work together is a method that, absent in other examples of the oldest Norwegian court poetry, can be found in *kviðuháttur* poems. It became popular among the best Icelandic poets, and, according to Snorri Sturluson, it is called a *nýgerving* (novelty), although it never ousted the apparently older style of creating kennings with totally different connotations, which Snorri calls *nykrat* (monstrous, mixed).

The advent of Christianity necessarily posed a threat to skalds like Hallfreður who believed in the mythical origin of their art and based the most important element of their diction on references to myths. The survival of Icelandic court poetry at the courts of the militant missionaries Ólafur Tryggvason (d. 1000) and Ólafur Haraldsson (Saint Olaf; d. 1030) is a testament to the strength of the institution of court poetry and the professional skill of its great craftsmen. Hallfreður himself is a prime example. Only a few years after he composed his inspired heathen *drápa* about Hákon, he was converted to Christianity and became the court poet of Ólafur Tryggvason. A considerable amount of his praise poetry about Ólafur is preserved in the form of occasional stanzas and the fragments of two *drápur*.

Hallfreður's stanzas show that his conversion was not easy. Hallfreður says that it is hard to begin to hate Frigg's husband (Odin) and that he has been forced to pray to God instead of to Freyja's kin. Although his rejection of mythological kennings meant that he never again attained the brilliant metaphoric style of "Hákonardrápa," he succeeds in forging his own imagery, and his poetry becomes much more personal, beautifully expressing his devotion to King Ólafur. In "Erfidrápa" (Memorial poem), composed after Ólafur's death, he uses hyperbole effectively to articulate his grief: "All the countries of the North lie waste after the death of the king; all peace is disturbed after the fall of the brave son of Tryggvi." Along with Egill

Skallagrímsson, Hallfreður is unique among skaldic poets in expressing personal grief and revealing personal religious conflict.

If Hallfreður cleared the way for a new kind of court poetry acceptable to Christian princes, the position of the Christian skalds was strengthened by Sighvatur Þórðarson (ca. 995–1045), the skald of Saint Olaf and his son Magnús the Good (d. 1047). Sighvatur seems to have left Iceland as a young man to join Olaf and soon became an honored member of his court. When Olaf was killed, Sighvatur was on a pilgrimage to Rome, but he later joined Olaf's son Magnús and became his teacher in the art of government.

Sighvatur avoids mythological references; his kennings are generally simple and easily understood, but he is a master of the art of intertwining sentences and has absolute command of his meters. Most of his poetry is in *dróttkvætt*, but in "Knúts drápa," which he composed in praise of the Danish-English King Canute (d. 1035), he uses *töglag*, a meter with only four syllables in each short line that nonetheless incorporates the same demands of alliteration and rhyme as does *dróttkvætt*. A great deal of Sighvatur's poetry consists of conventional enumerations of battles and conquests, at some of which he was probably not even present. But, in addition to several elegant occasional stanzas, his travelogue "Austrfararvísur" (Verses about an Eastern journey) and the admonitory poem "Bersöglisvísur" (Outspoken verses) substantiate his claim to excellence. "Austrfararvísur" is a loosely connected sequence of stanzas describing in a humorous vein the adventures of Sighvatur and his companions on a diplomatic mission to Götland in Sweden on behalf of Saint Olaf. The *drótt* (king's retinue) is addressed in the opening lines, and no doubt the poem was composed to entertain the king and his men. The poet describes the Swedish peasants with a mixture of humor and condescension, but he is capable of taking a humorous look at himself too. At the same time, his self-confidence and pride are well expressed in a stanza in which he responds to a woman who has noted his black eyes. Incidentally, this stanza marks the first appearance of the adjective *íslenzkr*, "Icelandic":

Oss hafa augun þessi
íslenzk, konan, vísat
brattan stíg at baugi
björtum langt en svörtu;
sjá hefr, mjöð-Nannan, manni
mínn ókunnar þínum
fótr á fornar brautir
fulldrengila gengit.

> These black Icelandic eyes, woman, have shown us far along the steep path to the shining ring; this foot of mine, Mead-Goddess, has walked quite boldly on ancient roads, unknown to your man.

After the death of Saint Olaf, Norway was ruled by Danes until the Norwegian chieftains rebelled and summoned Magnús, Olaf's young son, to ascend the throne. Some of these particular chieftains had also taken part in the rebellion against Saint Olaf, and Magnús, still in his teens, began to think of revenge on them, despite the fact that they had become his own supporters. Sighvatur then took it on himself to speak openly to the king about the dangers involved. In "Bersöglisvísur" he analyzes the political situation in which King Magnús finds himself and advises him to be moderate in the use of power and to keep up good relations with his chieftains. At the end of the poem Sighvatur explains that, although he prefers to stay with Magnús, he will leave him if he does not mend his ways. This poem is a refreshing contrast to all the flattery of conventional court poetry.

Sighvatur's best stanza, composed after he had heard about the death of his beloved Olaf, closely connects the king with his country, and the skald uses natural imagery to express his state of mind in a way that has more in common with modern poetry than with the poetry of his pagan predecessors:

Há þótti mér hlæja
höll of Noreg allan,
fyrr vark kenndr á knörrum,
klif meðan Ólafr lifði;
nú þykkir mér miklu,
mitt stríð er svá, hlíðir,
jöfrs hylli varðk alla,
óblíðari síðan.

> The high inclined cliffs seemed to me to be laughing throughout all of Norway — I was formerly known on ships — while Olaf was alive; now the slopes seem to me — such is my grief — much less blithe; I got all the favor of the prince.

There is no space here to discuss the court poetry of the great number of skalds who were Sighvatur's contemporaries and successors. Remarkable for his brilliant, if somewhat superficial, style and for the introduction of the *hrynhent* meter into court poetry was Arnór Þórðarson jarlaskáld (Earl-poet; eleventh century). He composed poems about the earls of Orkney and the Norwegian kings Magnús the Good and Haraldur Sigurðarson Hard-ruler (d. 1066). Best known is his *hrynhent drápa* on Magnús that, with its eight-syllable lines and trochaic rhythm (probably modeled on rhythms frequent in Latin hymns while at the same time retaining the conventional use of internal rhyme and alliteration), marks a departure from the sturdy *dróttkvætt* style. Although the poem is reported to have been a success with his contemporaries, Arnór continued to use *dróttkvætt* in most of his work. Perhaps he found *hrynhent*'s easy rhythms somehow undignified or insufficiently expressive of his expertise.

Icelanders continued to praise and no doubt exaggerate killings and burnings and other deeds or misdeeds of kings and their warriors as long as the kings were prepared to lend an ear. In the twelfth century, however, interest seems to have started dwindling in Denmark and even in Norway, although the craft of the skald enjoyed popularity in Orkney during the reign of Earl Rögnvaldur kali (d. 1158), who was born in Norway and was himself an excellent skald. Around 1200, Icelanders seem to have sent written poems to kings and other nobles in Norway, and, in the thirteenth century, Sturla Þórðarson composed poems to adorn the sagas that he was commissioned to write about the Norwegian kings Hákon Hákonarson (d. 1263) and Magnús Law-mender (d. 1280; see p. 120).

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries skaldic poetry increasingly became a learned activity dealing with heroes of the past such as the legendary Danish Viking fraternity called Jómsvíkingar, whose adventures are described in *Jómsvíkinga saga* (see p. 114), or famous kings like Ólafur Tryggvason. A skald about whom we know little, Haukur Valdísarson (probably late twelfth century), composed an "Íslendingadrápa" enumerating among Icelandic champions the protagonists of certain sagas. This native lore was combined with a broader type of learning when the Icelander Hallur Þorarinsson (twelfth century) and Earl Rögnvaldur kali composed their *Háttalykill*, a *clavis metrica* (catalog of meters) demonstrating examples of a great number of meters and stanza forms and employing themes from heroic legend. The *clavis metrica* form was later used for *Háttatal* (List of verse forms), composed by Snorri Sturluson in praise of King Hákon of Norway and Earl (later Duke) Skúli, and later included with commentary in the *Prose Edda* (see pp. 152–57). The tendency to treat legendary themes as well as the systematic interest in metrics and style that characterize twelfth- and thirteenth-century skaldic poetry are a result of more widespread literacy and an increased knowledge of medieval poetics and rhetoric. There is reason to believe that the systematic study of traditional poetry and its stylistic and metrical devices forms the background for the court poetry of the thirteenth century, especially as practiced by the Sturlungar—Snorri Sturluson, Sturla Þórðarson, and Ólafur Þórðarson. The difficult art of skaldic poetry was, indeed, a discipline that must always have called for the training and guidance of aspiring poets by older, experienced ones. *Egils saga* describes how the young poet Einar skálaglamm sought the company of Egill Skallagrímsson to discuss poetry with him; Snorri Sturluson and Ólafur Þórðarson also taught young poets the traditional art of poetry, although their teaching methods and the discipline that they passed on were deeply influenced by medieval learning. The increasingly learned quality of skaldic poetry coincides with the development of saga writing. In time, sagas superseded skaldic verse as historical evidence, but, by incorporating court poetry into their work, the saga writers saved much of it for posterity.

Personal Poetry

Personal poetry often treats the same themes as court poetry — fights and sea voyages — but centers on the personal situation of the poet. The most celebrated practitioner of this genre, Egill Skallagrímsson, lived in the tenth century and, according to his saga, was the son of settlers from Norway. Egill was a great viking and traveler, getting involved in conflicts with the royal family of Norway, but surviving to die of old age in Iceland. Although we will never be sure how much of the poetry ascribed to him in his saga he really composed, it is now generally, although not unanimously, accepted that two of the three poems attributed to him are his, along with a number of occasional *lausavísur*. Early or late, much of the verse ascribed to Egill is among the most forceful and personal poetry preserved in Old Icelandic.

Firmly anchored in the tradition of the oldest Norwegian court poetry, Egill's verse nevertheless strikes a new note with its individualism in content and style. The poet we meet is a traveler and fighter with a fierce temperament, but he is also a sensitive man who highly values ties to kin and friends. He is capable of deep feelings; his sorrow over the death of his sons makes him question the gods he has believed in, and only after a hard mental struggle can he be reconciled with them. The kind of stylistic experimentation that Egill practiced is illustrated in one of his best-known stanzas, which describes a journey by sea:

Þél höggr stórt fyr stáli
stafnkvígs á veg jafnan
út með éla meitli
andærr jötunn vandar,
en svalbúinn selju
sverfr eirar vanr þeiri
Gestils ölpt með gustum
gandr of stál fyr brandi.

> The furiously opposing enemy of the mast [headwind] is chopping out with the chisel of storms a file on the even path of the steel-prowed bull [sea]; with it the cool-clad wolf of willows [wind] mercilessly grinds away at the swan of Gestil [ship] with gusts over the bowsprit before the prow.

In the first half of the stanza, archaic kennings transform the storm and the ship into living beings, a bull and a giant. These creatures are brought together when the effect of the storm on the sea is pictured as a giant in his smithy forging a file with rugged teeth. Here is a poet who has the strength and the originality to attempt a combination of *nykrat* and *nýgerving*, as if the *dróttkvætt* meter were no more of an obstacle than the relatively permissive *kviðuháttur*. The poet does not abandon the old style for the metaphor, however, and in the second half the ship has turned into a swan and the wind into a wolf, who is putting the already forged file to the swan's breast. The metaphoric layers are by no means reconciled, as in a *nýgerving*, but allowed to fight each other as fiercely as the subjects of the stanza—the storm, the sea, and the ship. The heavy rhythm and the tight clusters of consonants further emphasize the conflict of adverse elements.

Sorrow and generosity are central themes in Egill's poems "Sonatorrek" and "Arinbjarnarkviða." "Sonatorrek" (A lament for sons) is undoubtedly one of the greatest works of Old Icelandic literature, although bad preservation makes it difficult to interpret. Egill lost two sons, one to sickness, the other to the sea. In the poem he is beside himself with grief and describes how difficult it is to move his tongue, to carry the timber of poetry, grown with leaves of speech, out of the temple of words. At first the poem is loaded with heavy, complicated kennings. Gradually, however, powerful images begin to appear, and Egill's attention turns to the importance of the family, which the poet sees as both a wall around the individual and a rope of which he is one strand. The loss of a loved one (called in the poem *ástvinur*, "love-friend") is the breaking of a strand in the family rope. Having expressed the importance of family and kin in general, Egill turns to his own particular reaction to his loss, directing his anger at Ægir, the giant who personifies the sea and against whom he wishes he could take revenge. Egill's memories of his favorite son, who was always obedient, lead him to contemplate his own relationship with Odin, to whom he pledged his loyalty in youth but who now has betrayed this loyalty. The poet must admit, however, that Odin has given him some compensation, the gift of poetry, and in the final stanza Egill achieves reconciliation with his fate.

"Arinbjarnarkviða" (The lay of Arinbjörn) is a less complex poem, demonstrating the dimensions of Egill's self-esteem no less vividly than it shows his love for his Norwegian friend and cousin Arinbjörn. The poem is incomplete, but it is characterized by brilliant imagery and skillful variation. It contains an excellent example of a *nýgerving* in which Egill describes his confrontation with an angry Eirik Blood-ax, the ruler for whom he composed "Höfuðlausn" and from whom he succeeded in escaping with his life with the assistance of Arinbjörn:

Vara þat tunglskin || tryggt at líta
né ógnlaust || Eiríks bráa,
þás ormfránn || ennimáni
skein allvalds || ægigeislum.

It was not safe or without menace to look at the shining of the moon of
Eirik's brow when the serpent-shining moon of the prince's
forehead glittered with rays of terror.

The poem is a gold mine of original kennings that demonstrate the same strange and original poetic vision that characterizes Egill's *lausavísur*.

The art of the single stanza, the *lausavísa*, in *dróttkvætt* meter was practiced by Icelanders for centuries after Egill's time, and, although no one surpassed him, there have come down to us striking examples of poetic skill from other skalds. The Sagas of Icelanders preserve a great number of stanzas about fighting; much of this verse is doggerel, but some of the best of it expresses the feelings of men who are facing death. Þormóður Kolbrúnarskáld, who fell with Saint Olaf in 1030, describes for a woman who wondered why he is so pale how an arrow has pierced him and given him a fatal wound. Our appreciation of the stanza's exact images and carefully measured rhythms is little affected by whether we choose to see it as an example of Þormóður's bravery in the face of death or as the result of the skald's poetic imagination. This stanza and similar ones express a feeling, deeply rooted in the peoples of the North, that death should be met with equanimity.

Equanimity in the face of danger was, no doubt, also frequently demanded of Viking Age Icelanders on their journeys at sea. Many of the most effective *lausavísur*, such as the example by Egill already discussed, take up this theme. Although she was not involved in the incident herself, the poet Steinunn Refsdóttir (late tenth century) describes how Thor took the ship of a missionary and dashed it against the shore. Her verse is picturesque, reminiscent of the way Bragi and other early poets depicted Thor's struggle against the World Serpent. Steinunn's son, Hofgarða-Refur (eleventh century), describes dangers at sea in some wonderfully concrete and evocative stanzas. Although a Christian and the court poet of Christian kings, Hofgarða-Refur was not afraid of using kennings with mythological references. He may have forsaken his mother's belief in Thor, but he certainly remained loyal to the poetic traditions that she revered.

Love is a major theme of the *lausavísa,* as we might expect. The authenticity of the love poetry preserved in the sagas has been the subject of a controversy that takes in the possibility of influence from poetry in Latin and the poetry of the troubadours. The stanzas preserved in *Kormáks saga* (The saga of Kormákur), ascribed to its eponymous hero, are full of mythological kennings and convoluted syntax, but at the same time they express a sensibility so strikingly modern that the term *alienation* springs to mind. With outrageous hyperbole Kormákur describes the woman he loves, enumerating the countries of his world that, put together, are less valuable than she, and declaring that the mountains will be swallowed by the sea before another woman so beautiful is born. Through all skaldic love poetry there rings a note of tragedy: love is the mother of pain, and the sight of his beloved immediately evokes in the poet the certainty of sorrows to come. "The moon of the eyelashes of the woman [the ale-valkyrie] beautifully dressed in linen shone sharply on me, but that ray shining from the goddess of bracelets will cause sorrow for me and that goddess of rings," says Kormákur in one of his stanzas. Or perhaps it was Gunnlaugur ormstunga (Serpent-tongue) who said it since the stanza is also ascribed to him in his own saga (see also p. 137). In *Eyrbyggja saga* (The saga of the people of Eyri) we read of the doomed love between the famous hero Björn the Breiðavík-champion and the married sister of an important chieftain. When he must take leave of his mistress for good, Björn composes a stanza expressing a wish that the time from dawn to dusk might last forever because, when night falls, he is going to attend the funeral of his happiness. The stanza exemplifies a tendency in erotic *lausavísur* to express feelings through natural imagery while their mythological kennings seem largely mechanical.

The *lausavísa* was the most persistent of skaldic forms, and many of the skaldic verses that retain aesthetic appeal are *lausavísur*. This is not surprising when we remember that the art of the skald is primarily to express a reaction to a moment of experience. Because of this, many skaldic poems could as well be described as series of single stanzas. A superimposed principle of composition, like the insertion of a refrain in the *drápa*, is needed to connect the stanzas to each other. There are exceptions, of course, above all the long poems ascribed to Egill Skallagrímsson.

One of the most plausible etymologies suggested for the word *skald* is the one that connects it with verbs like English *scold* and German *schelten*. Originally, personal invective, not praise, may have been the main subject of skaldic poetry. The use of poetry for this purpose was long lasting among the Icelanders, and it was not considered harmless fun by any means because people believed that the word had the power to affect people's lives and that this power was enhanced by difficult and intricate versification. Versified invective and love poetry addressed to a woman were equally punishable by law. The pagan Icelanders considered the craft of poetry a gift from the gods, an effective weapon, and, when put to legitimate use, a "blameless accomplishment." Fortunately, the respect for this accomplishment proved stronger than the contempt for the old religion after Christianization.

CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS POETRY

The Roman Catholic Church brought new kinds of music and versification to Iceland, but Latin hymns had no immediate effect on the ancestral poetic tradition, apart from the *hrynhent* meter mentioned above. It must have been a natural reaction of the converts to try to put together in skaldic style words of praise for their new king of kings, Christ. One thing the skalds knew how to do was to adapt to the tastes and preferences of different kings. A new type of kenning was introduced, one based on the idea of a "king of heaven." Since *king* could be traditionally expressed, especially with *heiti*, and there were many ways of paraphrasing *heaven* in natural terms, such as "hall of the winds," great possibilities for variation lay open to the religious skalds and were much used for over three centuries. When mentioning secular subjects, the poets made free use of old kenning types; while they avoided mentioning the most important gods, such as Odin, Thor, Freyja, or Freyr, they continued to use mythological elements, although with diminishing frequency, until about the beginning of the fourteenth century.

The oldest half stanza that we have in praise of Christ is probably by the same Eilífur Guðrúnarson who composed "Þórsdrápa." The poet praises Christ as a victorious southern king, but his references are pagan. Other poets who converted at an early age, such as the influential lawspeaker (*lögsögumaður*) Skafti Þóroddsson (d. 1030), praised Christ as a king more powerful than any other and as the creator of the world. Although their diction bears no obvious witness to paganism, their worldview seems only superficially affected by Christianity.

The earliest extant poem to include Christian references is a praise poem by Þórarinn loftunga (Praise-tongue) from the 1030s that mentions Saint Olaf and some of his miracles. From about the mid-twelfth century on entire religious poems were composed in skaldic meters. Most of them appear in manuscripts from later periods, but, because these poems were composed in writing to begin with and did not go through a period of oral transmission, they are well preserved.

Among the oldest Christian poems is "Plácítusdrápa" (The poem of Placitus), preserved in a manuscript from around 1200, and probably composed no later than ca. 1150. It tells the story of *Plácítus saga*, a translation of the Latin life (vita) of Saint Eustace. Composed in *dróttkvætt* meter and in a genuine and rather complex skaldic style, the poem has as its most striking feature the attempt to construct a coherent narrative with dialogue. This was an innovation in skaldic poetry, and the attempt was not repeated by following generations of poets.

Einar Skúlason (twelfth century), a priest and one of the many skalds descended from Egill Skallagrímsson, was a well-known court poet, and splendid secular *lausavísur* by him are preserved. Einar's career reached a high point in 1152, when he was called on to deliver a poem in the new cathedral of Saint Olaf in Nidaros (Trondheim) before an audience including three kings and an archbishop. His "Geisli" (Beam of light), a *drápa*, brilliantly unites skaldic traditions with theological learning and Christian symbolism. The saint is described as a beam of light shining from Christ, the true sun. After an introduction expressing basic Christian truths and an address to the dignitaries present, the poet turns to his main subject, Olaf's death and his miracles, and in a final section the saint is praised in general terms. The poem has much of the official and somewhat distant quality of court poetry. It initiated an era in skaldic poetry that saw conventional symbols of medieval Christianity adapted to skaldic style and the mythological element of the kennings gradually reduced.

The twelfth-century "Leiðarvísan" (Guidance) employs a theme widely known in the Middle Ages: the letter about the Sabbath sent from heaven by Christ himself. "Harmsól" (Sorrow-sun) by Gamli, a canon of the Augustinian monastery at Þykkvibær in southern Iceland, is an impressive poem characterized by humility and deep religious feeling clearly relating to the congregation that the poet addresses: "my brothers and sisters." Christ the Conqueror has been replaced here by the suffering Redeemer on the cross, and the poet stresses the need for human repentance. Paradoxically, the poem is in strict *drápa* form, and Gamli uses pagan kennings freely. By this time the pagan references must have been accepted as purely conventional, as poetic, not religious, language. The poem reaches its climax in the description of Judgment Day, in which mastery of skaldic style and echoes of the apocalyptic vision of "Völuspá" are harnessed to express the profound drama of Christianity.

In "Líknarbraut" (The road to grace), a beautiful *drápa* of the thirteenth century or the early fourteenth, the use of kennings has been reduced, and mythological elements have been largely supplanted by conventional Christian symbolism. Nevertheless, the poem stays within the skaldic tradition, the word order becoming occasionally quite complicated. "Líknarbraut" focuses on the cross and the Passion, anticipating thematically and in some of its imagery the seventeenth-century *Passíusálmar* (Passion hymns) by Hallgrímur Pétursson (see pp. 215–17).

It was only natural that Icelanders who wanted to praise the Lord should make use of the well-established form for the praise poem that they had inherited in the *drápa*. It may seem more paradoxical that deeply religious men, such as the poets who wrote "Harmsól," "Leiðarvísan," and "Líknarbraut," whose piety kept them far from the flamboyant self-aggrandizement of the earlier skalds, should have remained so faithful to skaldic meter and style instead of trying to imitate the Latin hymns with which they most certainly were familiar. The power of the poetic tradition is seen in "Heilags anda vísur" (Verses of the Holy Spirit), probably from the thirteenth century and in genuine skaldic style, a substantial part of which is a free translation of the well-known ninth-century hymn "Veni creator spiritus." Nor did religious poetry in simpler meters and style seek models in Latin poetry either. Three stanzas in the end-rhymed *runhent* by the secular chieftain Kolbeinn Tumason (1173–1208), a contemporary of Gamli's, address the Lord humbly and in simple words:

Heyr, himna smiðr
hvers skáldit biðr:
komi mjúk til mín
miskunnin þín.
Því heitk á þik
þú hefr skaptan mik.
Ek em þrællinn þinn,
þú ert dróttinn minn.

Hark, maker of heaven,
to what the poet prays:
May your mercy mild
make its way to me.

I call to you,
for you gave me life.
I am your servant,
you are my Lord.

The form of these stanzas is skaldic, the meter is the same as in Egill's "Höfuðlausn," but the simplicity is far from conventional *drápa* style.

The most original religious poet of Iceland in the Middle Ages also chose a native model but turned to Eddic meter and style—to "Hávamál," as a matter of fact. His "Sólarljóð" (Song of the sun) is preserved only in paper manuscripts from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The text is, no doubt, corrupt in places, but there is no reason to believe that anything important is missing or that the order of stanzas is incorrect. The poem's eighty-two stanzas in *ljóðaháttur* can be divided into three main sections.

The first section (sts. 1–32) is didactic, opening with five brief exempla, short narratives exemplifying different types of human actions and their consequences, and ending with seven pieces of advice. There is an obvious parallel here to the opening part of "Hávamál," although the message is, of course, totally different; the exempla have a transcendental reference to spiritual truth alien to pre-Christian thought. The second section (sts. 33–52) is a first-person narrative. It begins with a contemplation of man's sinful nature, which had bound the speaker to this life, and continues with a description of the experience of death: sickness and fear torment body and mind, and at death the body stiffens and is gradually absorbed into nature. Death itself is described from the point of view of the dying individual in a sequence of seven highly poetic stanzas all beginning with the line "Sól ek sá" (I saw the sun): what is seen is clearly the natural sun, but it is at the same time a symbol of human life in this world and of the glory and grace of God, who gives life to man. The section ends with a stanza describing how the soul, "star of hope," flies from the body, and then the "I" of the poem is born a second time. The sun stanzas stand at the very center of the poem and mark a turning point in its content as well as a high point in its verbal art.

The third section of "Sólarljóð" deals with the otherworld that awaits the soul after death. It is influenced by the medieval tradition of dream visions of the otherworld, but it stands apart from them in that the narrator has not been led to the otherworld in a dream, like Dante or other visionaries known from other Icelandic works (see pp. 171–72), but has died and is appearing in his son's dream. In the first part of the vision, the soul has left the not-yet-buried body but is still tied to the material world and cannot find a place in the otherworld. The continuation describes punishment and reward in visual terms and goes on to speak of mysterious beings symbolizing otherworldly powers. Many of these figures are enigmatic and difficult to interpret, but the Revelation of Saint John is, without doubt, the main source of the very effective imagery.

In the last two stanzas the speaker addresses his son, telling him to recite the poem to those who are still alive, and bidding him farewell with the following stanza:

> Hér við skiljumsk
> ok hittask munum
> á feginsdegi fira;
> drottinn minn
> gefi dauðum ró
> en hinum líkn sem lifa.
>
> Here we must part
> and will meet again
> on the *dies laetitiae*;
> may my lord
> grant peace to the dead
> and grace to the living.

The poet of "Sólarljóð" has full command of Eddic style, and the most expressive of his stanzas match the best of "Hávamál." There can be no doubt about his strong faith and sound knowledge of Scripture as well as his thorough familiarity with the native tradition. But the result is no simple sum of these parts. A powerfully poetic mind has expressed a deeply original vision of man's destiny. The traditional economy and concreteness of expression combined with apocalyptic imagery in the style of the Book of Revelation has created a unique poem that continues to fascinate because of the way it confronts its reader with the mysteries of life and death.

Although scholars have variously dated "Sólarljóð" to ca. 1200, to ca. 1300, and even to the fourteenth century, its firm command of Eddic style would seem to indicate that the poem was composed earlier than 1300. Its combination of artistry and apocalyptic vision could well have been the product of a late thirteenth-century worldview, one that expressed itself in the tragic terms of a work like *Njáls saga* and grew out of the turbulent Age of the Sturlungar (see also part two of this chapter).

The composition of religious *drápur* continued into the fourteenth century. Several *drápur* praise the Icelandic bishop Guðmundur Arason, and poems were also composed about Saint Nicholas, Saint Catherine, and the apostles John, Peter, and Andrew; there is a quantity of poetry about the Blessed Virgin, some of it as early as the thirteenth century, but most of it is from the late Middle Ages.

In the fourteenth century and after, there are two dominant styles of religious poetry. The *drápa* form survives, but only in *hrynhent* meter, and generally avoiding such old poetic diction as kennings and *heiti*; and a new kind of song appears, making use of a simple style and end-rhymed stanza forms probably connected with melodies and a mode of singing imported from abroad.

"Lilja" (The lily), composed just before the middle of the fourteenth century, was recognized as a masterpiece of religious verse almost immediately, and it became an important influence on subsequent poetry. The "Brother Eysteinn" to whom it is attributed in one late manuscript may be the rebellious monk from the Augustinian monastery at Þykkvibær mentioned in an annal of 1343 or the Eysteinn Ásgrímsson of the monastery of Helgisetr in Norway who in the years 1349–61 was involved in Icelandic church affairs as a representative of the bishop of Skálholt and the archbishop of Nidaros; the two may also be the same person. In any event, the language of the poem shows beyond any doubt that the poet was an Icelander who had full command of the learning of his time, rhetoric as well as theology, and was well acquainted with older Icelandic poetry.

Eysteinn saw the architectural potential of the *drápa* form and made more efficient use of it than any poet before him. Although he also realized that, with its long lines and even rhythms, the *hrynhent* meter was eminently suitable for his purposes, he explicitly denounced traditional poetic diction: "It is most important that each word should be correctly understood" (st. 97). He also states: "The custom of introducing innumerable obscure archaisms in a poem obstructs the understanding" (st. 98), echoing Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Poetria nova*. Eysteinn is, thus, the first Icelandic poet to accept the full consequences of the generally accepted Christian attitude that poetic expression should serve only the purpose of revealing the message of the church. As his practice shows, this does not entail any aversion to metrical or stylistic elegance; but to classify his poetry, and the poetry that later was modeled on his, as skaldic, as most editions and reference works do, is to ignore his own statements.

"Lilja" is one hundred stanzas long. The introductory section (*upphaf*) of twenty-five stanzas is followed by a main part (*stefjabálkar*) of fifty stanzas evenly divided in two parts, each with its separate refrain, while the final twenty-five stanzas form the closing (*slæmur*). The first and last quarters have no refrain. The poet praises the Holy Trinity and asks the help of God and Mary in composing the poem. Then the story of Creation is told, the fall of Lucifer, the creation of Adam and Eve, their temptation and fall, and the consequences. At the end of the introduction the poet describes how the archangel Gabriel is commissioned to make the Annunciation to Mary. The two central sections tell the story of Christ's incarnation and his work as the Redeemer. The first part takes the story from conception to the Crucifixion. Stanza 49 tells of Christ nailed to the cross, and stanza 50 is a prayer and praise, including the last appearance of the refrain that has linked the first group of stanzas together. In stanza 51, the second refrain, which will knit the next twenty-five stanzas together, is introduced. The story continues with a moving description of Christ on the cross and Mary's sorrow, and it goes on to tell of Christ's Harrowing of Hell, the Resurrection, the Ascension, the descent of the Holy Ghost at Pentecost, and the Day of Judgment. The closing is concerned with prayer and worship: the poet confesses his sins to God the Father and to Christ the Son. In stanzas 86–95 Mary is praised with great eloquence; at the end the poet turns to Christ and his mother together, telling them why he composed the poem, and giving it the name "Lilja." Stanza 100 repeats the first stanza:

Almáttigr guð allra stétta,
yfirbjóðandi engla og þjóða,
ei þurfandi stað né stunda,
stað haldandi í kyrrleiks valdi,
senn verandi úti og inni,
uppi og niðri og þar í miðju!
Lof sé þér um aldr og ævi,
Eining sönn í þrennum greinum.

Almighty God of all places,
ruler of angels and peoples,
independent of time and space,
standing firm in the power of peace,
at once inside and outside
above and below and in between!
Praise be to you for all ages and time,
three in one and one in three.

Eysteinn's attempt to define God at the same time as he addresses him is impressive and displays the clarity and consistency of his worldview. In Eysteinn's poetry can be found a range of tones and subjects, from the theological to the comic. Satan, who up to this time had led a rather shadowy existence in Icelandic religious poetry, becomes in "Lilja" a lively figure, at once comic and contemptible, his defeat by Christ described with great relish by the poet. The descriptions of the suffering Christ and Mary are vivid and moving; the figure of Mary in particular seems to call forth Eysteinn's best poetry. The poet is a dramatic and effective storyteller, although sometimes rather too enthusiastic when hammering home the moral of his story. The art of "Lilja" reaches its highest achievement in the lyric final section, where the poet's humility and faith are expressed by a variety of stylistic means, from the most simple and low-key to a virtuoso display of rhetorical devices that climaxes in his praise of Mary:

> Máría, ertu móðir skærust,
> Máría, lifir þú sæmd í hári,
> Máría, ertu af miskunn kærust,
> Máría, léttu synda fári,
> Máría, lít þú mein þau er vóru,
> Máría, lít þú klökk á tárin,
> Máría, græð þú meinin stóru,
> Máría, ber þú smyrsl á sárin.
>
> Mary, thou art the brightest of mothers;
> Mary, thou livest honored on high;
> Mary, thou art adored for thy mercy;
> Mary, relieve the plague of sins;
> Mary, behold the evil that was;
> Mary, behold our tears with compassion;
> Mary, heal the great injury;
> Mary, rub ointment on wounds.

The anaphoric apostrophe has made it easy for the poet to add end rhyme to the internal rhymes. Although such eloquence may seem artificial to the modern reader, the individual sentences are, in fact, simple and straightforward.

A more ornate style with imagery fundamentally different from the traditional kenning is found in another stanza praising Mary:

> Þú ert hreinlífis dyggðuð dúfa,
> dóttir guðs og lækning sótta,
> giftu vegr og geisli lofta,
> gimsteinn brúða og drottning himna,
> guðs herbergi og gleyming sorga,

gleðinnar past og eyðing lasta,
líknar æðr og lífgan þjóða;
loflig mær, þú ert englum hæri.

Thou art the virtuous dove of purity,
daughter of God and healing of sickness,
road of happiness and sunbeam of the air,
jewel among brides and queen of heavens,
God's abode and forgetting of sorrows,
place of joy and remover of vices,
vein of grace and life-giver of peoples;
excellent virgin, thou art higher than angels.

These images are based on conventional Christian symbolism, but what distinguishes many of them formally from kennings is the fact that the basic meaning is revealed in the defining component, "road of happiness," "place of joy," "vein of grace," etc. This is a florid style that became popular in late medieval Icelandic poetry.

"Lilja" is not an original vision in the same sense as "Sólarljóð" is, but, through its command of theology and poetic expression, it overshadows everything else in medieval Icelandic Christian art. Icelandic poetry was not to be the same after "Lilja." "All poets wish that they had composed 'Lilja,' " as the old Icelandic saying goes, and later the *hrynhent* meter was often called *Liljulag*, " 'Lilja's measure." Echoes of "Lilja" are frequently to be found in later poems of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, and, by breaking with the skaldic tradition, the poem cleared the way for the direct influence of meters and styles practiced in European religious poetry.

The influence of "Lilja" is apparent in "Guðmundardrápa," a poem composed in 1345, soon after "Lilja." Around 1500, "Rósa," a *drápa* in *hrynhent* by Sigurður the Blind of Fagradalur in eastern Iceland, openly imitates "Lilja." Here, however, the narrative material is greatly increased with added tales (e.g., about Saint Ann, the mother of Mary) and with greater detail in the treatment of the Passion, while the lyric component is much less prominent. The poet, who was a layman, demonstrates a good command of meter and style. The same applies to his contemporary Hallur Ögmundsson, a priest from the northwest corner of Iceland. Hallur was a prolific writer of religious poetry and made frequent use of *hrynhent* meter, for instance, in "Náð" (Grace), his long *drápa* about Mary and Saint Ann and the history of redemption.

The most interesting poem about this subject matter is "Ljómur" (The bright poem). "Ljómur" has the same metrical structure as a canzone, with the rhyme scheme *abcabcdddd*. It was sung to a melody that has been preserved to this day on the Faroe Islands. Here, the main emphasis is on the Last Judgment, and what awaits the damned is picturesquely described; Mary and John intercede with Christ, asking him to redeem all mankind, both good and evil, and he grants their request. On the evidence of seventeenth-century manuscripts, "Ljómur" has been attributed to Jón Arason (1484–1550), a well-known poet and the last Roman Catholic bishop of Iceland, who was decapitated in 1550 for his resistance to the Reformation and the king. The credibility of this attribution is undermined by the fact that the oldest manuscript containing the poem, one produced during the bishop's lifetime, does not mention him as the author. "Davíðsdiktur" (Poem for David), a free translation of Psalm 51 in the same meter as "Ljómur," can on more solid grounds be attributed to Bishop Jón.

Numerous poems about Christ and the cross, based on the Bible and on medieval legends, were composed in the late Middle Ages. In "Náð," Hallur Ögmundsson's detailed descriptions of the torturing of Christ have a sadistic flavor reminiscent of much German poetry of this time and point toward the Protestant poetry of the seventeenth century. One of the most memorable poems about Christ from around 1500 is "Niðurstigningarvísur" (Verses on the Harrowing of Hell), tentatively attributed to Bishop Jón Arason. The poem forcefully narrates the fighting in hell, and there is real joy in the description of the breaking down of Satan's fortresses and the extinguishing of his fires when the King of Heaven crushes the devils under his feet. The stanzas are in a simple canzone form.

The most popular theme of the religious poets of the late Middle Ages is the Virgin Mary. Either the poems on this subject are primarily narrative, drawing on *Maríu saga* (The life of the Virgin Mary), and dealing with Mary's life and miracles, but including a lyric component of praise and prayer, especially if they depict Mary at the cross; or they are pure lyric poems of worship. Although a few poems about miracles are in skaldic meters, most of the narrative Marian poems are in end-rhymed meters, which sometimes give them a balladic quality. Mary's kindness and influence are frequently illustrated by showing how she helps even the most undeserving because they have shown her some devotion. We meet here the same lenient attitude as in "Ljómur": Mary is too kind to accept any human being's suffering in eternal damnation. The lyric poems to Mary are heavily rhymed and simple in syntax and vocabulary, although making abundant use of Latin words and phrases. As a group they seldom rise high as poetry, but they do impress the reader as both sincere and charming.

A great number of late medieval poems are devoted to saints and apostles. Among the most interesting are poems about Saint Olaf, particularly "Ólafs vísur" (Verses of Olaf), composed about 1500 by a layman, Gunni Hallsson. Based on Snorri Sturluson's *Ólafs saga helga* (The saga of Saint Olaf; see also p. 103), it is a reverent poem composed in intricate meter and a style often picturesque.

Although "Lilja" was never surpassed, the religious poetry from the early sixteenth century is rich in forms and themes. By this time skaldic style had been rejected, but the language remained free of the flow of Low German and Scandinavian words and forms that came with the Reformation and had cropped up earlier in secular poetry. Sigurður the Blind, Hallur Ögmundsson, the poets of "Ljómur" and "Niðurstigningarvísur," and other poets of the period are comparable with the best poets of other ages.

Christian religious poets of the Middle Ages did not strive for originality. Their ambition was to join the angelic choir singing the praises of the Lord and to repeat the eternal truths in appropriate language. It took a long time for the Icelandic poets to break their ties with skaldic poetry and to adopt conventions used by their colleagues in other parts of Europe. Even after this step was definitively taken by Brother Eysteinn, the poetry of Iceland retained its own distinct characteristics: the poetic tradition was renewed but never broken.

SECULAR POETRY OF THE LATE MIDDLE AGES

Although the main stanza forms survived in religious poetry and in the *lausavísa*, court poetry came to an end during the thirteenth century. Secular poets also gradually adopted foreign forms and modes of poetry, incorporating them into native traditions of metrics and style. The alliterative system was retained, as were many of the traditional *heiti* and a somewhat simplified system of kennings.

After Iceland had come under the rule of Norway in 1262–64, communication between the two countries was strengthened, and the king of Norway kept representatives in the country. Until the Reformation, Iceland was always considered part of the Norwegian state and partly governed through Norway, even after Norway came under the Danish crown in 1387. During the late Middle Ages, with Iceland being part of the archbishopric of Nidaros in Norway, the church controlled increasing amounts of Icelandic property and power.

In the late thirteenth century and the early fourteenth, Norway had strong commercial and diplomatic ties to the rest of the European continent as well as to Britain, and, in the course of their travels to Norway and more distant countries, the Icelanders came into contact with European culture. Around 1400, the English began fishing off the coast of Iceland and trading with the Icelanders, and, while British influence was strong throughout the fifteenth century, from about 1475 German Hanseatic merchants were an increasing presence. Although communication with English and German traders and fishermen would have introduced Icelanders only to popular culture, such relations opened the way for broader cultural contacts. English bishops were appointed to Icelandic bishoprics, and Icelanders went to England to seek education. Cultural contact with Germany is amply documented from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Links with Norway, however, were not yet broken. Some of the trade with Germany was conducted through Bergen in Norway, and the rulers of Denmark and Norway made efforts, both diplomatic and military, to ensure that Iceland remained part of the state. The Danish monarchy took control of religious and secular affairs in stages during the years 1530–50; from then on Iceland was ruled directly from Denmark, and communications with Norway came to a halt.

No less than elsewhere in Europe, the late Middle Ages in Iceland were a time of weak administration and arbitrary justice. There were economic fluctuations, but exploitation of the fishing grounds surrounding the country brought in riches. Unevenly distributed, this wealth brought to prominence several rich families, some of whom considered themselves aristocratic, and it also formed the basis of ecclesiastical power. The literary culture of the country depended on the strong economic position of the church and the gentry, but its survival was also due to the relatively high rate of literacy among the laity.

Lyric and Satiric Poetry

Most of the secular Icelandic poetry of the late Middle Ages is anonymous, and much of it is preserved only in manuscripts compiled long after the poems themselves were composed. We assume that much has been lost, especially from the fifteenth century, about which our knowledge is limited. One of the richest men in Iceland and a *hirðstjóri* (the king's highest representative) in the first half of the century was Loftur Guttormsson (d. 1433). An interesting *háttalykill* is attributed to him. Loftur's meters are basically the old skaldic ones, although several innovations and changes in preference can be seen, and his diction is also skaldic. However, his themes are chivalric, consisting largely of declarations of love and melancholy complaints about obstacles to the union of lovers, and similar to the themes of courtly love in contemporary and earlier European lyrics.

With the beginning of the sixteenth century, our knowledge about poets increases. Bishop Jón Arason, for example, did not limit himself to religious themes but wrote a lively poem about his dealings with Danish emissaries sent to enforce Protestantism in Iceland. The bishop boasts of his effective armed attack on the Danes, whom he mocks. He is obviously proud that, in his old age, he is capable of such feats. Paradoxically, a lay contemporary of the bishop's, Jón Hallson, seems much more pious. In "Ellikvæði" (Poem about old age), he complains of the ailments of old age—infirmity, loss of influence, and lack of attention—but concludes with reflections on the necessity of preparing for death. The stanza form is that of the simple canzone, and the main theme is treated in a spirit similar to that of European poetry on the same subject. Although earlier poets occasionally complain about old age, this is the first example of this genre in Icelandic, and many such poems were to follow.

Another poet who probably lived around 1500 was Skáld-Sveinn, about whom nothing is known but his name, which is mentioned in connection with one of the most remarkable poems of the period, the satiric "Heimsósómi" (The wicked ways of the world). This is an eloquent poem in the same meter as "Ljómur" and "Davíðsdiktur." Its biting satire is directed primarily against the lawlessness of the times and the corruption of the upper class: bribes and naked force rule the courts; the rich man lives in luxury and oppresses the poor; and his greed is limitless. The poet goes on to describe with passionate anger and contempt how, at death, the rich man will be thrown into the grave as food for worms and how his soul will enjoy in hell an everlasting "merciless party." The poem ends on a more conciliatory note, with admonitions to the rich to mend their ways and prepare for death. Icelandic annals show that there was ample occasion for such angry sermons around 1500, but both style and rhetoric are, evidently, inspired by the poetry of other countries: there are numerous parallels in English, German, and even Danish poetry from the fifteenth century, although few equal the eloquence and passion of Skáld-Sveinn.

Most of the anonymous secular lyric poetry that has been preserved from the Middle Ages concerns erotic themes and is in the form of individual stanzas or short poems, *brunakvæði* (passionate poems) or *afmorskvæði* (poems of love; from the French *amour*). This poetry is usually in end-rhymed meters and an unpretentious style, although the presence of *heiti* and simple kennings shows that the ties to the skaldic tradition have not been broken entirely. Those ties, however, are much stronger in narrative poetry.

Narrative Poetry: Rímur

Narrative prose on native themes in Icelandic had come to an end by 1400, although the composition of fictional sagas on romance themes continued (see pp. 139, 151). By that time an entirely new narrative genre had appeared, one that was to hold a prominent place in Icelandic literature for half a millennium: the *rímur* (sg. *ríma*; "rhymes").

At the beginning of the 1390s, a poem consisting of sixty-five stanzas was recorded in the *Flateyjarbók* manuscript under the heading *Ólafs ríma Haraldssonar er Einar Gilsson kvað* (*Ríma* about Ólafur Haraldsson composed by Einar Gilsson). The poet was a lawman (*lögmaður*), a high office at the time, and is known to us also as the composer of a religious *drápa* about Bishop Guðmundur Arason. The reason for the inclusion of *Ólafs ríma* in this manuscript—mainly a compilation of Kings' Sagas—is, of course, its protagonist, Saint Olaf. Other medieval *rímur* or cycles of *rímur* are preserved in collections from the end of the fifteenth century and later. Although this version of *Ólafs ríma* is found in a manuscript that was compiled a hundred years earlier than any other *rímur* text was recorded, it displays a meter, a style, and a narrative technique that were fully developed when the poem was composed, probably about 1350. The genre must, therefore, predate the mid-fourteenth century; a few of the extant *rímur* cycles were probably composed in the fourteenth century, and we have a considerable number from the fifteenth century. Most of the medieval *rímur* are anonymous and, therefore, difficult to date, but, after the middle of the sixteenth century, the names of their authors are almost always recorded, making dating easier.

Rímur are long rhymed narratives, similar to the metrical romances of England and Germany in the High and late Middle Ages. The *rímur* poets did not make up their own stories but almost always versified prose sagas, most frequently the Legendary Sagas or prose romances known as the Knights' Sagas (*riddarasögur*). The diction of the *rímur* is skaldic, but the syntax is simpler and better suited for narrative. The basic metrical forms are well-known from European narrative and lyric poetry: the *septenar* or the *vagant* strophe with four plus three stresses in each half stanza, which is the model used in the most frequently employed meter, *ferskeytt* (rhymed *abab*). Another frequently used stanza form is the *stafhent*, based on the octosyllabic couplet with four plus four stresses, and rhymed *aabb*; more rarely the half stanza has four plus two stresses with *abab* rhymes, a form known mainly from lyric poetry outside Iceland.

These meters are also known in Scandinavian ballads, and many scholars have assumed that the *rímur* poets borrowed them from that source. Very little is known, however, about the Scandinavian ballad so early, and, more important, *rímur* meters are much more heavily laden with rhyme and have more fixed rhythms than the ballads. All the oldest stanza forms actually have closer counterparts in English and German metrical romances and lyric poetry than in the ballad. The Icelanders who created this genre seem to have been inspired by foreign poetry of various kinds, which they may have encountered through minstrels or other entertainers in Bergen or farther away from home.

The Icelandic *rímur* poets were most interested in the invention of new and complicated rhyme schemes and stanza forms. In the fourteenth-century *rímur*, *ferskeytt* and other basic stanza forms are most commonly used, but later more variation was preferred, and it became usual to change meter with each new *ríma*.

The fact that poets took the trouble to versify already available prose narratives indicates that this new form of narrative was popular. Sung or chanted, *rímur* could be performed for groups of any size and, easier to memorize than prose sagas, were less dependent on books — an expensive medium at this time — for circulation and preservation. In later centuries *rímur* were a popular evening's entertainment, and it is natural to assume that this was the case in the Middle Ages as well. There is also some evidence that *rímur* were occasionally sung to be danced to. Despite their widespread popularity, which indicates oral transmission, all extant *rímur* show clear signs of having been composed in writing.

A *ríma*, or a cycle of *rímur*, tells a story, beginning by introducing the characters, then developing the action through narration and dialogue to a well-motivated conclusion. When the narrative is fairly long, as is most often the case, it is divided into sections or songs, each of which is a *ríma*. As a rule, the beginning and end of each *ríma* are signaled by a direct address to the audience. Although such passages of direct address were not obligatory in the oldest *rímur*, it gradually became a fixed convention to extend the beginning address through several stanzas of a lyric nature called the *mansöngur* (love song) and directed toward the women in the audience, who were told of the poet's adventures — often unhappy — in love. The *mansöngur* has parallels in both German and English narrative verse, but it has most in common, including its clichés, with the subjective and sentimental European love lyric. The nature imagery that marks the troubadours and minnesingers, however, is not found in the Icelandic *mansöngur*.

Skaldic diction — *heiti* and kennings — characterizes *rímur* throughout their long history. Their kennings are simple, and as a rule there is no attempt to make them the basis of a metaphoric style. Mythological kennings are used without any hesitation, but limited knowledge of mythology, insufficient understanding of older poetry, and the influence of a florid style often yield corrupt kennings or paraphrases different in nature from true kennings. In contrast to epic singers making use of formulas, the *rímur* poets avoid word-for-word repetition of lines or stanzas; but the systematic variations in the style of kennings offer the possibility of expressing identical ideas in various ways according to the demands of meter and stanza form, and to this extent the kennings of *rímur* function in a way similar to formulas in epic songs. In spite of the kennings, *rímur* style is simple and easy to follow because word order and sentence structure are always straightforward.

The Kings' Sagas and the Sagas of Icelanders furnished the stories on which a few *rímur* cycles are based. Snorri Sturluson's version of *Ólafs saga helga* is the source for *Ólafs ríma*, although the poet emphasizes the king's saintliness more heavily than is done in the saga (see pp. 103–5). Although the *ríma* is pious in tone at the beginning and end, it is devoted to a description of the battle of Stiklarstaðir (Stiklestad), and Olaf's miracles are only briefly referred to. The most interesting of the *rímur* based on the Sagas of Icelanders is *Skáld-Helga rímur* (*Rímur* of Skáld-Helgi), a cycle dated to the fifteenth century. It is based on a lost, very late saga with a romantic theme: lovers kept apart by fate and evil people.

Three *rímur* cycles are based on heroic and Eddic sources. *Völsungs rímur*, based on *Völsunga saga*, has been dated to the fourteenth century; its meter is plain *ferskeytt*, and it has no *mansöngur*. The poet calls himself *vitulus vates*, "Calf the Poet," and is probably the same Calf (Kálfur) who composed a *drápa* on Saint Catherine early in the century. *Þrymlur* (*Rímur* of Þrymur) is loosely based on "Þrymskviða," and the differences between them are interesting. The *rímur* poet has added material from other sources to flesh out his characters. Compared to the Eddic poem the story has been vulgarized, but much of the fun survives. *Lokrur* (*Rímur* of Loki) is based on the *Prose Edda*. It shares with other "Eddic" cycles a tendency to treat its source more freely than do *rímur* based on Legendary Sagas or romances.

Most medieval *rímur* are based on prose romances, some on translations of European sources, such as *Karlamagnús saga* (The saga of Charlemagne) and *Þiðriks saga* (The saga of Þidrek), but many more on Legendary Sagas and Icelandic Knights' Sagas (see pp. 139–51). The majority of these *rímur* are concerned with the superb courage, physical strength, and warrior skill of their heroes, but, unlike the old Germanic heroic poetry, the *rímur* are comic. Usually, the hero prevails over his enemies, obtaining a bride (beautiful and virtuous, usually waiting passively for the hero to come and get her) and, if he does not already have one, a throne. His adversaries are cruel Vikings, sorcerers or sorceresses (the evil women are