

Poetry and *Fornaldarsögur*

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One of my tasks in the forthcoming new edition of *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages* is to edit Volume 8, due out in 2010, entitled *Poetry in fornaldarsögur*. In fact, I am also contracted to edit quite a lot of the contents of the volume myself, so my engagement with the topic of this paper is partly driven by my contractual obligations and editorial responsibilities, partly by a long-standing interest in the nature of the poetry incorporated in the group of sagas that we call *fornaldarsögur*.

When the General Editors of the skaldic project first started to plan for the new edition, we were going to exclude poetry in *fornaldarsögur* altogether, even though it is included in Finnur Jónsson's *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning* (1912-15), henceforth abbreviated as *Skj*. Our main reason for so doing was that most of the poetry in these sagas is in so-called 'eddic' rather than skaldic metres like *dróttkvætt* or *hrynhent*. Aside from the fact that the modern distinction between eddic and skaldic verse is difficult to sustain in absolute terms (Clunies Ross 2005, 21-8), metrical criteria alone are not decisive; *fornyrðislag*, usually held to be the distinguishing metre of eddic verse, is the second commonest verse-form found in the poetry in *Skj* (Faulkes 1999, 83).

It would have been a highly retrograde step, too, to exclude poetry in *fornaldarsögur* from the new edition on other grounds, not least because it has an important but under-recognised part to play in these sagas' cultural recuperation of Scandinavian prehistory. *Fornaldarsögur* have begun to be revalued by scholars over the last decade and a half, beginning with Torfi Tulinius's *La matiere du nord* (1995, English translation 2002), and there have been at least three conferences on the subject in 2001, 2005¹ and now 2006 in Durham, but so far most of the attention has been directed to these sagas as predominantly prose works. It is high time for the poetry in *fornaldarsögur* to be given similar attention, and I thank Rory McTurk for urging the General Editors of the new skaldic edition to change their minds and include it.

It has often been observed that 'eddic-style' poetry seems to have been recognised by saga writers and their presumed audiences as generically appropriate to *fornaldarsögur*, just as Snorri Sturluson quoted eddic poetry in the mythological section of his *Edda*, *Gylfaginning*, and reserved the quotation of skaldic verse by named poets (and some anonymous ones) for *Skáldskaparmál*. In both cases, the presumption is that old-fashioned *fornyrðislag* and related verse-forms were appropriate to subjects that either narrated the events of prehistory or reconstructed a prehistoric world and its inhabitants for medieval audiences. In the case of *fornaldarsögur*, if the foregoing assumption of generic appropriateness is a valid one, the next question to ask of the corpus of these sagas is whether there are any distinguishing characteristics of the poetry that appears in them which mark them as

¹ Two conferences on new approaches to *fornaldarsaga* research have now been held, organised by Ármann Jakobsson, Annette Lassen and Agneta Ney. Proceedings of the first, held in 2001, have now been published (2003), and the proceedings of the second conference, 'Fornaldarsagaerne: myter og virkelighed', held in 2005, are in the pipeline.

contributing to the overall direction of these sagas, towards a twelfth-thirteenth-fourteenth-century recreation of an ancestral past.

I think we can see very clearly that there *are* such distinguishing characteristics, which articulate a new, individually-oriented sensibility and project it onto the heroes and ancestral figures of the past. It has become a truism to place the discovery of the individual in the medieval West, to repeat the title of one book on the subject (Morris 1972; cf. Bynum 1982), in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. As with all truisms, objections can be raised to such a contention, but on the whole scholars have agreed that a number of the cultural initiatives of medieval Europe in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries had to do with a redefinition of individuals and the societies to which they belonged in terms of a re-imagined and reinterpreted past, with which people claimed direct though often attenuated links. The rise of historiography with such an agenda during this period throughout much of Europe supports this argument, as does the parallel rise of the romance genre and the literary development of the 'matters' of Britain, France, Rome, and — as Torfi Tulinius has reminded us — of the North. It is in the *fornaldarsaga*, and in the *riddarasaga*, the second of which, interestingly, contains almost no poetry, that we find indigenous Norse, mostly Icelandic, explorations of a prehistoric world appropriated to present, medieval, ways of thinking.

With the exception of the poetry regarded by many scholars as genuinely old, like *Hlǫðskviða* ('The Battle of the Goths and the Huns'), or as likely to be based on old models, like much of what has been published, separated from the sagas in which it has been preserved, by either Neckel-Kuhn (1983) or Heusler and Ranisch (1903), the verse texts in *fornaldarsögur* have not been greatly esteemed. They were, of course, very highly valued and extremely influential in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Clunies Ross 1998), *Krákumál* being the predominant example, but their reputation has certainly slipped since then. This is undoubtedly in part because the whiff of inauthenticity hangs over them. Most of them are unlikely to be as old as they purport to be within the contexts of their sagas. However, this is no reason to neglect them; whether they are old poems made new in the interests of their prose narrative contexts or entirely new creations, or something in between, they deserve attention. As things stand, even where they have been edited within modern editions of *fornaldarsögur*, they have not been given much literary space, and that may be partly because the standard edition of the poetic corpus, Finnur Jónsson's *Skjaldedigtning*, does not treat them very sensitively. In most cases, he lumps all the verses in a particular saga together, not distinguishing between different kinds of poetry within it. For example, all the poetry from *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka* (*Skj* A II, 256-69, B II, 276-91) is divided off by roman numerals with parenthetical indications of the names of the characters who are supposed to have spoken the verses, but no other indication of differences between *lausavísur* and the several long poems that the saga contains.

What is striking about poetry from *fornaldarsögur*, as older surveys such as those of Finnur himself (1920, 139-55) and Jón Helgason (1953, especially 77, 87-9) confirm, is how many long poems or probable fragments of long poems the corpus contains relative to its size. As with other saga genres, *fornaldarsögur* contain their share of *lausavísur* placed in the mouths of their protagonists, but they also hold many examples of what I shall call the autobiographical turn in Old Icelandic poetry, which

takes the form of a long poem in which a character recounts his (*not* her) life history. This kind of poem is often called an *ævikviða* (literally 'life-poem') or, inaccurately because these poems do not have a refrain, an *ævidrápa*. Neither of these terms are medieval, as far as I know.² The *ævikviða* may be placed at a significant moment in a protagonist's life (as with the *Vikarsbálkr* attributed to Starkaðr inn gamli in the longer version of *Gautreks saga*)³, or it may be associated with the impending death of the hero, who reviews his eventful life and evaluates his own behaviour, as in *Orvar-Oddr's ævidrápa* at the end of his saga, *Hjalmarr's* death-song, transmitted in the same saga as well as in *Heiðreks saga*, and *Hildibrandr's* death-song from *Ásmundar saga kappabana*. Other examples of the type are to be found in *Hálfs saga*. Part of the so-called *Innsteinskvæði* (sts 29-37) is a monologue in which the warrior *Innsteinn* tells of how his leader *Hálfr* and his followers are caught inside a burning hall and how he himself foresees death. Likewise, *Hrókskvæði* is a monologue by one of *Hálfr's* surviving followers at the court of a foreign king; he reveals his true identity and reviews his past life with *Hálfr's* warrior band. *Krákumál*, transmitted in manuscripts of *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, is another example of the type, combining death-song and review, the only difference from the other poems listed here being that it is in the *háttlausu* variant of *dróttkvætt* metre, whereas the others are in *fornyrðislag*.

A probable variation on the long autobiographical monologue poem takes the form of dialogue verses between protagonists. This type of poem also gives the opportunity for backward-looking and personalised review. *Innsteinskvæði* from *Hálfs saga* in fact combines monologue and dialogue. Stanzas 14-28 are a stichomythic dialogue between King *Hálfr* and two of his warriors, *Innsteinn* and *Útsteinn*, in which they explore the hazards of their warrior life in some psychological depth.⁴ Another dialogue in the same saga is the so-called *Útsteinskviða* between *Útsteinn* and *Úlfr inn rauði* and *Útsteinn* and King *Eysteinn*. Another notable dialogue is that in *Heiðreks saga* between *Hervor* (acting in a male role) and her father *Angantýr* in his grave mound, tracing the history of the sword *Tyrfingr* and its part in bringing a curse upon their family.

In their contexts within *fornaldarsögur* all these poems contribute in autobiographical mode to the sagas' reprise of prehistory, giving it an individualised, personalised character. The poetry is autobiographical, while the prose engages in a predominantly third-person narrative reconstruction of heroic society. It is interesting also to compare the autobiographical *ævikviður* of *fornaldarsögur* with some of the

² Neither term appears in standard dictionaries of Old Icelandic, including *Lexicon Poeticum*, *Fritzner*, *ONP*, *Cleasby-Vigfússon-Craigie*; *ævidrápa* but not *ævikviða* appears in *Blöndal*. So far I have not found either word in medieval or early modern manuscripts where these poems have been recorded, neither in the prose texts, in headings nor in marginal annotations.

³ The longer version of this saga, containing the *Starkaðr* material, including *Vikarsbálkr*, is, as Michael Chesnutt has recently reminded us (2005), much younger than the shorter version. Following Axel Olrik, Chesnutt postulates that the prosimetrum incorporating *Vikarsbálkr* was probably written in Iceland in the thirteenth or fourteenth century.

⁴ Jón Helgason (1953, 88) compares this poem's question and answer format to *Bjarkamál*; cf. the use of this format in *Evríksmál* and *Hákonarmál* and in the Old English *Finnsburh* fragment.

basic genres of long skaldic poems in order to point up their differences. One obvious contrast is between the *ævikviða*, particularly in its death-song variant, and the skaldic encomium, especially the *erfidrápa*, the memorial lay composed by a skald in honour of a dead patron, usually a king or jarl.⁵ The contrast here lies in the fact that *erfidrápur* were composed *about* their subjects by a third person, though skalds might well throw in some personal reminiscences along the way, whereas *ævikviður* purport to be the direct reminiscence of the speaker himself, who is also, of course, a poet.⁶ Here the figures of heroic actor and poet are fused, a powerful combination of roles that is realised most strongly in the figure of *Starkaðr*, at once a six-armed giant, a heroic warrior in the service of Norwegian and Danish kings, and, as *Skáldatal* has it, the first known poet (Clunies Ross forthcoming).

It is instructive to ask whether there are signs elsewhere in Icelandic poetry of the period contemporary with the *fornaldarsögur*, roughly the late twelfth to the late fourteenth centuries, of a similar trend from the third- to the first-person mode of poetic narrative, from biography to autobiography, fictional or otherwise. And of course there are. Let me mention first the long poems attributed to Egill Skallagrímsson, particularly *Arinbjarnarkviða* and *Sonatorrek*, both in *kviðuhátt* metre. Although *Arinbjarnarkviða* is partly an encomium of Egill's friend Arinbjörn, it is also strongly autobiographical, particularly in its first part, recounting as it does, in much franker detail than in *Höfuðlausn*, the circumstances of Egill's encounter with Eiríkr bloodaxe at York. *Sonatorrek*, on the other hand, is very comparable in a number of respects to the *ævikviða*: it is spoken by the poet-protagonist towards the end of his life (or at its end, as Egill expects before he has been tricked into breaking his fast unto death), and it reviews his own life and that of his immediate family. As with Þorvar-Oddr's *ævikviða*, the accompanying saga text indicates that the poem was memorised by a by-stander, in this case Egill's daughter Þorgerðr, and inscribed on runic staves. Questions have been raised about the poem's authenticity as a tenth-century composition, though not conclusively settled, nor is it known when Egill's long poems were first inserted into his saga. This is unlikely to have happened early in the saga's transmission (Bjarni Einarsson 2001, XXVI-XXX, XXXIX-XLII). Whether authentic or inauthentic, and whether they were part of the saga in its original conception or not, these poems fit well with the sensibilities that the *ævikviður* of *fornaldarsögur* must also have appealed to.

While we are still in the territory of the sagas of Icelanders, two other examples of *ævikviður* come to mind, in the late *Grettis saga*. The poem now called *Grettir's ævikviða* is one of the many elements of this saga that imbue it with characteristics of the *fornaldarsaga* genre. Finnur Jónsson doubted whether this *ævikviða*, if indeed it is a whole poem, was genuine. He hedged his bets in *Skj*, however, by placing it chronologically in the early eleventh century and attributing it to Grettir Ásmundarson

⁵ There are some exceptional cases in pre-twelfth-century skaldic verse, where the poet relates his own experiences in the first person, like Sighvatr Þórðarson's *Austrfaravísur*, which tell of an expedition the poet made as Óláfr Haraldsson's ambassador to Jarl Rǫgnvaldr of Västergötland.

⁶ *Lausavísur* within sagas which purport to be the actual words of characters can be seen as a development in a similar direction, in this case taking the form of pseudo-autobiographical 'bites' rather than lengthy personalised reminiscences.

(*Skj* A I, 309-11, B I, 287-8), while he relegated most of the rest of the verses in this saga to Anonymous of the fourteenth century (*Skj* A II, 430-45, B II, 462-76). Seven stanza are usually assigned to Grettir's *ævikviða*, the first three cited in chapter 24 of the saga, at the point where Grettir is forced to leave Norway for the first time on account of his killings, and the other four in chapter 52, after he had escaped the gallows at the hands of the men of Ísafjörður. The supposed circumstances of composition and the verses' subject matter fit the *ævikviða* model: Grettir reviews his life at moments of crisis and gives his own account of how he escaped death. The metre of these stanzas is *kviðuháttur*, as with Egill's *Sonatorrek* and *Arinbjarnarkviða*, and as is the case with another poem in *Grettis saga* in the *ævikviða* mould, often called *Hallmundarkviða* (*Skj* A II, 440-2, B II, 471-3). Hallmundr, a mysterious helper of the hero, who lives in a cave with his daughter, is said in the saga (ch. 62) to recite a poem to the daughter detailing his own and Grettir's adventures just before he dies. Once again, as with *Sonatorrek*, the daughter agrees to memorialise the poem on rune staves.

The Guðrún poems of the Elder Edda collection (*Guðrúnarkviða* I-III) also show a degree of comparability to *ævikviður*, though here there is a key difference. The protagonist (and poet) is a woman, while all the poet-speakers of *ævikviður* except Hervor in *Hervarar saga*, who takes on a male role, are men, and Guðrún speaks about 'women's business' rather than heroic deeds and adventures. Although the dating of poetry in the Elder Edda collection is notoriously difficult, many scholars have been inclined to date this group, at least in their present form, to the twelfth century.

Three late twelfth- or early thirteenth-century poems which are not strictly in the *ævikviða* mould nevertheless provide an interesting comparison with the *ævikviða*, because they all present what one could call a personalised view of history and myth. The first of these is *Merlínuspá*, composed by the monk Gunnlaugr Leifsson, who died in 1218 or 1219. The two versions of this poem are, as is well known, translations of the Latin *Prophecies of Merlin*, composed by Geoffrey of Monmouth and inserted into his *Historia regum Britanniae* (Book 7, chs. 3-4), just as *Merlínuspá* was later inserted into one version of *Breta sögur*. The fictional speaker is the prophet Merlin, who tells of various battles between the Britons under Vortigern and the Anglo-Saxons. The poem's Icelandic title and style as well as its metre, *fornyrðislag*, proclaims that Gunnlaugr was consciously working in the native tradition of prophetic eddic-style poetry like *Völuspá*. Nevertheless, the first-person male narrator and the review of past events recalls the *ævikviða*. Moreover, if we accept that this material concerns the matter of Britain rather than the North, we may see a comparability of purpose with the poetry in *fornaldarsögur*.

The other two examples of the personalised view of history and myth are probably the work of the same man, Bjarni Kolbeinsson, Bishop of the Orkneys (d. 1223). There are medieval witnesses to Bjarni's authorship of *Jómsvikingadrápa*, and strong comparative and manuscript evidence that he was also the poet of *Málsháttakvæði* (Fidjestøl 1993a, Frank 2003). Bishop Bjarni, interestingly, gives us a contemporary generic term for his kind of poem, a mixture of heroic and mythic lore, proverbial wisdom (in *Málsháttakvæði*) and personal reminiscence, in which the old lore is presented as comparable to his own experiences, particularly in love. In *Jómsvikingadrápa* (5/8) he gives this type of poetry the name of *sögukvæði* 'story

poetry' or 'old lore poetry'. *Háttalykill*, also a poem from the Orkneys, has some similarities with the mode of *sögukvæði*, as it recounts many examples from heroic legend and Norwegian and Danish history, the poets stating explicitly that they have heard *forn tíðendi* (1b/3) and will impart *forn fræði* (1a/4), all in the service of exemplifying metrical forms – the latter something they do not mention at all! As Fidjestøl suggested (1993b), some of the poetry in *fornaldarsögur* might have been thought of as belonging to the class of *sögukvæði*.

Having reviewed the *ævikviður* of *fornaldarsögur* and comparable poetry in other sources, we need to ask ourselves some difficult questions, to which there may not be definite answers. Most of these questions have been asked before, though perhaps not from quite the same perspective. First, do we, as scholars, have any evidence that *ævikviða*-style poetry actually existed as part of the repertoire of the poet-heroes of prehistory? This may seem to some a naive question, but it has to be asked. Second, if such poetry did exist, how likely is it that poets and saga writers of a much later age (from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries) would have known anything about it? Third, if they did know something about it, presumably from oral tradition, is it feasible to consider that, in some cases, they refashioned and amplified an inherited poetic corpus into the kind of autobiographical account of prehistory that became fashionable in the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, while, in other cases, poets created new *ævikviður* following old models?

It seems to me that the answer to the first question must be a qualified 'yes'. Many scholars have studied the relationship between several of the *ævikviður* I have mentioned here (e.g. *Vikarsbálkr*, *Bjarkamál*), and Saxo grammaticus's Latin prosimetra. Unless Saxo was totally dependent on Icelandic sources (and in that case his evidence has no value as an independent witness), his version of prehistory suggests that he must have had access to an Old Danish alliterative poetic tradition, which bore witness to poetry comparable to the *ævikviða*.⁷ In addition, there are acknowledged parallels between Icelandic *ævikviður* and Old High German (Hildebrand's death-song and the OHG *Hildebrandslied*) as well as Old English poetry, especially *Beowulf* lines 2041–69. Moreover, Old English poems like *Widsið* and *Deor*, the latter a clear case of the personalised view of history, attest to the existence of a genre comparable to the *ævikviða* in Old English. Both these poems are also remarkable for their many allusions to heroic figures and tribes from Southern Scandinavia.

It is very difficult to present incontrovertible evidence in support of my second question, as to whether poets and saga writers from the historical period would have been aware of the fact that what we might call a 'pre-*ævikviða*' was a genre that belonged to the poetic repertoire of the past. However, it makes sense to think that they did, if for no other reason than that, otherwise, the Germanic parallels I have just mentioned, including Saxo's, make little sense. In addition, there seems good empirical evidence that poets, even of probably 'inauthentic' *ævikviður* like those in *Grettis saga*, were aware that metrical conventions required them to compose poetry of this type in either *fornyrðislag* or *kviðuháttir*.

⁷ At present, Danish Saxo-scholars (e.g. Friis-Jensen 2005), seem rather reluctant to accept that twelfth-century Denmark may have had 'en gammel poetisk tradition', but there seems to be no good *a priori* reason why it should have been bereft of such poetry.

Regarding the third question I posed, of whether, in some cases, poets refashioned and amplified an inherited poetic corpus into the kind of autobiographical account of prehistory that had become fashionable in the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, while in others they created new *ævikviður* following old models, I think the answer is 'very likely'. I still entertain the possibility that the long poems attributed to Egill Skallagrímsson existed in some form in the tenth century; they are atrociously preserved, but I somehow doubt whether Snorri Sturluson and Óláfr Þórðarson would have attributed verses from them to Egill in the *Edda* and the *Third Grammatical Treatise* respectively if Snorri or some other early thirteenth-century skald had made them up *de novo*. Further, although they are now irrecoverable and probably were not much like the *Vikarsbálkr* we know, the evidence that ascribes verses to Starkaðr seems both convincing and extensive (see Friis-Jensen 2005, 4-7), and the tradition of the skaldic treatises and *Skáldatal* that sees him as the first poet of the known past must be respected.

In conclusion, the poetry in *fornaldarsögur* participates actively in these sagas' recuperation of a heroic past by providing an autobiographical validation of prehistory, couched in a poetic form and with a particular content that probably seemed authentically old beside the newer genres of skaldic encomium that celebrated notable men of the historical period. Further research is necessary to discover whether, as seems likely, the *ævikviða* conformed to compositional and stylistic rules and conventions beyond those I have mentioned in this paper. But I shall have time to find out between now and 2010!

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