

Introduction

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In the mythological eddic poem *Hymiskviða* the gods order the sea-ruler Ægir to entertain them all at a feast. Ægir responds with the claim that he does not possess a cauldron big enough for the purpose, and Týr and Þórr set off to find a suitable vessel at the home of Týr's mother in *Jötunheimar* ('the lands of the giants'). Their success means that *véar hverian vel skulu drekka qlðr at Ægis eitt hørmeitið* ('the gods will drink well ale at Ægir's every winter', *Hym* 39/4–8). The most capacious of cauldrons is appropriated from Hymir, whose hospitality is distinctly chilly, and brought to a hall where its contents can delight gods and elves alike. The mode of eddic poetry is just such a gigantic kettle, an all-encompassing container for the Old Norse myths and heroic legends which froth, bob, and jostle together within it, whether as substantial whole poems, fragmentary verse sequences, or single *lausavísur* ('free-standing verses'). When in 1955 the English poet Philip Larkin eschewed drawing on the 'common myth-kitty' for the inspiration for his poems (Larkin 1955, 78), he was explicitly rejecting the recent Modernist poetic practice of employing wide-ranging cultural allusions. Yet Larkin's metaphor for all that he refused has found resonance for those who write about traditional story. Thus, this Handbook engages closely with the 'myth-kitty', the shared resources of traditional knowledge that find their form within the accommodating mode of eddic poetry: the myths and legends of the Old Norse–Icelandic tradition. These stories are primarily preserved in the two great anthologies of eddic poetry, the Codex Regius of the Poetic Edda (GKS 2365 4^o) and AM 748 I a 4^o, but a number of mythological and heroic eddic poems were written down in other manuscripts (see Clunies Ross, Chapter 1 in this Handbook). These poems, or poems very much like them, provided the important Icelandic writer Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241) with the basis for composing his *Edda*, a manual of poetics into which he incorporated a systematic overview of Old Norse myth and offered summarised versions of some of the more important legendary cycles. Had the Codex Regius

manuscript not come to light in 1643 and been preserved in Copenhagen for future generations, if we were without our most important eddic manuscript, our understanding of Old Norse myth and legend would be immeasurably the poorer.

The poems transmitted in the anthologies are largely whole, barring the incomplete poems *Sigrdrífumál* and the *Brot af Sigurðarkviðu*, truncated by the missing gathering from the Codex Regius. Only a few of them bear medieval titles, among them *Hávamál* and *Vafþrúðnismál*. The first poem in the manuscript *Völuspá* takes its name from Snorri's references to it in his *Edda*, while the poem generally known as *Skírnismál*, titled thus in AM 748 I a 4°, is called *För Skírnis* (*Skírnir's Journey*) in the Codex Regius. Other titles are the work of later editors and have no medieval equivalents. In her chapter on eddic modes and genres (Chapter 12), Brittany Schorn notes which poem titles originate in the Codex Regius; the varying terms to describe the mode of each poem show how difficult it is to come to solid conclusions about what they might imply about eddic genre. Thus, *-spá* (in *Völuspá*) is self-evidently a prophecy, just as *-hvot* in *Guðrúnarhvot* means 'whetting'; the *-pula* (list) in *Rígsþula* too is self-explanatory – all these titles occur in medieval manuscripts. The distinction between *-mál* and *-kviða* is hard to establish, however; *-mál* seems to imply 'sayings, things uttered', and indeed *Atlamál* contains a sizeable percentage of dialogue, though we might need to construe the title as 'Things said about Atli' rather than 'Things said by Atli', in contradistinction to *Hávamál* (*Sayings of the High One*) where Hávi (Óðinn) seems to be the narrator throughout. Yet *Atlakviða* also switches freely between narrative and dialogue, and the three poems entitled *Guðrúnarkviða* in the Codex Regius contain varying, but often substantial, proportions of direct speech.

The great majority of eddic verses have been transmitted as sequences of stanzas, again usually without title, within prose sagas, in a form known as prosimetrum. Some of these sequences, such as *The Waking of Angantýr* from *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* (*The Saga of Hervör and Heiðrekr*), have been assumed to be complete poems and have been assigned titles by their editors, some in Old Norse, some in other languages. Other runs of verses occur across more than one saga, such as the so-called *Hjálmar's Death-Song*. This sequence is found in two sagas: *Qrvar-Odds saga* (*The Saga of Arrow-Oddr*) and *Hervarar saga*; these two *fornaldarsögur* (legendary sagas) relate the adventures of Hjálmar's companions and of his opponents respectively. Their versions of the dying viking's lament are constituted by differing verses in differing orders, yet since the two verse sequences manifestly belong both to Hjálmar and to the 'death-song' subgenre,

what, then, is *Hjálmar's Death-Song*? Editors cannot always agree on whether individual verses do in fact constitute a discrete poem; hence, the work known as *Hlōðskviða* (*Poem of Hlōðr*), in English as 'The Battle of the Goths and Huns' and, in Neckel and Kuhn (1962), as *Hunnenschlachtlied*, is treated in the forthcoming volume VIII of *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages* (hereafter *SkP*) as a series of verses delivered by different speakers, and not as a complete poem.

Eddic poetry is anonymous, stanzaic, relatively straightforward in form, and, like its relatives in other Germanic languages, it is capable of mediating all kinds of content: swift-moving narrative, pithy dialogue, grand monologue, and lyric description. It was the medium chosen by those anonymous poets and performers, male or female, who had myths to dramatise, wisdom to impart, and conceptions of the ancient Germanic and heroic past to explore. One of our earliest written sources for eddic verse in Scandinavia is the Rök Stone, probably dating from the first half of the ninth century. In the centuries after the conversion to Christianity the eddic mode retained its usefulness, its formal and thematic authority, and it was employed to educate later generations in Christian wisdom. Its conservatism and its versatility enabled poets to retell culturally important narratives as late as the fourteenth century when new 'neo-eddic' poems such as *Svipdagsmál* were composed. Pastiche poetry in eddic metres continued to be composed into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Hughes 2013): thus, eddic poetry never entirely disappeared from Icelandic tradition.

Most eddic verses, as noted above, are preserved in prosimetric contexts, multiply recopied in paper manuscripts in post-medieval Iceland. These prose narratives usually give some information about the speaker and situation in which the verse is recited. While a series of verses may sometimes be assumed to constitute an entire poem, it is not usually possible to determine the relative age of individual verses. Some stanzas may indeed be ancient and traditional, others might be ad hoc compositions by the prose author, intended to reshape the sequences better to fit the new prose context. The language of eddic poetry is not easily susceptible to dating (see Thorvaldsen, Chapter 4), and criteria for determining the age of stanzas are hard to establish. Yet it is exactly that unaging simplicity, the directness and relative unchangingness of eddic expression which mediates so effectively to us the imagined speeches and the actions of the gods, heroes, and heroines of the past. Eddic poetry does not often depend on riddling kennings, complex syntax, or dense metaphorical reference systems for its effects. Rather, it harnesses rhythm and assonance;

repetition intensifies underlying emotions. *Lengi hvarfaðak, lengi hugir deildusk* ('Long I turned it over, long my thoughts ran on', *Gðr II* 6/1–2), notes Guðrún about the mystery of her husband's death; or, more poignantly, *hnipnaði Grani þá, drap í gras höfði* ('Grani [Sigurðr's horse] hung his head, lowered it to the grass', *Gðr II* 5/5–6); *Hnipnaði Gunnarr, sagði mér Hogni* ('Gunnarr hung his head, Hogni told me', *Gðr II* 7/1–2). Gunnarr regrets the killing of his brother-in-law, which he has been obliged to countenance; just as, earlier, he vacillated in trying to placate his wife's rage and to accommodate his own damaged sexual honour, so he now leaves the communication of Sigurðr's death to the more dispassionate Hogni.

If less riddling than they are in skaldic verse, eddic metaphors are just as vivid: *gnadda niflfarna* ('little beasts, gone to the shades', *Akv* 33/8) is how Guðrún describes her slaughtered sons to their unwitting father. Eddic dialogue allows for dry understatement. The dead Angantýr observes to his fearless daughter: *Kveðkat ek þik, mæ ung, mönnum líka, er þú um hauga hvarfar á nóttum* ('I say, young girl, you are not like most men when you hang around burial mounds by night', *SkP*, Angantýr Lv 6^{VIII}/1–4). It can express wistful regret, as in the dying Hjálmar's meditation on all he has lost: *Hvarf ek frá fögrum fjóða söngvi, alltrauðr gamans, austr við Sóta* ('I turned away from women's lovely songs, all resistant to amusement, eastwards with Sóti', *SkP*, Hjálm Lv9^{VIII}/1–4). Passion, too, finds a voice in eddic verse: when Menglöð learns that at long last her destined lover has come to her hall, she expresses her fierce desire for Svipdagr: *nú er þat satt at vit slíta skulum evi ok aldri saman* ('now truly we shall together devour life and time', *Fjöl* 40/4–6). Menglöð echoes, whether in a deliberate intertextual reference or by deploying a shared formula associated with female erotic longing, the defiant declaration of the dead Brynhildr, on her way to reunion with her Sigurðr: *við skulum okkrum aldri slíta, Sigurðr, saman!* ('we shall devour our life together, Sigurðr!', *Hlr* 14/5–7). Many of the chapters which follow exemplify and unpack the particular artistry and effectiveness of expression that the eddic mode offers.

There has been an upsurge of interest in eddic poetry during the last decade. The Skaldic Editing Project, in particular *SkP VIII*, containing the poetry preserved in the *fornaldarsögur*, but also *SkP VI* (Runic Poetry) and *SkP III* (Poetry from Treatises on Poetics), will soon make newly edited poems in eddic metres available to a wide readership. The first complete edition of the Codex Regius poems to be published in decades (Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason 2014) has recently appeared in the Íslenzk fornrit series. This new edition also contains the four poems from other manuscripts usually anthologised as part of the 'Poetic Edda'

Introduction

5

(*Baldur's Draumar*, *Rígsþula*, *Hyndluljóð*, and *Grottasöngur*); the two 'neo-eddic' poems *Gróugaldr* (*Gróa's Chant*) and *Fjölsvinnsmál* (*Sayings of Fjölsvinnr*) are also included. The revised second edition of my translation was published in 2014; this also expanded the 'Poetic Edda' corpus to include the two 'neo-eddic' poems edited by Jónas and Vésteinn, and also *The Waking of Angantýr*.

This Handbook owes its genesis in large part to the impetus of the Eddic Network, a research network founded by the three editors in 2012, in order to consolidate our research interests in eddic poetry and to raise its profile; this was a timely move anticipating the recent renewed focus on eddic poetry noted above. Two workshops were held (2013 and 2014) at St John's College, University of Oxford, in order to bring together the international scholars who have contributed to this volume; other scholars in related fields also gave papers and an enthusiastic group of undergraduate and graduate students – the next generation of eddic scholars – also attended. The Network's aims were, and remain, to develop and encourage new approaches to eddic poetry, to call into question the established categorisation of Old Norse-Icelandic poetry into 'skaldic' and 'eddic', to interrogate the distinction between 'mythological' and 'heroic' (historically, the product of the organisation of the Codex Regius), and, above all, to open up discussion of the whole corpus, beyond the Codex Regius poems. From the substantial poems preserved in *fornaldarsögur* to the quirky eddic stanzas uttered by supernatural figures in the *Íslendingasögur* (sagas of Icelanders), the powerful genealogical and memorial poems composed in mixed eddic metres found in the *konungasögur* (kings' sagas) to the eddic wisdom poems composed most likely in the thirteenth century, eddic poetry encompasses much that has been critically neglected. The later *Sólarljóð* (*Song of the Sun*) and *Hugsvinnsmál* (*Sayings of Hugsvinnr*), often transmitted alongside the mythological and heroic poems in late paper manuscripts, bear witness to the continuing versatility and artistic power of eddic poetry.

This powerful, rhetorically expressive, and flexible mode of verse is thus the subject of this Handbook. The collection of essays is intended primarily to provide tools for understanding eddic poetry for those who are embarking on the study of Old Norse verse, at both undergraduate and graduate level. It also aims to inform scholars working in neighbouring disciplines about the range and depth of this important medieval European verse tradition. Experts in Old Norse-Icelandic literature will, we believe, find much that is new, eye-opening, even provocative, in what follows: fresh critical approaches and new kinds of engagement with familiar issues.

Our contributors – experienced international scholars and newer, younger voices – offer up-to-date accounts of the state of eddic scholarship across the book's eighteen chapters, bringing together the wisdom of a lifetime's eddic study and new theoretically articulated approaches. The consolidated bibliography provides references to enable readers to investigate further poems and topics treated in the individual chapters. The Handbook begins with Margaret Clunies Ross's overview of the contexts in which eddic poetry has been preserved and transmitted (Chapter 1), locating it within wider traditions of Germanic alliterative verse and highlighting the particular problems thrown up by a poetry that is fundamentally oral in origin. Clunies Ross's chapter outlines the scope of the Codex Regius anthology and deals, with an editor's particular expertise, with the preservation and adaptation of stanzas within the prosimetric contexts of the *fornaldarsögur*.

Joseph Harris (Chapter 2) takes up the challenge of describing the history of eddic scholarship, dating the beginning of professional engagement with the poetry from around 1870 (although Jakob Grimm's work was an important precursor of later nineteenth-century scholarly study). This was the period in which eddic editions began to proliferate, the era of the development of comparative scholarship, and of the contextualisation of the poetry within particular historical and philological milieux. Harris also traces the impact of our new conceptualisations of orality – indeed, of the nature of the oral-literary continuum – on our models for transmission, and assesses the findings of old and New Philology. Judy Quinn's chapter on the editing of eddic poetry also takes a historical view, exploring the ways in which the editors of Codex Regius poems have shaped readers' interpretations through particular (often radical) editorial interventions (Chapter 3). To some degree, editors of eddic poetry can be seen to lag behind the recent trend towards more conservative editing, which is premised on greater respect for the manuscript evidence (even when the text is challenging) and heightened awareness of the implications of the oral composition and transmission of much eddic verse. With examples drawn from *Völuspá*, *Hávamál*, *Oddrúnargrátr*, and *Hyndluljóð*, Quinn demonstrates how interventionist editing has the potential to falsify not only the poetic record, but also our understanding of the mythology and legends of early Scandinavia.

Bernt Øyvind Thorvaldsen (Chapter 4) addresses the difficult issue of dating eddic poetry, building on the findings of Bjarne Fidjestøl (1999). Thorvaldsen investigates in detail the various criteria for older and more recent dating, demonstrating in many cases their unreliability, and he

offers an incisive critique of the dating methods used by, for example, the influential *Edda Kommentar* series (von See et al. 1997–). Thorvaldsen’s scepticism anticipates the arguments taken up by Jens Peter Schjødt in his chapter about the relevance of the poetry to the study of the religion of pre-Christian Scandinavia (Chapter 7). Although the information which eddic verse provides is neither reliable nor in most cases securely dateable to an age consistent with a pre-Christian origin, nevertheless, Schjødt argues, eddic poetry provides evidence which, if assessed judiciously, offers strong support for such religious phenomena as kingly initiation and fertility ritual.

Preceding Schjødt’s chapter are Terry Gunnell’s discussion of performance and audiences in eddic contexts (Chapter 5) and John Lindow’s account of eddic mythology (Chapter 6). Gunnell sketches a scale between ‘ritual’ and ‘play’ along which performances of eddic poetry must have moved, and suggests a distinction between the performance of material preserved in the *ljóðaháttr* metre, as authoritative mediation of traditional wisdom, and the dramatisation of the narratives and dialogues in swift-moving *fornyrðislag*. The effects of sound in space, the very elements of poetry missing from transmission on the written page, are foregrounded in Gunnell’s readings of *Grimnismál* and *Þrymskviða*. John Lindow traces the cultural contexts in which Old Norse mythology is preserved, starting with Snorri’s account of it in his manual of poetics, *Snorra Edda*, intended to maintain Iceland’s major cultural export: skaldic poetry. The chapter also provides an overview of the organisation and contents of the first part of the Codex Regius where the majority of Old Norse mythological information is preserved. Lindow reminds us too of the lost poems, those which underlie the euhemerised tales in Saxo Grammaticus’s *Gesta Danorum*, those very briefly quoted by Snorri, or alluded to in *Völsunga saga* (*The Saga of the Völsungs*). Although the scribe of the Codex Regius marks a clear distinction between the first eleven poems, broadly recounting the adventures of the gods, and those that follow, we should not necessarily adopt one thirteenth-century compiler’s view that mythological and heroic are separate spheres, Lindow concludes. Rather (an argument advanced elsewhere in the Handbook), the gods move also in the human and heroic world, and humans (as in *Grimnismál*) interact with gods in mythological contexts. Carolyne Larrington’s discussion of heroic legend and eddic poetry extends beyond the anthology manuscripts into the prosimetric texts (Chapter 8). Eddic heroes include the protagonists of legends also known from Middle High German and Old English texts, the Scandinavian ancestors of prominent Icelandic families, and such heroicised Norwegian

kings as Haraldr hárfagri ('fairhair'), Eiríkr blóðǫx ('blood-axe'), and Hákon the Good. Verse is primarily employed to mediate dialogue in the *fornaldarsögur*, the genres of death-song and *æviþrápa* (praise-poem about one's life), largely preserved in these contexts, allow the moribund hero to take stock of his past deeds and his imminent entry into Valhöll.

The next section of the Handbook probes into eddic poetry's relations with real-world contexts: place names, stone sculpture, and archaeology. Stefan Brink and John Lindow (Chapter 9) consider the etymology of place names in three of the longer mythological poems of the Codex Regius. Noting the different frequency of distribution between fictional and actual names in the mythological and heroic poems, they argue that the creativity of eddic poets leads them to coin, or to choose, vivid, metaphorical names for mythic places. Lilla Kopár (Chapter 10) shows how the content of eddic myths and legends was in circulation long before the first texts were written down; scenes from the narratives are carved in stone reliefs surviving across the Viking world. Kopár concentrates on the widespread depictions – from Sweden to North-West England – of Þórr's fishing expedition, during which he catches the *miðgarðsormr* ('world-serpent'), but she also adduces other carvings (Óðinn's fate at *ragnarök* and the adventures of Völundr) in support of her discussion of how heroic and mythic motifs interact with words and stone. John Hines (Chapter 11) argues for a fuller mutual engagement between material culture and oral-literary poetic texts; not simply, he urges, in order to flesh out the reader's imaginings of the northern past, but, rather, to investigate the whole range of cultural meanings embedded in both finds and poems. He draws attention to the ways in which artefacts – among them, ring-hilted swords, Icelandic halls, and high-status beds – open up the fruitful possibilities inherent in the writing of a broadly defined cultural history.

A series of chapters on poetics follows, investigating the poems primarily as literary texts. The first of Brittany Schorn's chapters (Chapter 12) sketches the problematic relationship that the eddic mode has with genre, while the second (Chapter 14) uncovers distinctive features of eddic style. Schorn shows how eddic genres are interpenetrative and notes the difficulties (referred to above) of determining how far there was an 'ethnic' genre system in Old Norse poetry. The argument is extended to the (probably) thirteenth-century vision-wisdom poem *Sólarljóð*, composed in *ljóðabáttir* and generically hybrid. Schorn's chapter on style explores eddic lexis, compound words (perhaps newly coined for their poetic contexts), and variation in epithets for frequently occurring concepts, such as the warrior, the beautiful woman, or battle. She analyses

the different rhythmic and stylistic effects of the main eddic metres, and discusses the effects of mixed metrical forms within prosimetric sequences. The focus on metre is broadened by Robert Fulk's detailed account of how eddic metres functioned. Explaining stress and alliteration rules across the three most frequent eddic metres – *fornyrðislag*, *ljóðaháttur*, and *málaháttur* – and drawing attention to the scope for variation within poems predominantly composed in one or other of them, Fulk discusses the basis for emendation on the grounds of defective alliteration and metre.

Judy Quinn's chapter on kennings and other forms of figurative language (Chapter 15) explores the variety of ways in which eddic poets engaged with metaphor in their verse. In addition to similes drawn from the natural world, eddic poets often used kennings (poetic circumlocutions comprised of two or more nouns) as substitutes for or embellishments of a noun. Some eddic kennings are unique, while many others draw on the same conventions used to formulate kennings in skaldic praise poetry. An interesting difference, Quinn notes, is the reflexivity of eddic kennings, where valkyries and warriors speak from within figures of speech in the vivid dialogues characteristic of the eddic mode. Maria Elena Ruggerini's chapter (Chapter 16) builds on her comparative work in Old English poetics, demonstrating how alliterative collocations function to create semantic networks in eddic poems. Connections within networks can be strengthened through phonological similarity (in addition to the initial alliterating sound); startling stylistic effects are achieved by substituting an unexpected word for a predicted one. Ruggerini's methodology flags up possibilities for future work in mapping Old Norse semantic fields, enhancing our access to the medieval Scandinavian conceptual universe.

The Handbook concludes with two chapters that trace connections between eddic poetry and modern critical responses. David Clark and Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (Chapter 17) engage with issues of gender and queer theory, problematising straightforward gender binaries and arguing for blurred and transgressive gender roles, not just in the mythological poems where Óðinn and Loki experiment with *seiðr*, a kind of magical praxis that involves cross-dressing and other non-normative behaviour, but also in the heroic verse. Maternity and monstrosity are foregrounded as spheres in which eddic poetry unsettles our sense of straightforward gender binaries. Finally, Heather O'Donoghue (Chapter 18) considers the reception of eddic poetry, from Snorri's dependence on it in composing his *Edda* all the way through to *Game of Thrones*

and Viking death-metal. O'Donoghue brings into focus the eighteenth-century English rediscovery of the poems, largely through Bishop Percy's *Five Runick Pieces*. Percy's work was widely read; it inspired not only Thomas Gray's version of *Baldur's Draumar*, but also a whole slew of further 'Gothick' verse translations. The nineteenth century saw the beginning of eddic translation into English; thereafter, the heroic poems of the Codex Regius became more influential than the mythological tales. William Morris, Richard Wagner, and J. R. R. Tolkien took inspiration from the Volsung legendary-cycle; Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (*The Ring of the Nibelung*) remains perhaps the single most influential response in later centuries to eddic versions of the Northern heroic.

Eddic poetry is ancient, *er fát fornara, fremr var þat hálfu* ('few things are so old that this is not twice as old', *Hm* 2/5–6), and yet ever-new, capable of being remade in a surprisingly modern vein. Thus, almost anticipating modern social media, the thirteenth-century poem *Hugsvinnsmál* st. 28 offers a useful warning:

Öll tíðindi, þau er upp koma,
 ræð þú eigi fyrstr með firum;
 betra er at þegja en þat at segja,
 sem lýðum reyniz at lygi.

[All the news, that which comes up, don't be first to discuss among men;
 better to say nothing than to relate that which proves to be a lie among men.]

All the authority of the Old Norse wisdom tradition and the *ljóðahátt* metre lies behind *Hugsvinnsmál*'s reformulation of the *Distichs of Cato* for a new medieval Icelandic audience (Schorn 2011).

After the contentious events chronicled in *Lokasenna*, Loki prophesies that there will never again be convivial ale-drinking at Ægir's home; Hymir's huge cauldron seems no longer to have a function. The study of eddic poetry, however, and of the myths and heroic legends, the wisdom, rhetoric, and adventure that it mediates to us, remains as vital, fresh, and enthralling as when the compiler of the Codex Regius applied himself to selecting the poems for that anthology, nearly seven hundred and fifty years ago.

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