

From oral poetry to literature

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Early narratives and pictures

At Rök, Östergötland, Sweden, at the beginning of the ninth century a chieftain raised a rune-stone in memory of his dead son. Many similar memorial stones carved with Scandinavia's earliest script are known from the succeeding centuries, but the Rök stone is rather special. Not only does it carry the longest and one of the oldest northern runic inscriptions, it is also the first attempt in Scandinavia to transform oral narrative into script.

The text consists of extracts from heroic tales and myths. One of them is a verse about Thjodrek, a verse in the same style and metre as the heroic poems which, 400 years later, were written down on parchment. Thjodrek has been identified with the famous Ostrogothic king Theodoric the Great (died 526) who was the subject of many poems in the Germanic lands, and also in the North. We do not know why he was mentioned on the Rök stone; perhaps the dead could be honoured by giving them a relationship with heroes of earlier times.

Today the meaning of much of the inscription is obscure and this must also have been true at the time at which it was carved. Knowledge of runes was the preserve of a few and, furthermore, part of the Rök inscription is carved in secret runes which could only have been understood by the initiated. Thus the script was apparently not used as a means of communication, but rather as decoration. The whole of the tall, narrow stone is covered with large beautifully-formed runic letters—even on the top where only the gods could read them. Here indeed the god Thor himself is invoked.

The closest parallels to the Rök stone are the roughly contemporaray Gotland picture-stones which illustrate myths, sagas and possibly also rites (cat. no. 1, 175). The Rök inscription attempts to do in writing what is done in pictures on the other stones: namely, to preserve and perpetuate something essential in oral narratives and poems.

From the Viking Age and right up to the high Middle Ages we find traces of oral poems and narratives in the pictures which were carved in stone or wood, or woven in cloth. Incised into an ice-smoothed rock at Ramsund in Sweden, the story of Sigurd the dragon-slayer (*Siegfried* of the later German *Nibelungenlied*) is depicted in a series of pictures. Three other Sigurd pictures are known from Sweden and four have been preserved on the Isle of Man, on the



Fig. 1. The Rök stone, Östergötland, Sweden. The front face with part of a verse about Tjodrek, 'Tjodrek the bold/ king of sea-warriors ruled over Reid-sea shores; now he sits armed on his Gothic horse/ shield strapped, prince of Märlings'.

western fringes of the Viking world. In Norway, the Sigurd legend is carved on portals of stave churches dating from about 1200, including that from Hylestad (cat. no. 442). The Norwegian pictures show that the old tales could be absorbed unchanged by Christian culture, but that paganism had to keep outside the church itself—as at the entrance to it.



Fig. 2. The Sigurd engraving on the Ramsund rock, Södermanland, Sweden. 11th cent. The runic band which frames the picture is the dragon Fafnir, guardian of the gold, pierced by Sigurd's sword. The other scenes from the legend show Sigurd roasting the dragon's heart; then burning his thumb, which he sucks, so that he tastes the dragon's blood: he was thus

able to understand the language of the birds. The birds tell him that his foster-father, Regin the smith, wants to kill him for the dragon's gold. Sigurd then kills Regin. Regin is depicted with the severed head and smiths' tools beside him. Sigurd's horse Grane is tethered to the birds' tree, the gold on its back. Cf. fig. 4.

Just as widespread as the legend of Sigurd and the dragon was the myth of Thor and the World Serpent, the mighty sea-monster which in the Scandinavian picture of the world lay beneath the ocean and embraced all lands. The story in which Thor goes fishing and tries to drag the monster out of the sea is described in the scaldic poetry of the Viking Age and depicted on a Gotland picture-stone of about 800 (cat. no. 1); it is found a couple of centuries later at Hørdum in Jutland, at Altuna in Sweden, and on a stone from Gosforth in northern England.

These pictures presuppose a knowledge of the story, without which they cannot be understood. We find their content again in the poems of gods and heroes which were written down in Iceland in the thirteenth century, and from the pictures we may conclude that such poems were known throughout Scandinavia in the Viking Age in oral form.

Writing and the Scandinavian renaissance

Scandinavia's ancient script, runes, was in everyday use in the Viking Age both for practical purposes and for litera-

ture. Short poems in Old Norse or Latin, pagan incantations and Christian prayers were carved in runes on wood and other materials. Longer texts, however, used the new Latin language on parchment and at first Latin was confined to ecclesiastical and royal documents and books. An early example is the Dalby Gospels (cat. no. 509), a gospel-book written about the middle of the 11th century in what was then Danish Skåne. About 1120 Ælnoth—an Anglo-Saxon who lived in Odense for most of his life—wrote, in Augustinian mode, a chronicle of Knut the Great. There must also have been an early life of Norway's holy king St Olaf who was slain in 1030, but the earliest surviving record is the *Passio Olavi*, which dates from the end of the twelfth century and was written in England to the order of the exiled Norwegian archbishop Øystein.

During the course of the twelfth century, secular works concerning Norwegian and Danish kings were also composed; and, towards 1200, traditions from the Viking Age and early Middle Ages really began to be absorbed into the new literary culture. In Denmark this coincided with the high point of Scandinavian Latin literature, Saxo's *Gesta*

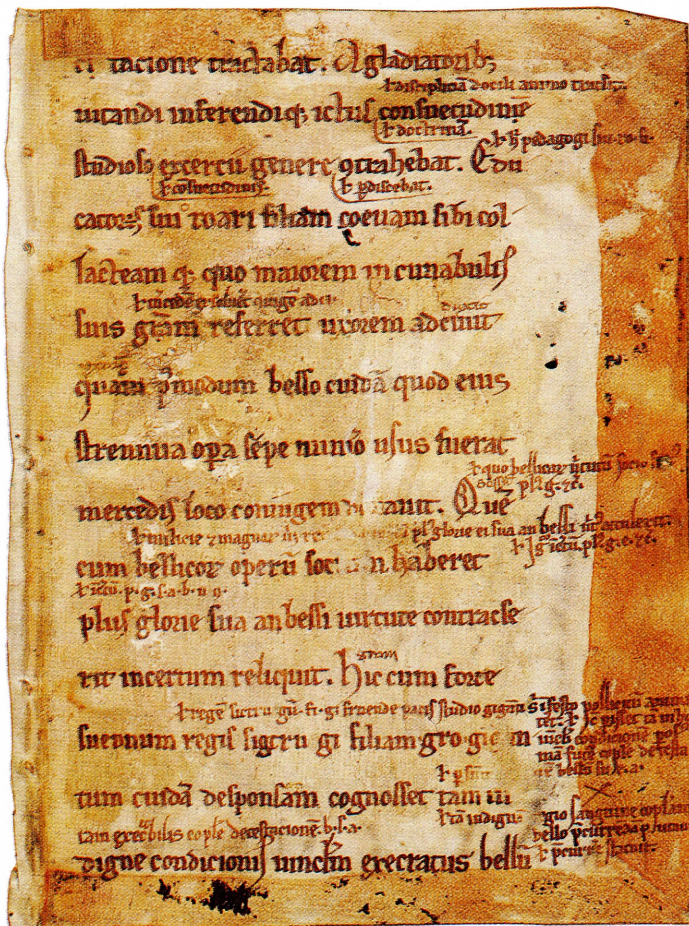


Fig. 3. The Angers fragment of Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*, c. 1200. The width between the lines allowed space for corrections and additions, and the fragment is possibly from Saxo's own working copy. It comprises part of the first of sixteen books. This page (fol. 2r) contains the beginning of the history of King Gram and the Swedish princess Gro. Cat. no. 529.

Danorum of c. 1200, which records the actions of the Danish kings from the earliest times to Saxo's period (cat. no. 529, 530). The aim of this great work was to glorify the fatherland by describing its splendid early history, and one of Saxo's ambitions was to demonstrate to the learned world that Denmark had had ancient poetry which could be compared in quality with the Classics. He did this by recreating Danish heroic poetry in a classical Roman style. Saxo based his stories of the earliest times on oral tradition—on legends, myths and poems.

In his prologue Saxo writes that the Icelanders' 'treasury of evidence of ancient happenings' was one of his sources. The Icelanders themselves converted this treasury into literature on a much greater scale than that of the other Nordic peoples. The western Scandinavian countries—Norway,

Iceland, the Orkneys, Faroes and Greenland—formed a specific cultural area. The Scandinavian languages were of course closely related, but, whereas the Danes had their closest contacts with the Continent and the Swedes' connections were directed predominantly towards the east, west Scandinavia had its closest contacts with the British Isles. The use of the vernacular in Britain encouraged the west Scandinavians to write in their own language—Old Norse—and not in Latin which was general elsewhere. As early as about 1125 the Icelander Ari Thorgilsson wrote a short history of Iceland, *Islendingabók* (cat. no. 520), in the vernacular, and the earliest version of *Landnámabók* (cat. no. 336) (a genealogical-topographical work about the colonization of Iceland c. 870–930) probably dates from the same time.

About 1150, an Icelandic scholar wrote a short philological treatise (cat. no. 521), which set out to adapt the Latin alphabet to the Icelandic phonetic system, 'so that it will be easier to write and read, as now is the habit in this country, laws and genealogies or exegeses of holy scripture or the learned historical works which Ari Thorgilsson has written in books with such outstanding wisdom'. The quotation gives us an idea of the kind of Icelandic literature which existed in the middle of the twelfth century and, apart from the genealogical works, exactly the same type of written studies were familiar in Norway and Denmark. Everywhere laws were written down in the vernacular: in Norway before 1100, in Iceland in 1117, in Denmark by 1170 at the latest, and in Sweden a few years later (cat. no. 518–9).

In the western Scandinavian countries the use of the vernacular displaced Latin as the main written language (cat. no. 520–5). The dominant position of written Old Norse was the single most important precondition for recording of the old oral tradition on parchment, produced in splendid redactions in Iceland and the other western Nordic countries. Another prerequisite for its success was the new European interest in history and poetry, and a third was that this interest began in Norway, Iceland and Denmark so soon after the conversion to Christianity, at a time when the pre-Christian tradition was still alive. It is significant that the same is not true of Sweden, where the fact that Christianity and the Latin script were adopted later (about 1100) precluded the Swedes from the early European renaissance.

It was not until the beginning of the nineteenth century that ancient Finnish traditions were written down. In Karelia, a medical doctor, Elias Lönnrot, collected heroic poems and brought them together into the great national epic *Kalevala*, which in its longest version (published in 1849) comprises 22,795 lines.

At the end of the twelfth century and in the course of the thirteenth century the culture of the North experienced its own early, intense renaissance. The combination of a number of factors—written culture, a fascination with the ancient world, and a rich oral tradition—produced (almost explosively), particularly in Norway and Iceland, a literature unique in medieval Europe. The sagas of Saint Olaf and Olaf Trygvason had been written down in Iceland before 1200; and, about 1200, the history of the Norwegian King Sverri was written in Old Norse. Danish events are recounted in the Icelandic *Skjöldunga saga* which tells of Danish kings and in *Jómsvíkinga saga* (cat. no. 523). Oral traditions, and probably also written stories, gathered in the rich culture of the Orkneys led to the production of the early *Orkneyinga saga* (cat. no. 525)—the story of the earls of Orkney. In the west the sagas, long prose narratives, became the form in which old tradition and new literature could be melded together: the history of kings (the *Kings' sagas*—cat. no. 526–7) and of the Icelanders themselves in old times (the *Saga of the Icelanders*) or stories of contemporary events (*Sturlunga saga* and the *bishops' sagas*), saints' lives, ancient legends (*fornaldarsögur*) and translated romances (*riddarasögur*) were all modified into sagas. It was not only oral narratives that were translated, scaldic poetry was of particular relevance because of the new interest in ancient times (see p. 172). Some of the earliest sagas, for example *Egils Saga Skallagrímssonar* (cat. no. 524), deal with the scalds of the Viking age; and the royal sagas and most of the some thirty-five sagas of the Icelanders contain scaldic verses. A total of some six thousand scaldic verses are preserved.

Poems of gods and heroes

The second great poetic genre of the Viking age, the *Eddas*, were written down independently. One of the reasons why these poems were remembered was that they related pre-Christian myths and heroic sagas with a wealth of subtle circumlocutions known as *kennings*. In the high Middle Ages the eddas became fashionable as poetic sources for pagan times and they were written down as a part of the interest in the ancient past. They are preserved in the famous manuscript *Codex Regius*, which now contains ten poems concerning gods and nineteen poems about heroes. The collection, which is usually called *The Poetic Edda*, is the most important basis for our knowledge of the heroic poetry of the Viking Age, as well as of Scandinavian (and Germanic) mythology. Single poems of the same type were written down in other manuscripts. Heroic poetry is also known from England and Germany, but there it has a different form and spirit from

the poetry of the North. Poems about pre-Christian gods are preserved only in the North.

The Poetic Edda begins with *Voluspá*, in which the ancient seeress tells Odin, in a great vision, about the cosmic course from the creation of the world to its destruction at Ragnarök. This is followed by three more Odin poems, *Hávamál*, *Vafþrúdnismál* and *Grímnismál*, which tell of the lives of gods and men. The poem *Skírnismál* deals with Frey and his love for the beautiful giant's daughter Gerd. The servant Skírnir is sent away to Jötunheim (the world of the giants) to win her, but only after terrible threats and curses does she yield to him. Five poems relate to Thor; one of these is the *Hymiskviða*, which tells the story of Thor's attempt to kill the World Serpent.

The heroic poems in the collection mainly concentrate on the saga cycle of Sigurd and his wife Gudrun. After Sigurd's death Gudrun becomes the dominating figure. Two poems describe her grief and her anger against the brothers who killed her husband. In *Atlakviða* she marries Atli (the historic Attila, died 453), who dupes the same two brothers and slays them. The poem ends with Gudrun's frightful revenge in which she slaughters her two sons by Atli and serves them to their father at dinner. She then kills Atli, sets fire to the royal hall and burns all the retainers. In the cycle Gudrun lives on to experience yet another tragedy. In the last poem, *Hamðismál*, she encourages the sons of her third marriage to revenge their half-sister Svanhild who, unprotected by King Jörmunrekk, had been trampled to death by a horse. The poem describes their heroic battle and death.

While the scaldic poems are art at the highest level, the eddaic poems of the Viking Age were a functional medium for knowledge which had to be remembered. Their verse form is simple. As in other early Germanic poetry, alliteration is the dominant principle but the Scandinavian poems differ from the Germanic ones in that they are divided into stanzas. The two main types of verse are *fornyrðislag* ('metre of ancient words') and *ljóðaháttir* ('metre of chants'), with eight and six lines to each stanza. An example of the first type is verse 3 of *Voluspá* with its picture of the world before the gods created the cosmos:

Of old was the age
when Ymir lived;
Sea nor cool waves
nor sand there were;
Earth had not been,
nor heaven above,
But a yawning gap,
and grass nowhere.



An example of *ljóðaháttir* is verse 139 of *Hávamál*. For nine days Odin has been hanging on Yggdrasil (the World Tree), and thus learns the secret of the runes:

I had no bread,
no drinking horn;
I looked down,
I took up the runes,
shrieking I took them,
And so fell back.

There is no agreement about the age and origin of the Edda poems. It is certain that the preserved poems were written down in Iceland in the thirteenth century and that Saxo knew the same types of poems about 1200. We also know that heroic poems and myths of gods occur on the Rök stone (about 800). But it is impossible to date the oral poems before they were written down. We can only say that the poems perpetuate a tradition which had an ancient, pre-Christian content, and that in the Viking Age they were current throughout Scandinavia. Some of the poems seem to have survived reasonably unchanged, while others are recreations of old poems.

In the 1220s the Icelandic chieftain Snorri Sturluson wrote a work which was both an introduction to scaldic art and an account of pagan mythology (cat. no. 521). The book came to be called the *Edda*—a word which can be interpreted both as 'great-grandmother' and as 'poetics'—which later gave the name to the eddaic poems because Snorri cited them as his sources. His book has no counterpart in foreign literature, but is an expression of the pursuit of the ancient past in contemporary Europe, and is perhaps the finest example of what has here been called the renaissance of the North. Snorri wished to improve knowledge of scaldic poetry and in his prologue he gives this, and pre-Christian belief, a place in the Christian cosmos. Using prevalent European medieval ideas with originality, he carried the Scandinavian royal lines back to the Classical world. He thought that the pagan gods, the *Æsir*, came to Scandinavia from Troy and that they spread their families and language through the North. In this way Snorri devised a direct continuity between Scandinavia and the areas which were in the Middle Ages considered to be the centre of the world and the origin of culture. And, equally important, the language and poetry of Scandinavia were explained as being as old and as venerable as Latin.

The North and Europe

Snorri's scholarly interpretation expressed a Scandinavian self-confidence, a belief in an independent cultural identity, which was both inspired by contemporary European fashions and was in contrast to them. The Nordic peoples picked up everything that was new in Europe—religion, writing, Classical and modern literature and learning—but they also made it clear that they themselves had an early history and a poetry which was on a level with those of the Continent.

In *Orkneyinga saga* (cat. no. 525), the meeting between troubadour poetry and scaldic poetry is described. About the middle of the twelfth century the earl and scald, Rognvald, sailed from Orkney on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and on the way he and his retinue, which included two Icelandic scalds, visited the countess Ermengarde at Narbonne—the focus of homage by troubadours. According to the saga the Scandinavian scalds entertained the countess with their poetry and in one of the preserved stanzas the troubadours' simpler style is imitated. Ermengarde could hardly have understood anything of the Old Norse poetry, but for the scalds the meeting was an opportunity to display a poetry which—created for kings—was just as ancient and fashionable as that of southern France.

Linguistic differences prevented Nordic literature from becoming known in Europe in the Viking Age and Middle Ages. The North was, on the other hand, open to many inspirations and influences from outside; but they were adopted on the North's own cultural terms. When in the twelfth century the Norwegians became interested in Anglo-Norman romances such as Thomas's *Tristan et Iseult*, Chrétien de Troyes' *Yvain*, and the German ballads and stories of Didrik of Bern, they did not read them in French or German but had them translated into the prose of the sagas. A vast amount of foreign literature of widely differing character, both religious and secular, was translated into Old Norse in the course of a few decades; but most of all it was the North's own early history which was used as a subject for its literature. With writing as a tool and oral tradition as their material, the Scandinavians of the high Middle Ages re-created the Viking Age as an exceptional epoch, the quintessence of the Northern character.

Fig. 4. Portal of the stave church at Hylestad, Norway, with scenes from the Sigurd legend. C. 1200. Cf. fig. 2. Cat. no. 442.