

# Scaldic poetry

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Around the year 100 AD Tacitus wrote in his *Germania* that songs were the only form of recorded history or annals of the Germanic peoples—by songs he meant narrative poems which were performed, or rather chanted, aloud. Tacitus based his account on contemporary knowledge of the Germanic tribes who lived in the areas bordering the Roman Empire, north of the Rhine and the Danube, but what he wrote of the Germanic annals in all probability also applied to the people in Scandinavia and indeed to most Germanic tribes of ancient times. Before the introduction of Christianity they had no written literature in our sense of the term. The unique Germanic runic script was almost exclusively used for short inscriptions on loose objects and, later, on memorial stones to the dead. But poetry was common to all Germanic peoples and its form and content survived well into the Christian era. All the Germanic peoples spoke closely related languages or dialects and, because the poems were composed in very free metre, they could travel from country to country, from people to people and adapt to new linguistic forms. The old Germanic metre was not at all like the Latin metres which became the basis for all poetry in the Christian world, even up to modern times. This metre has no fixed number of syllables to each line, no regular rhythm and no rhyme in the usual meaning of this term. Its characteristic feature is that great emphasis is laid on the words which the poet considers to be the most important and that these words are stressed by alliteration, so that two or three words in two consecutive lines (also called a ‘long line’) begin with the same sound (vowel or consonant). This ancient Germanic metre is found in the eddaic poems and in Old German and Old English poems, such as *The Hildebrandslied* and *Beowulf*. The following stanza from *Atlakviða* may serve as an example. This is one of the oldest poems in the collection known as *The elder Edda* and is probably from the ninth century:

Rín skal ráða rógmálmi skatna  
svinn, áskunna arfi Niflunga;  
í veltanda vatni lýsask valbaugar,  
heldr en á hǫndum gull skíni Húna bǫrnum.

The Rhine shall be master of the metal of man’s strife,  
the god-sprung river rule the inheritance of the Niflungar;  
in rolling waters rather shall the foreign rings glint  
than that gold should shine on the Huns’ children’s hands.  
(Transl. Ursula Dronke)

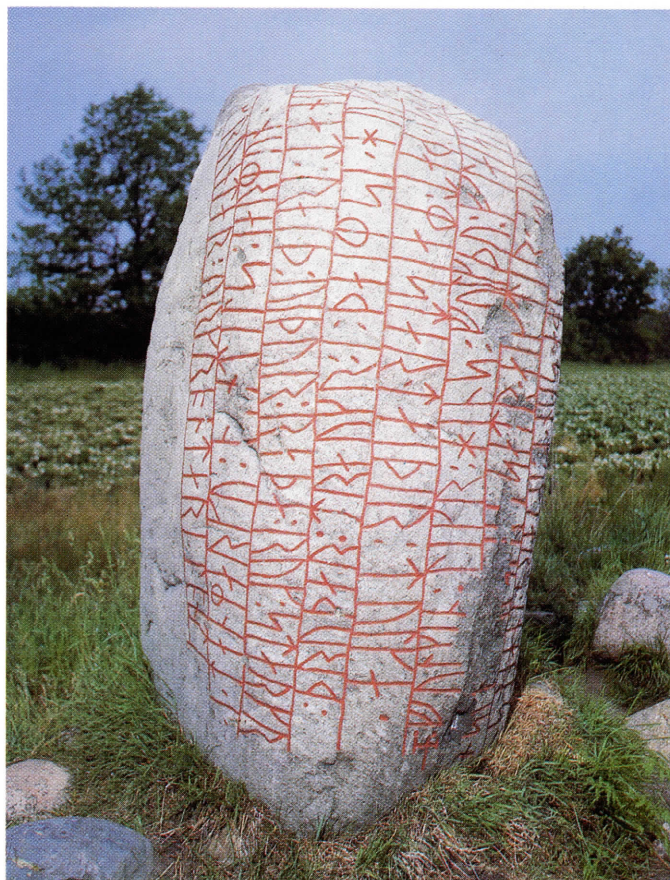


Fig. 1. The rune-stone from Karlevi, Öland, Sweden. Raised c. 1000 in memory of the chieftain Sibbe, son of Foldar. On this stone is the only surviving scaldic verse which was written down in the Viking Age. It is in the *dróttkvætt* metre.

But the Scandinavians also composed in other metres and some of these are highly sophisticated. The noblest of all was the so-called *dróttkvætt* (i.e. the metre suitable for the retainers of a lord). The order of words and sentence structure display deep convolutions and ingenuity. There is both alliteration and rhyme within each line, as well as a rich use of circumlocutory tricks, the most important of which are known as *heiti* and *kenningar*. A *heiti* uses a circumlocution in the form of a synonym, preferably an unusual or poetic word. A *kenning* consists of a picturesque description of an important word (thus ‘blood’ becomes ‘ocean of the wound’; a ‘ship’, the ‘waves’ horse’; or a woman ‘the field of gold ring’). There are thousands such, and they take for granted a knowledge of myth and heroic legend. It was an important element in the skald’s art that he could vary and

polish his often subtle painting of pictures.

Whilst this poetry was by implication accessible only with difficulty, it had at the same time through hundreds of years fascinated and tested patience and insight. An example of such poetic speech is a half-verse of *dróttkvætt* composed by Egill Skallagrímsson during a stormy passage. The alliteration is here printed in bold type and rhyme in *italic* (The kennings are as follows: the ‘prow’s bull-calf’ is the ship: the ‘ship’s road’ is the sea and the ‘mast’s giant’ is the storm).

Þél høggr stórt fyrir stáli  
stafnkvígs á veg jafnan  
út með éla meitli  
andærr jötunn vandar.

With the shock of hail’s chisel  
the mast’s giant hews  
The prow’s bull-calf’s smooth way  
into a coarse file.

(Transl. D.M. Wilson)

Old Scandinavian poetry is traditionally divided into two main groups, eddaic and scaldic. These two terms were, however, introduced in later times and the distinction between them is sometimes unclear; many poems straddle both groups. To the eddaic poems are assigned poems about pagan gods and ancient Germanic heroes; scaldic poems praised kings and other great men, and also comprised individual stanzas or short poems composed on specific occasions. Many scaldic poems were created in *dróttkvætt* or other similarly elaborate metres, but some of the most famous were composed in the old Germanic metre or in other free metres. The oldest scaldic poems were created by Norwegian scalds, but many of the most famous were produced by Icelanders.

The sagas describe, with romantic elaboration, how Icelanders travelling to foreign countries, went before the king and, having created poems eulogizing his achievements, were rewarded with gold and gifts. But the scalds also composed on other occasions: whilst travelling on land or at sea or at happy or sad events (cat. no. 524–5). Fighting and killing were the favourite subjects, but the scald could naturally also sing of beautiful women and the trials of love.

Poems which were preserved in oral tradition were probably often accompanied by explanatory legends, and (when the sagas began to be written down in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries) the writers used such legends along with the poetry as source material for history. In order to support the veracity of the written sagas the authors quoted liberally from poetry—from praise-poems in the sagas of Norwegian kings and from the occasional poems in the sagas of the Icelanders—consequently much of this poetry

survives as components of the sagas. One reason that so much poetry by Icelandic scalds survives may be that the sagas were written in Iceland and therefore build mainly on the Icelandic corpus of legends and poems.

The old authors of the Icelandic sagas were quite convinced that the scaldic poems were their most reliable sources—so far as they went. The great Icelandic saga writer Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241) used them to their best advantage. In his work on the history of the kings of Norway *Heimskringla* (cat. no. 526–7) he quotes liberally from the ancient poetry in support of his account and, in his prologue, he has some wise words to say about the value of this source. He traces them back to Harald Fairhair, who was the first to become king of large parts of Norway in the late ninth century: ‘There were scalds in Harald’s court whose poems the people know by heart even at the present day, together with all the songs about kings who have ruled in Norway since his time, and we rest the foundations of our story principally upon the songs which were sung in the presence of the chiefs themselves or of their sons, and take all to be true that is found in such poems about their feats and battles: for although it be the fashion with scalds to praise most those in whose presence they are standing, yet no one would dare to relate to a chief what he, and all those who heard it, knew to be false and imaginary, not a true account of his deeds; because that would be mockery, not praise.’

Then Snorri goes on to tell of the historian Ari the Wise Thorgilsson, for whom he with good sense had a high regard, and at the end of the prologue he returns to the source value of the scaldic poetry: ‘But the poems seem to me least corrupt, if the metrical rules are observed in them and if they are sensibly interpreted.’ (Transl. S. Laing and P.G. Foote)

King Harald Fairhair’s most famous scalds were Þorbjörn hornklofi and Þjóðólfr of Hvin. Þorbjörn composed the so-called *Haraldskvæði* about Harald’s victories and about life at court. Here we catch a glimpse of a king’s hall eleven centuries ago, we see the warriors and scalds, berserks and jesters in the service of the king. The contents are richer than is usual in scaldic poetry, since the poem is composed in the old free Germanic metre. Generally speaking, it is very like the heroic poems of the Edda:

One sees from their gear and from their gold bracelets  
that they are on close terms with the king;  
they dispose of cloaks red and beautifully striped,  
of swords wound with silver, ring-woven corselets,  
gilded baldrics and chased helmets,  
bracelets worth wearing which Harald picked out for them.

(Transl. P.G. Foote)



Fig. 2. A page from Harald Fairhair's saga from Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla, Codex Frisianus (fol. 10v). Cat. no. 527. In the chapter beginning with initial H is a stanza from Haraldskvæði: *Uti vill jól drekka . . . In English translation: If he has his own way/ the valiant warrior/ he will feast and fight/ away from home./ When young he hated fire-heat/ and sitting around inside/ he hated heated women's rooms/ and down-lined mittens.*

One of Norway's most eminent scalds was Eyvindr Finnsson whose nickname was *Skáldaspillir*, (spoiler of scalds). His most famous poem is *Hákonarmál*, a memorial poem to King Hakon the Good who was killed in 960. Hakon was Christian and had been fostered by King Athelstan in England, but Eyvindr was pagan like most Norwegians of his day, and in the poem he has the king go to Valhalla and thanks him for having taken good care of the pagans' sacrificial sites. The light eddaic metre enables the scald to soar and allow us to hear the din of battle as the king falls:

Wound-fires burnt in bloody gashes,  
swords leaned towards men's vitals,  
wound-sea surged on the headland of swords,  
flood of javelins fell on the foreshore of Stord.  
(Transl. P.G. Foote)

The greatest of all the ancient scalds was Egil Skallagrímsson, who lived in the tenth century. He was a son of one of Iceland's mightiest settlers and was himself the most powerful man in his district. A whole saga is written about his life, an outstanding work of literature—whatever one may think of it as a historical source. As a child Egil longingly composed poems about the great days to come, when he would be allowed to go abroad with Vikings and “hack down man after man”. His dreams came true. He sailed to foreign countries, went on Viking expeditions and composed verses about mighty kings. He composed a large number of occasional verses replete with powerful poetic imagery. He came into conflict with the Norwegian Viking king, Erik Bloodaxe, who at that time ruled over York in England and, when the king wanted to have him killed, he saved his own life by composing, during a single night a twenty



Fig. 3. Egils Saga (fol. 3v). This damaged fragment of the saga (3 leaves) contains the poem *Höfuðlausn* (Head-ransom) almost complete. The beginning of each stanza is marked by an initial and a *v* (for *vísa*, verse) in the margin. Cat. no. 524.

stanza poem of praise to the king set to a melodic metre modelled on an English form. When the king had heard the poem he reprieved Egil and the poem has since been known as *Höfuðlausn*, ‘head-ransom’ (cat. no. 524).

But Egil’s greatest renown as a scald came from two poems in simple metre, one about his friend who stood by him in York, the other about the two sons he lost under tragic circumstances.

The poem about Arinbjörn, *Arinbjarnarkviða*, is only preserved in the famous manuscript containing sagas of the Icelanders, *Möðruvallabók*, where it is written separately on a page following Egil’s saga. This page is, however, partly illegible and the end of the poem was on the following leaf, which is now lost. *Sonatorrek*, “sad loss of sons”, is just as

badly preserved, but for a different reason. Although it survives in its entirety, it is known only in late paper manuscripts where it is somewhat corrupt. Enough of these poems survive, however, to demonstrate the magnificent qualities of this poet, the first in Scandinavia to emerge as a personality. The poems radiate strongly-felt emotions and are honed with vigour and word-craft. We are not offended, even when he views his work with Horatian self-satisfaction in the last stanza of *Arinbjarnarkviða*, which by a stroke of good fortune survives in a single manuscript redaction of Snorri’s *Edda*:

I was early wakeful, I gathered words together  
with the morning labours of the speech-servant [tongue];  
I built a stack of praise which will long stand,  
not hasty to collapse, in the courtyard of poetry.

(Transl. P.G. Foote)

The saga relates that when Egil learnt of the death by drowning of his son Böðvarr, he at first decided to starve himself to death. His daughter persuaded him to postpone this until he had composed a memorial poem. Another of his sons had died from disease a short time before and the scald recalls them both. The poem is an implacable indictment of Odin and Ran (goddess of the sea), who had robbed him of his sons. Earlier he had had a good relationship with Odin, god of war and poetry. Now the friend has failed him. But Egil gathers strength as he composes, and at the end he has won a victory over his grief and reconciled himself with the gods through his poetry:

The enemy of the wolf Odin, used to battle,  
gave me a skill removed from blemish  
and such a cast of mind that I made  
open enemies of wily plotters.

Yet glad in good heart  
and not cast down shall I wait for death.

(Transl. P.G. Foote)

One of the best known of the later scalds was Sighvatr Þórðarson. He was scald to King Olaf Haraldsson, who was canonized after his death at the battle of Stiklestad in 1030. When the battle took place Sighvatr was on pilgrimage to Rome, a journey which in effect saved his life. When he heard of the death of his king he expressed his grief symbolically:

The high, leaning cliffs round all Norway seemed to me to smile  
when Olaf was alive —I used to be known on ships.  
Now afterwards, the slopes seem to me much less friendly  
—such is my grief. I had the king’s complete favour.

(Transl. P.G. Foote)