

Norse

Mythology

A GUIDE TO THE GODS, HEROES,
RITUALS, AND BELIEFS

JOHN LINDOW

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John Lindow

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A NOTE ON ORTHOGRAPHY

Because this book is intended for a general audience, a decision was made to limit the use of the specialized characters usually employed to represent the sounds of the older Germanic languages, including those of Norway and Iceland during the Viking Age and Middle Ages. Specifically, in names and titles the letter *þ* (thorn) is here represented as *th*, *ð* (eth) as *d*, and *ǫ* (o-hook) as *ö*. These letters have, however, been retained in discussions of specific terms, such as “*þylja*” and “*goði*.” Other characters, such as *æ*, *œ*, and *ö*, have been retained. In addition, the nominative singular final *r* has been removed from names, and the accent marks have been removed from the names “Odin” and “Thor,” since these forms are the most widely used in English.

These compromises naturally create inconsistencies, but I hope they will not divert from the aim of the work, namely, to let the texts speak for themselves and to give the reader an idea of the main issues in the study of Scandinavian mythology.

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INTRODUCTION

When most of us use the word “myth” in conversation, we refer to something that is not true. When historians of religion use it, they generally refer to a representation of the sacred in words. When anthropologists use it, they often refer to narratives that tell about the formation of some social institution or behavior. None of the definitions, however, will hold directly for the characters and stories this book treats. That is in part because of the enormous time frame: Materials relevant to the study of Scandinavian mythology, broadly defined, span two millennia or more. But even if we limit the discussion to the relatively small body of texts from the Viking Age and later Middle Ages about the gods Odin, Thor, Frey, and the others and their constant battles with forces of evil and chaos, it is difficult to reconcile these texts with any one of the narrow definitions of myth suggested above. Certainly they had some truth value to the people who composed them and those who wrote them down, but these were not always the same people—usually they were not—and it is obvious that what was true, sacred, and an account of how the world got to be the way it is to a Viking Age pagan poet can have been none of the above to a Christian scribe copying the story in a manuscript hundreds of years after the Viking Age. It is therefore easier and more enlightening to talk of formal criteria and content.

In form, then, myth in general, and the texts that comprise Scandinavian mythology in particular, are narrative, although this narrative is couched in both verse and prose. In general, one expects myth to recount important events that took place at the beginning of time and helped shape the world, and Scandinavian mythology indeed has sequences that tell of the origin of the cosmos and of human beings. The story goes on, however, to the destruction and rebirth of the cosmos, and everything in it is presented in light of an enduring struggle between two groups of beings, the gods on the one hand and giants on the other hand. These terms are to some extent misleading: Although the group that creates and orders the cosmos is often referred to by words that can best be translated “gods,” the principal word, “*æsir*,” is explicitly presented by the most

important medieval interpreter, Snorri Sturluson, as meaning “People of Asia,” and indeed the word often has the feel in mythological texts of an extended kin group or tribe rather than of a collective of deities. And the other group, the ones who aim for the destruction of the cosmos and disruption of order, are certainly not “giant” in the sense that they are demonstrably larger than the gods. They are usually called the “jötnar,” and again as the term is used in the mythology it feels more like a tribal or kin group than anything else.

The world in which the æsir and jötnar play out their struggle has its own set of place-names but is essentially recognizable as Scandinavia. There are rivers, mountains, forests, oceans, storms, cold weather, fierce winters, eagles, ravens, salmon, and snakes. People get about on ships and on horseback. They eat slaughtered meat and drink beer. As in Scandinavia, north is a difficult direction, and so is east, probably because our mythology comes from west Scandinavia (Norway and Iceland), where travel to the east required going over mountains, and going west on a ship was far easier for this seafaring culture.

It is helpful to think of three time periods in which the mythology takes place. In the mythic past, the æsir created and ordered the world and joined with another group, the vanir, to make up the community of gods. Somehow this golden age was disrupted in the mythic present. As dwarfs, humans, and occasionally elves look on and are sometimes drawn into the struggle, the æsir and the jötnar fight over resources, precious objects, and, especially, women. The flow of such wealth is all in one direction, from the jötnar to the æsir, and in fact one might divide the narratives of the mythic present into those in which the gods acquire something from the giants and those in which an attempt by the giants to acquire something from the gods is foiled. In the mythic future, this world order will come to a fiery end as gods and giants destroy each other and the cosmos, but a new world order is to follow in which the world will be reborn and inhabited by a new generation of æsir.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Scandinavia consists of the low-lying Danish islands and the peninsula of Jutland and the great Scandinavian peninsula, which in its northern reaches is divided in two by the huge mountain range known as the keel. On the eastern side lies Sweden with its gentle Baltic Sea coast and a great deal of fertile land, especially in the central parts of Sweden, around the lakes Mälaren, Vänneren, and Vättern, and to the south. On the west lies Norway, where tall mountains spring from the coast, which is protected from the Atlantic by a series of small islands. To the south lies Denmark, which until 1658 included not only Jutland and the islands

but also southern portions of the Scandinavian peninsula. The names are indicative: Norway, the northern way, the sea route up and down the coast; Denmark, the forest of the Danes, which separated them from the Saxons; Sweden, the kingdom of the Svear, the people around Mälaren who at some point during the Viking Age subdued their southern neighbors in Götaland. The name “Scandinavia” appears to be the Latinized form of an unattested German word, *Scandinaujā. (The asterisk before the word means that it was never recorded but rather was reconstructed by linguists.) This word is a compound, the second part of which, *aujā*, means “island.” What the first part means has been endlessly debated. It appears to contain the same root as the name of the southern part of Sweden, Skåne, and may therefore mean “Skanian island.”

As the ice from the last great Ice Age retreated, the low-lying lands of the south were first exposed, and pollen analysis indicates settlement on Sjælland and elsewhere by around 10,000 B.C.E. We know little about these settlements, but by 6500 B.C.E. or so, a hunting and fishing culture may be identified. By 2500 B.C.E. or so, there are indications of agriculture and the raising of animals. At around 2000 B.C.E. the archaeological record begins to show characteristic small ax heads, made of stone but carefully copying the marks of metal pouring that was used for such axes to the south in Europe. A hypothetical culture associated with these axes and an even more hypothetical immigration of persons with them from Europe is known as the Boat-Ax culture. Around 1000 B.C.E. the Scandinavian Bronze Age begins, and from this same period there are numerous spectacular rock carvings, which may have had a religious purpose. The Scandinavian Iron Age begins circa 500–400 B.C.E., and its first stage, up to around the beginning of our era, is known as the Pre-Roman Iron Age, despite incipient trade with the Roman Empire. Around the beginning of our era we begin to get runic inscriptions from Scandinavia and the Continent in a language that is identifiably Germanic, and in Scandinavia the so-called Roman Iron Age begins. On the Continent this is the time when the Germanic peoples confront the Roman Empire, with increasing success. By around 400 C.E. gold appears in Scandinavia, and the Germanic Iron Age begins; the Older Germanic Iron Age, from circa 400 to 550 or 575 C.E., is also known as the Migration Period because of the extensive movements of the Germanic tribes around Europe, as is especially known from accounts of interaction with Germanic peoples written by Roman historians. Scandinavia was probably the homeland for some of these peoples. For example, the Burgundians would appear to have come from the island of Bornholm, the Goths either from Götaland in Sweden or from the island of Gotland off Sweden’s east coast, and the Vandals either from the Vendel area of Sweden or what is now Vendsyssel in Denmark. Part of the Anglo-Saxon immigration to England probably came from Angeln in what is now Denmark.



Buckle clasp in silver, gold, and precious stones from Admark, Norway, seventh century C.E. (The Art Archive/Historiska Museet Norway/Dagli Orti)

The period circa 600–800 C.E. is usually called the Younger Germanic Iron Age, although Swedish archaeologists usually called it the Vendel Period because of the wealth of finds from Vendel, an area northeast of Lake Mälaren. During this period, too, there was extensive trade from across the Baltic centered at Helgö, then an island in the southern part of Lake Mälaren. And in Den-

mark it appears that a Danish state was already beginning to establish itself in Jutland.

Between circa 600 and 800 C.E., a number of linguistic changes occurred in the northern area of the Germanic speech community, and by the end of this period one may speak of Scandinavian languages. By this same time some Scandinavians burst spectacularly on the European scene. Although there appears to have been sporadic raiding before the autumn of 793, in that year Vikings sacked the rich monastery at Lindisfarne off the east coast of northern England, and for nearly three centuries Vikings, and later, the Scandinavian kingdoms, would play a major role in European history. What the word “Viking” originally meant is not known; the European writers, mostly clergymen, who made it famous painted a fairly clear picture of pagan marauders who destroyed and despoiled wherever they went. Certainly there is some truth to such a picture, especially in the early part of the Viking Age, when the Scandinavian sailors do seem to have had military advantages, with their light, swift, maneuverable ships. But it is important to consider that there were individual forays, larger expeditions, armies wintering in England and on the Continent, and, finally, the North Sea empire of Cnut the Great. Besides this military activity there was continuous trade and a pattern of settlement in the lands to which the Scandinavian ships came.

Some of these lands were already settled, such as the French coast and northeast England. In Normandy the Scandinavians left relatively little trace, but in England their influence was great. The creation of the Danelaw—a relatively fixed area in which Scandinavian law obtained—arranged by Alfred the Great and the Danish king Guthrum in the 880s, indicates just how pervasive the Scandinavian presence was. The enormous number of Scandinavian loanwords into English indicates an extended period of contact between the English and the Scandinavians, and as the Scandinavian kingdoms began to emerge during the ninth and tenth centuries, there was not infrequently contact with English courts. For example, one of the sons of Harald Fairhair of Norway, Hákon the Good, had been fostered at the court of King Athalstan of England. According to tradition, Harald had united all Norway into a single kingdom (this had occurred somewhat earlier in Denmark and would probably happen somewhat later in Sweden, for which the sources are rather meager). During the reign of Harald (870–930) serious emigration began over the sea to the islands to the west: the Orkneys, the Shetlands, the Faroes, and Iceland. This push was finally to reach Greenland and North America, and it was paralleled by extensive travel from Sweden to the east, to Finland and Russia, down the great Russian river systems to Constantinople and the Black Sea.

According to the Icelandic sources, powerful chieftains fled western Norway and settled in Iceland in order to avoid the tyranny of Harald Fairhair. There may



Some English jet was exported from Yorkshire to Norway during the Viking Age. This carving of a pair of bear-like gripping beasts brings to mind related examples in amber. (Historisk Museum, Bergen Universitetet)

be some truth in this, and even if Norway was hardly the only source of immigration into Iceland, it remained the country most connected to Iceland and the kingdom into which Iceland was finally folded in 1262–1264. But from the time of the settlement—Iceland was “fully settled” by 897 according to learned authors of the twelfth century—until then, Iceland functioned as a commonwealth in which judicial power was in the hands of a group of chieftains, and there was no king or other central authority. These leaders were called *goðar* (sing., *goði*), and although the sources rarely show much religious activity on their part—and what they do show may not be reliable—the term clearly incorporates the word for “gods.” Therefore they must have had some sort of religious function. *Goðar* had “thing-

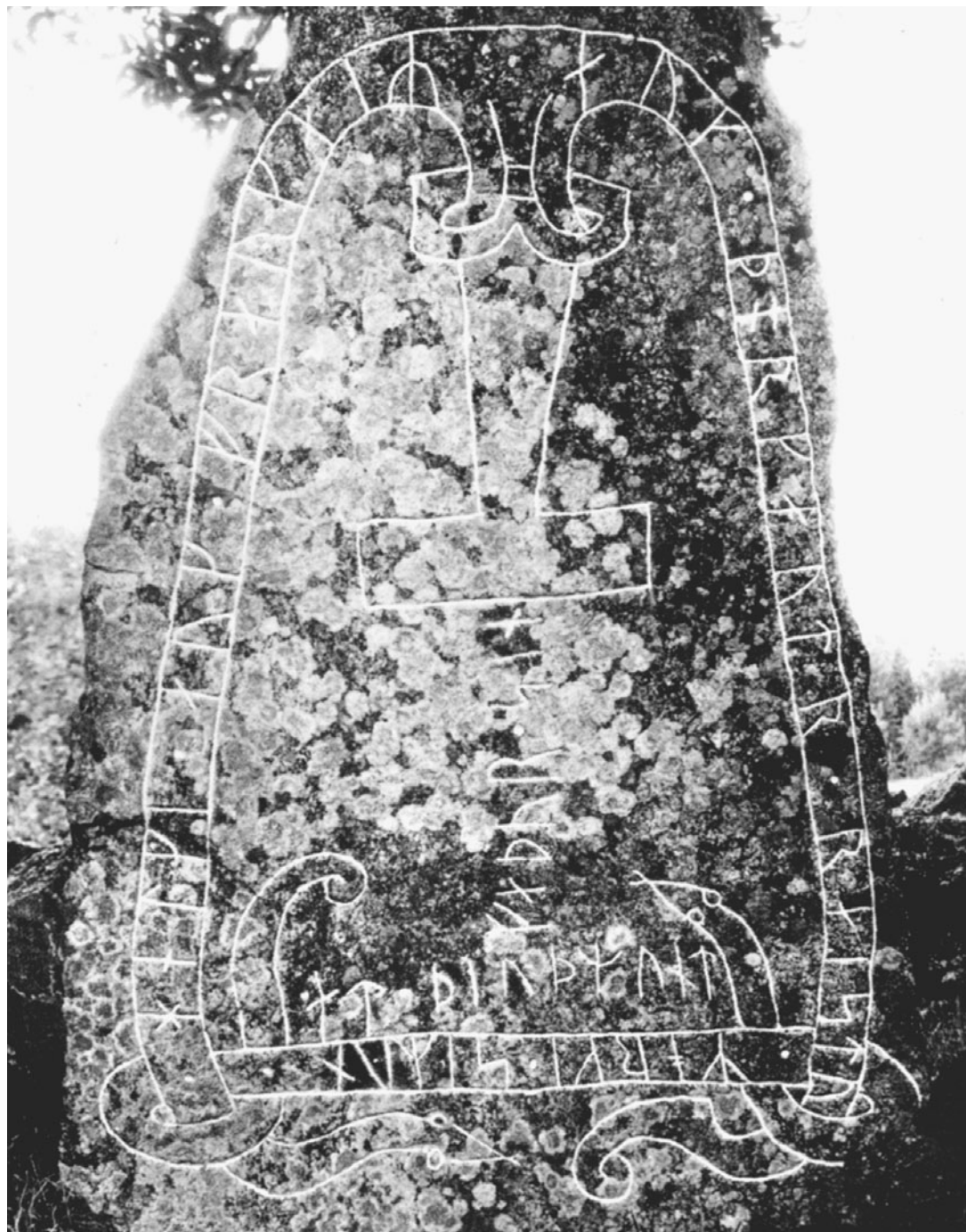
men,” who owed them allegiance and whom they in turn helped; every free man had to be some *goði*’s thing-man. The word “thing” (*þing*) means assembly, and one of the duties of a *goði* and his thing-men was to attend the local assemblies and the national assembly (*alþingi*) to participate in litigation and, one assumes, to renew friendships and exchange stories. There were few towns in Scandinavia during the Viking Age and none at all in Iceland, so the assemblies, and especially the annual national assembly, must have played an important social role. There, one-third of the law was recited from memory each year by the only national official in the country, the lawspeaker. The position was one of status and influence but of little direct power. People lived on farms, and the basic social unit was the household. So important was this principle of household membership that people could switch from one household to another only at certain specified times of the year, the “moving days.” Farming consisted primarily of raising cattle and the hay that would be needed to support the cattle.

The Viking Age is by definition a period when Scandinavians and Europeans interacted, and without that interaction and the written documents it gave rise to in Europe, archaeologists might have called the period from 800 to circa 1000 the "Scandinavian Iron Age." The beginning of the period, as we have seen, is portrayed by those who wrote the history, the literate members of the Christian church, as a meeting between pagan and Christian, and it was only natural that as time passed attempts would be made to convert the Scandinavians, as Charlemagne had converted the Saxons. Indeed, those Scandinavians who traded or settled in Christian lands had ample contact with Christianity, and many of them either converted or had themselves "prime-signed," that is, they accepted the sign of the cross, the first step toward baptism, so that they could do business with Christians. Furthermore, the gradual emergence of European nation-states in Scandinavia during the Viking Age and their increasing integration with Europe made it inevitable that the issue would arise at the national level as well. There is documented missionary activity in Scandinavia from the early Viking Age onward, most famously by Ansgar, the "apostle of the north," who worked with both Danish and Swedish kings in the first half of the ninth century.

The process was to bear fruit first in Denmark in the later tenth century, when King Harald Bluetooth witnessed the priest Poppo carrying a red-hot piece of iron, with no harm to his hands, as a demonstration that Christ was greater than the pagan gods. At Jelling in Jutland, King Harald Bluetooth erected an elaborate rune stone celebrating his parents and himself, the person who "made the Danes Christian," as the Jelling rune stone says.

In Norway there is evidence of Christian burial from around this time, and Hákon the Good was a Christian king whose reign ended around 960, when Harald converted. But Hákon was buried in a mound and celebrated in pagan poetry. Olaf Trygvason, who ruled Norway from 995 to 1001, had been baptized in England, and he undertook a program of forcible conversions throughout the country. He was of a family from the Oslo fjord, and the most obdurate pagans were allegedly in the other power center in the country, the area near modern Trondheim. Credit for the final conversion is given to Olaf Haraldsson. When he was killed at the battle of Stiklestad in 1030, a battle having far more to do with national politics than religion—his opponents were supported by Cnut the Great, the Christian king of Denmark and England—people quickly saw signs of his sanctity, and he became the most important saint of northern Europe.

We are less well informed about the conversion in Sweden. Although the kings of Sweden were Christian from the beginning of the eleventh century, the monk Adam of Bremen, in his history (ca. 1070) of the archbishopric of Hamburg-Bremen in northern Germany, which had responsibility for Scandinavia, reported a vast pagan temple at Uppsala, with idols of the pagan gods and gruesome sacri-



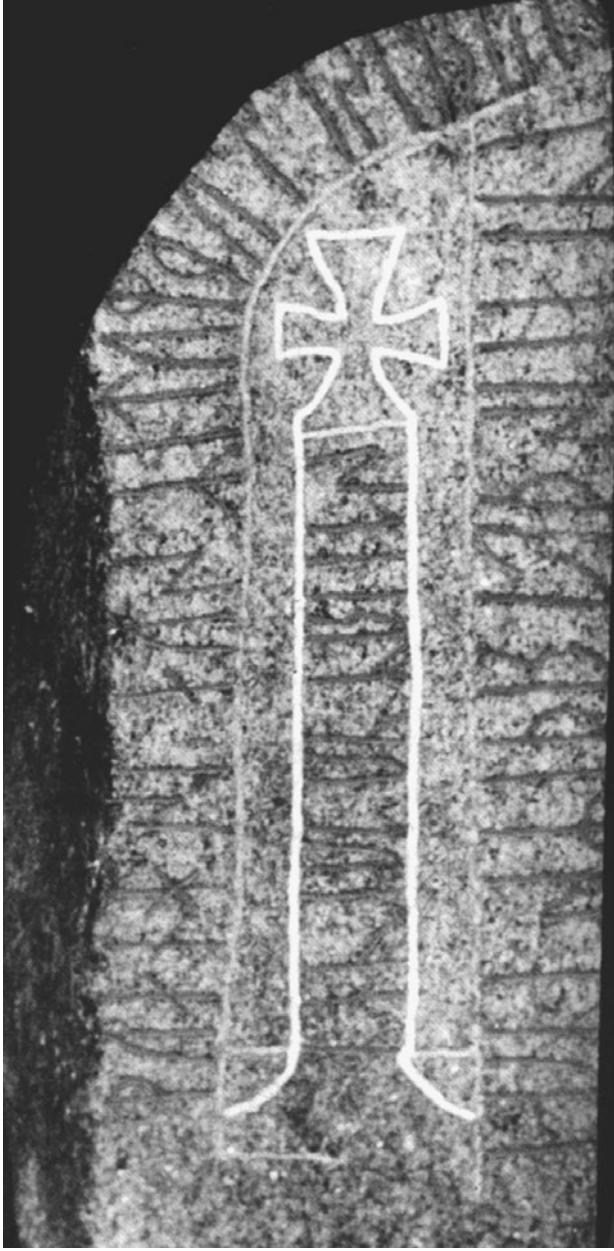
Rune stones depicting Thor's hammer like this one in Sweden are fairly easy to find. Compare this to the rune stone on page 10; both are from the late Viking Age. (Statens Historiska Museum, Stockholm)



Illustration from Flateyjarbók, a late-fourteenth-century Icelandic manuscript. The scene may depict St. Olaf killing a monster. (Bob Krist/Corbis)

fices. But eleventh-century rune stones from that very same part of Sweden are openly Christian: “God rest his soul,” many of them ask, in runes surrounding an incised cross. Most historians accept that Sweden was fully Christian by the beginning of the twelfth century at the latest.

The conversion in Iceland followed a fascinating course. Missionaries were active in the latter decades of the tenth century, but so were their pagan opponents. Olaf Tryggvason, whose role in the conversion was championed by twelfth-century and later Icelandic monks, took hostage some wealthy young Icelandic travelers, and there was further resolve among Christians in Iceland to complete the conversion. However, as the two sides approached the *althingi* in Iceland in the year 1000, it appeared that war would break out. Finally it was agreed that a single arbiter should choose one religion for the entire land, and the lawspeaker Thorgeir, a pagan, was chosen. After spending a night under his cloak, he emerged and decreed that Iceland should be Christian. And so it was. At first some pagan practices were permitted if carried out in secret, but later even this permission was rescinded. However, for reasons that are no longer quite clear, the old stories about the gods were not lost on Iceland. Poems about them lived on in oral tradition, to be recorded more than two centuries after the conversion. Some mythological poems may actually have been composed by



Compare this rune stone with a cross to the one on page 8. (Statens Historika Museum, Stockholm)

Christians in Iceland, and Snorri Sturluson made extensive use of the mythology in his writings.

Thus Scandinavian mythology was, with virtually no exception, written down by Christians, and there is no reason to believe that Christianity in Iceland was any different from Christianity anywhere else in western Europe during the High Middle Ages. Although the earliest bishops were sent out from Norway, quite soon the bishops were native born, and by the end of the eleventh century there were two episcopal sees, the original one at Skálholt and a new one for the north at Hólar. There were several monasteries, adhering both to the Benedictine and Augustinian orders, and there was also one nunnery in Iceland before the demise of the commonwealth in 1262–1264. At least some of the monks were literate, and they composed both Latin and Icelandic texts. Some lay persons of higher status were also apparently literate, at least in Icelandic, but all writing, whether in the international language of the church or in the vernacular, was the result of the conversion to Christianity, which brought with it the technology of manuscript writing.

Before and after the church brought manuscript writing to the north, there was some writing using the native runic writing system. Since in the older runic alphabet there are no horizontal strokes, it is assumed that the system was originally invented for scratching the letters on wooden sticks, whose grain would obscure horizontal strokes. Only special circumstances permit wood to remain



Detail of the rune stone from Rök, Sweden, from the ninth century C.E. Created by Varin for his dead son, Vemod, with center as ode to Theodoric, king of the Goths. (The Art Archive/Dagli Orti)

undecayed in the ground for archaeologists to dig up centuries later, and as a result most (but by no means all) of the extant runic inscriptions are on stones. It is important to stress that carving on wood or stone is a fairly laborious process and that the kinds of things recorded using the runic alphabets tended to be short and of a different nature from texts that can be easily written only in manuscripts. Most runic inscriptions are utilitarian, and despite popular conceptions, they have little to say about mythology or magic.

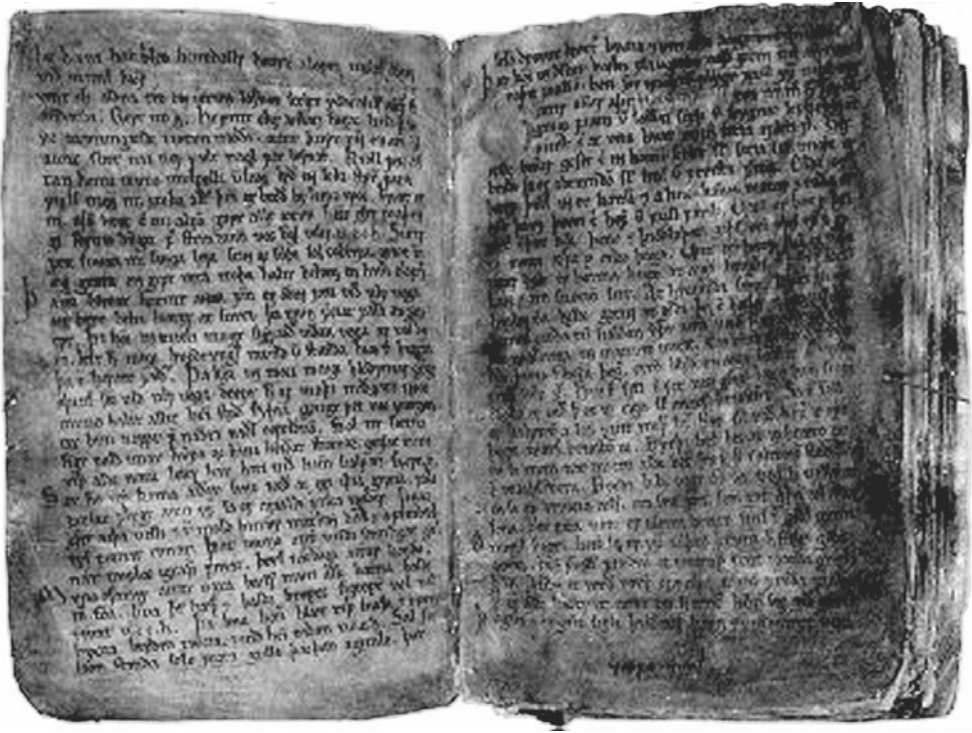
The oldest runic inscriptions are from around the time of the emergence of the Germanic peoples and are written in an alphabet of 24 characters whose origin is greatly debated. Early in the Viking Age a new runic alphabet developed in Scandinavia, one with 16 characters. Later several variations grew out of this basic Viking Age runic alphabet. Of the approximately 4,000 runic inscriptions, most are from the Viking Age; most of these are from Sweden; and most of these are from the provinces around Lake Mälaren, especially Uppland. Most are memorial: They explain who erected the stone, whose death is memorialized, and what the relationship was between the two. Although the few rune sticks and other kinds of runic inscriptions that have been retained show that runes

could be used in a great many ways, Scandinavia through the Viking Age was for all intents and purposes an oral society, one in which nearly all information was encoded in mortal memory—rather than in books that could be stored—and passed from one memory to another through speech acts. Some speech acts were formal in nature, others not. But like speeches that politicians adapt for different audiences, much ancient knowledge must have been prone to change in oral transmission. Without the authority of a written document, there was no way to compare the versions of a text, and we therefore cannot assume that a text recorded in a thirteenth-century source passed unchanged through centuries of oral transmission. This fact makes it extremely difficult to discuss with any authority the time or place of origin of many of the texts of Scandinavian mythology, especially eddic poetry.

“Eddic poetry” is the name we use for a group of about 35 poems, all of them recorded in Iceland during the Middle Ages, nearly all in the thirteenth century. The term “eddic” is a misnomer: Most of these poems are in a single manuscript, and when the learned bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson first saw this manuscript in the seventeenth century, he perceived a similarity to the book called *Edda* by Snorri Sturluson and imagined that this manuscript, another “*Edda*,” had been composed by Sæmund Sigfússon the Learned, a priest who flourished in the years around 1100 and who according to tradition was the first Icelandic historian, although no works by him have been preserved. This manuscript was therefore called not only “*The Edda of Sæmund*” but also the “*Elder Edda*,” since Sæmund had lived a century before Snorri. It has been more than a century since anyone has taken seriously the idea that Sæmund had anything to do with the composition of this work or that it preceded Snorri, but we still call it “*Edda*”: the *Poetic Edda*. Because the manuscript became part of the collection of the Royal Library in Copenhagen, we now call it “*Codex Regius* (royal manuscript) of the *Poetic Edda*,” and we call the kinds of poems in it “eddic poetry.”

Codex Regius of the *Poetic Edda*, which is now preserved in Iceland, was written down toward the end of the thirteenth century, probably in the years around 1280. It appears to be a copy of a now lost manuscript, probably written circa 1250, and it seems that some of the poems in it may have been written down as early as the very beginning of the thirteenth century. These are not, however, the mythological poems. *Codex Regius* of the *Poetic Edda* contains 31 poems, sometimes joined or interrupted by prose passages, arranged in a deliberate order by the unknown scribe who wrote it, an order that moves from the mythological to the heroic. It is ordered within the mythological and heroic sections as well.

The manuscript begins with *Völuspá* (Prophecy of the Seeress), which gives a summary of the entire mythology, from the origin of the cosmos to its destruc-



Pages from the famous Codex Regius of the Poetic Edda. (British Library)

tion to his rebirth. *Völuspá* can also be regarded as an Odin poem, since it is Odin who causes the seeress voicing it to speak. The following three poems are also Odin poems: *Hávamál* (Words of the High One), which contains Odinic wisdom and several stories that describe the acquisition of that wisdom; *Vafthrúdnismál* (Words of Vafthrúdnir), which describes the context of wisdom between Odin and the wise giant Vafthrúdnir; and *Grímnismál* (Words of Grímnir), which describes Odin's ecstatic wisdom performance at the hall of the human king Geirröd. The next poem, *Skírnismál* (Words of Skírnir) or *För Skírnis* (Skírnir's Journey), belongs to Frey, in that it describes the journey of Frey's servant Skírnir to woo the giantess Gerd. The following four poems are probably to be assigned to Thor. The first of these is *Hárbarðsljóð* (Song of Hárbarð), in which Thor and a disguised Odin exchange insults and anecdotes. The next is *Hymiskvida* (Hymir's Poem), an account of Thor's journey to the giant Hymir and fishing up of the Midgard serpent. *Lokasenna* (Loki's Verbal Duel) follows, and in it Loki insults all the gods. It is a Thor poem because it is Thor who finally chases Loki away. The last of the Thor poems is *Thrymskvida* (The Poem of Thrym), a burlesque in which Thor, disguised as Freyja, retrieves his hammer from the giant Thrym. The last two mythological poems are *Völundarkvida* (Völund's Poem) and *Alvíssmál*

(The Words of All-wise). *Völundarkvida* has no gods in it and to us today looks like a heroic poem, but the compiler of *Codex Regius* of the *Poetic Edda* must have thought that Völund's elfish background was good reason to situate the poem here, elves being creatures from the "lower mythology" (neither of the gods nor of the giants). *Alvíssmál* has another such creature in Alvíss, the "all-wise" dwarf who sues for the hand of Thor's daughter and is kept dispensing synonyms by the god until the sun comes up and turns the dwarf to stone.

At this point the heroic poems begin, but the gods are by no means wholly absent, especially from the poems telling the early parts of the story of Sigurd the dragon-slayer. Odin, Hœnir, and Loki appear in the prose header to *Reginsmál* (Reginn's Poem), and Loki appears in the poem itself. There are several allusions to Odin, and these poems contain much fascinating information about such mythological beings as norns, dwarfs, and the like.

There is a second main manuscript containing many of these poems, but, unlike *Codex Regius* of the *Poetic Edda*, it is not apparently ordered. Because it was retained as manuscript number 748 in the Arnarnagnæan Collection in Copenhagen, it is called AM 748. It was written down a bit later than *Codex Regius* of the *Poetic Edda*. There are few differences between the texts of the poems in the two manuscripts, but AM 748 contains a mythological poem not included in *Codex Regius* of the *Poetic Edda*, namely, *Baldrs draumar* (Baldr's Dreams), an account of Odin's questioning of a seeress about the fate of Baldr. One additional mythological poem, *Rígsthula* (Ríg's Rhymed List), which tells of the origins of the human social order, is found in a manuscript of Snorri's *Edda*.

Each eddic poem had its own history before it was written down, and there has been much speculation about the dates and origins of the various poems. Most scholars believe strongly in the possibility that some of the mythological poems were composed, after Iceland's conversion to Christianity, by antiquarians secure enough in their Christianity to be able to compose in the old form about the old gods. *Thrymskvida* is the poem most often mentioned in this context, but there are many others. On the other hand, there is no way to tell whether a poem, even one that looks as young as *Thrymskvida*, might have been composed during the Viking Age or even, theoretically, earlier, and changed in oral transmission so as to look like the product of a Christian antiquary. Whatever the original dates and origins of the mythological eddic poems, it seems to me that the similarities outweigh the differences and that the pictures of the gods are fairly consistent.

In form, the eddic poems are short stanzaic poems that rely chiefly on two meters, *fornyrðislag*, "old way of composing," and *ljóðahátt*, "song meter." *Fornyrðislag* is equivalent to the verse form used in Old English, Old High German, and Old Saxon, the other Germanic languages in which verse has been pre-

served, although the division into stanzas appears to be a Scandinavian innovation. Like the poems in the second half of *Codex Regius* of the *Poetic Edda*, verse in Old English and Old High German is about heroes, and even the major surviving example of Old Saxon, a verse life of Christ called *Heliand* (Savior), exhibits heroic diction. Heroic eddic poetry, then, especially when it uses *fornyrðislag*, appears to be the heir of common Germanic poetry. We may also surmise that there was verse about gods during the common Germanic period, but only Iceland has preserved any. *Fornyrðislag* tends to be used for third-person narrative, *ljóðaháttr* for dialogue. A version of *ljóðaháttr* is called *galdralag*, “meter of magics,” and its use, although sparing, has considerable stylistic power.

Besides these anonymous mythological and heroic poems, there is far more verse that has been transmitted to us with the name of a poet attached to it. The word for “poet” was *skáld*, and these verses are usually called “skaldic.” They are far more complex in form than the eddic poems, both with respect to meter and, in the case of the more complex longer poems, with respect to the structure of the poem itself. In addition, they use a far more complex diction. The high degree of formality and complexity make some skaldic verse difficult. Although a great many skalds are known, ranging from Icelandic saga heroes to bishops, some of the most famous skalds served at the courts of kings and other powerful rulers. Sometimes these men gave the skalds valuable gifts, such as a shield, and if the shield was decorated with scenes taken from narrative, the skald might compose a poem describing those scenes as thanks for the gift. Such a shield poem can be of considerable interest in the study of mythology and heroic legend, for the scenes depicted on shields tended to be from those realms. There are other examples of this sort of ekphrasis (Greek: “a plain declaration,” in this context a text about an image) in the skaldic corpus, such as Úlf Uggason’s *Húsdrápa*, which describes carvings in a newly built hall in late-tenth-century Iceland. In some cases we lack the context of a poem but can surmise the existence of an ekphrasis.

Skaldic poetry is retained as individual verses not (apparently) connected with any poem and as fragmentary or whole poems. The most elaborate poems are called *drápur* (sing., *drápa*), which are broken into sections by means of one or more refrains, which here means lines repeated in the same place within a given stanza. A *drápa* should also have introductory and concluding sections that lack the refrain(s). I will translate *drápa* in this book as “refrain poem.” A poem without refrains was called a *flokkr*, “flock.”

The earliest known skald is ordinarily taken to be Bragi Boddason the Old, whom most scholars think was Norwegian and active in the second half of the ninth century. According to Snorri, he was associated with the semilegendary Viking Ragnar Lodbrók (Hairy-breeches). Fragments of a poem addressed to Rag-

nar, *Ragnarsdrápa*, exist. The poem, as we have it reconstructed, describes four scenes on the shield Ragnar gave Bragi, and three of these have to do with the mythology: Thor's fishing up the Midgard serpent, Gefjon's plowing land from Gylfi, and Hild's inciting Högni and Hedin to endless battle.

Another early Norwegian skald was Thjóðólf of Hvin, who flourished around the end of the ninth and beginning of the tenth century and was patronized by several Norwegian rulers. Two of the poems attributed to him are important mythological sources. Of these, the first is *Ynglinga tal* (Enumeration of the Ynglingar), which Thjóðólf composed for Rögnvald heidumheiri (Honored-highly) Ólafsson, a king from the important Vestfold district in the Oslo fjord. *Ynglinga tal* lists the ways that 22 generations of the Ynglingar, kings centered in Uppsala and predecessors of Rögnvald, met their deaths and where they were buried. The poem clearly originally served a dynastic purpose, but, especially in its discussion of the earliest kings, it has much to tell us about mythology and religion. Thjóðólf also composed the shield poem *Haustlög* (Autumn-long, which may refer to the poem's gestation period). He describes two mythological scenes that adorned the shield: Loki's betrayal of Idun and her apples to the giant Thjazi and her rescue, and Thor's duel with Hrungnir, the strongest of the giants.

From the earliest skaldic tradition come three "eddic praise poems," poems in eddic meters (but in which the meters are ordinarily more strictly adhered to than in eddic poems proper), composed to honor not gods or ancient heroes but recently deceased kings. Two of these describe Valhöll in connection with the arrival there of the king the poet wishes to praise. One, the anonymous *Eiríksmál*, was allegedly commissioned by Gunnhild, the widow of King Eirík Haraldsson Bloodaxe, who died in 954. The other, attributed to Eyvind Finnsson skáldaspillir (Spoiler-or-debaser-of-poets), praises Hákon the Good, who died in 961.

Úlf Uggason was an Icelandic skald who lived around the tumultuous period of the conversion. Around 985, according to the chronology of *Laxdæla saga*, Úlf composed a *drápa* celebrating the building of an ornate hall by Ólaf pái (Peacock), an important chieftain in western Iceland. The hall was decorated within with scenes from the mythology. Three of the scenes are in what we now think we have of the poem, which Úlf recited at the wedding of Ólaf's daughter. These are Baldr's funeral, Thor's fishing up of the Midgard serpent, and Loki's fight with Heimdall.

Another skald who lived during this period was Eilíf Godrúnarson, about whom nothing is known—not even his nationality—other than that he was patronized by Hákon Sigurdarson, jarl of Hladir, a notorious pagan. Eilíf composed *Thórsdrápa*, a complex and difficult account of Thor's journey to Geirröð.

Besides these poems treating mythological subjects, there are numerous other relevant texts and fragments. A poem like *Sonatorrek* (Loss of Sons) by Egil

Skallagrímsson, the tenth-century hero of *Egils saga*, may tell us something about his own religious attitudes. “Rán has robbed me greatly,” he says, alluding to the drowning death of one of his sons.

In skaldic poetry, Thor is the most frequent mythological subject. The most tantalizing of these are two verses addressing Thor in the second person, both probably from the last years of paganism in Iceland.

Skaldic poetry is valuable not just for the direct exposition of mythological subjects but also for its very diction. The primary stylistic feature is the kenning, a two or more part substitution for a noun. Kennings consist of a base word (e.g., “tree”) and a modifier (“of battle”). What is a “tree of battle”? This figure is indeed something like a riddle. Because he stands tall in a battle, a “tree of battle” is a warrior. What is the “din of spears”? Because battles are noisy affairs, the “din of spears” is battle. Kennings are known from eddic poetry and the verse of the other older Germanic languages, but they took on a special importance in skaldic poetry because skalds linked them by using one kenning as the modifier of a base word to create another, for example, “tree of the din of spears” for warrior. The examples I have chosen so far are relatively obvious, but skalds also made kennings based on narrative, that is, on heroic legend and myth. For example, they called gold “the headpiece of Sif,” which is only comprehensible if one knows the myth in which Loki cuts off Sif’s hair and has the dwarfs make golden hair to replace it. Kennings can be helpful in dating myths, for a kenning that relies on a myth indicates the myth was known to the skald and his audience at a given time. Seeing whether a minor god or goddess is used in the base word of a kenning—for example, “Gná of rings” for woman—can give us some indication as to whether the figure in question was at all known.

Skaldic poetry, then, was a showy, ornate oral poetry, which must have taken much time to master; indeed, it is clear that a certain amount of training would have been needed just to understand it as a member of the audience. It is certainly possible that knowledge of the myths survived the conversion to Christianity because of the value early Christian Iceland placed on the skaldic poems about kings and rulers. In other words, it is possible that the continued transmission of poetry about early kings and battles as historical sources required a continuing knowledge of heroic legend and of myth, not as the object of belief or as something associated with cult but simply as stories that people interested in the history of their own culture had to know. In the same way, students today may study the Bible to be able to understand allusions in older literature. It is even possible to imagine that eddic poems continued to be recited for their narrative value in support of the kenning system, although once belief in the older gods had ended, they could also be recited purely by and for those who enjoyed a good story.

Certainly such a motivation associates the earliest recording of eddic and skaldic poetry and the systematization of the mythology by Snorri Sturluson. Snorri was born during the winter of 1178–1179 into a wealthy family, the Sturlungar, who were to give their name to the turbulent age in which Snorri lived: the Age of the Sturlungs. He grew up at Oddi, the foster son of the most powerful man in Iceland; one of his foster brothers was to become bishop, and Snorri himself was a *goði* and twice held the office of lawspeaker. Through various alliances he soon grew to be one of the most powerful men of his time, and he was deeply involved in the politics of the Age of the Sturlungs. During this time politics became increasingly deadly, and many disputes were settled with weapons. Snorri was assassinated in 1241 by enemies who claimed to be working on behalf of the king of Norway.

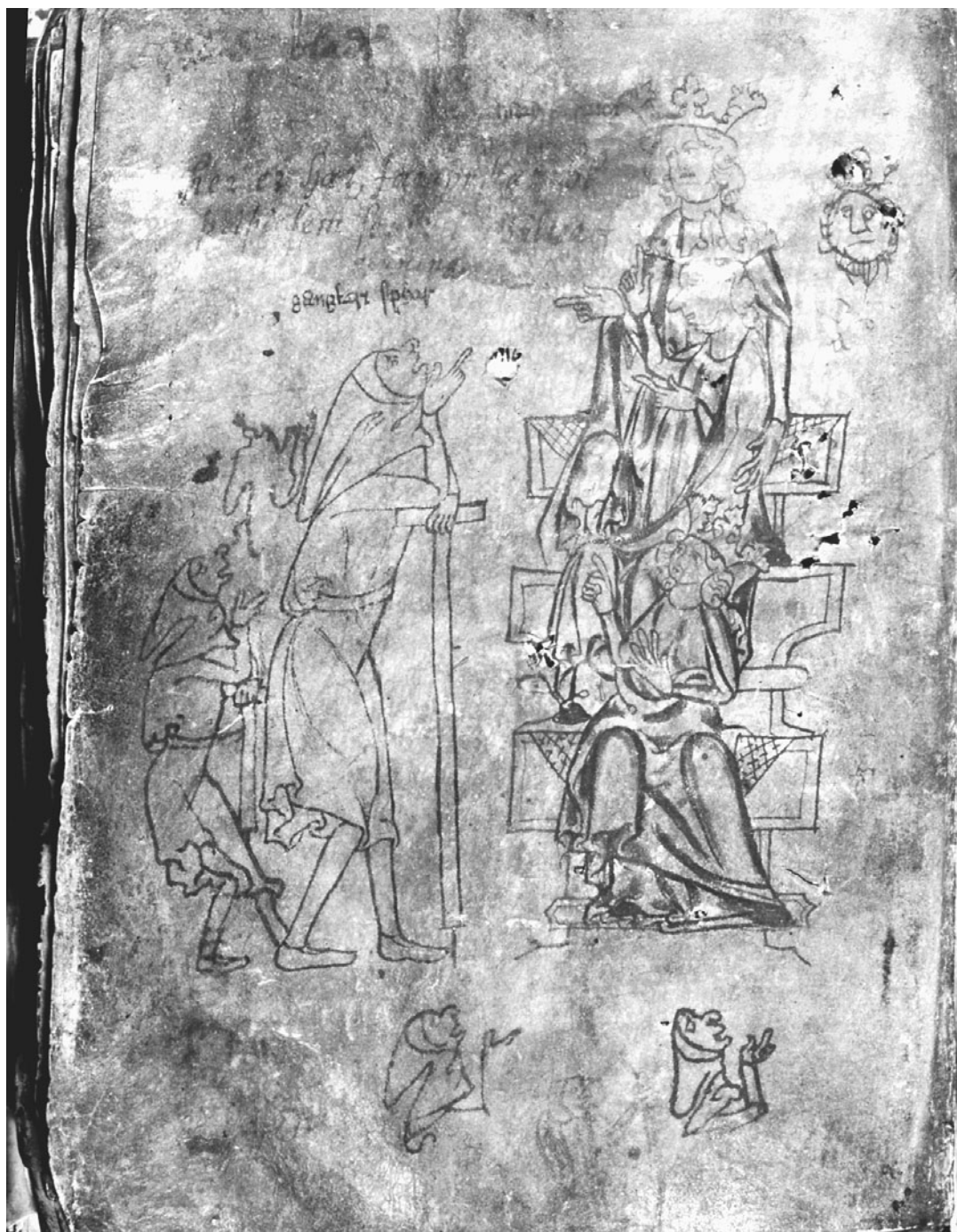
Snorri had visited that king, Hákon Hákonarson the Old, in 1218–1219, and he composed a poem in praise of the boy king and his regent, the jarl Skuli. This poem is called *Háttatal* (Enumeration of Meters), and it exemplifies 101 metrical or stylistic variants in its 102 stanzas, equipped with a commentary. From an explication of meter and style, it seems, he moved to a discussion of the system of kennings and rare or poetic words and names called “*heiti*,” which he embodied in a treatise called *Skáldskaparmál* (The Language of Poetry). This text comprises for the most part lists of kennings and *heiti* arranged by the nouns they can replace, illustrated with a large number of citations from skaldic poetry, quoting in blocks of half a stanza. But besides this, he used a narrative frame to retell some of the more important myths that underlie skaldic kennings. According to this frame, a man named Ægir or Hlér from Hlésey (“Hlér’s Island,” modern Læssø off the Danish coast), a master of magic, goes to Ásgard, where the *æsir* receive him well but with visual delusions. The hall is illuminated by swords alone. Twelve male and twelve female *æsir* are there. Ægir sits next to Bragi, who tells Ægir many stories of events in which the *æsir* have participated. The first of these is the full story of the alienation and recovery of Idun and her apples, the death of Thjazi, and the compensation granted to Skadi. When Bragi has finished, he and Ægir have a short conversation about a few kennings, and then Ægir asks Bragi the origin of poetry, which elicits the story of the origin and acquisition by Odin of the mead of poetry. At the end of this story Ægir puts questions and Bragi answers them in a way that looks very much like the master-disciple dialogue that so typifies didactic texts in the Middle Ages. Scholars pay special attention to this dialogue, for it sets forth more clearly than in any other place some of the principles of skaldic poetry. After it there follows a paragraph inviting young skalds to pay attention to the narratives that follow if they wish to learn skaldic poetry, but reminding them that Christians are not to believe in pagan gods or the literal truth of the narratives. This can hardly be Bragi’s voice; rather, it is

that of Snorri or, arguably, one of his copyists, and it intrudes on the framing device of a dialogue between Ægir and Bragi. That device is taken up again when Snorri introduces the story of Thor's duel with Hrungnir and of Thor's journey to Geirröd, but thereafter it is dropped. Additional mythic narratives in *Skáldskaparmál* include the acquisition from one set of dwarfs of Sif's golden hair, the ship *Skíðbladnir*, Odin's spear *Gungnir*, Odin's ring *Draupnir*, Frey's boar *Gullinborsti*, and Thor's hammer *Mjöllnir*, and the subsequent acquisition from another dwarf of the gold and cursed ring that play a large role in heroic legend. A good deal of heroic legend is also recounted in *Skáldskaparmál*.

It seems that Snorri next was moved to write up the rest of the myths and to do so with a frame story consistently carried out. The result was *Gylfaginning* (Deluding of Gylfi). Here the frame story has a Swedish king, Gylfi, come to visit Ásgard. He does so because he has heard that all goes to the will of the æsir, and he wishes to determine whether it is because of their own nature or because of the gods whom they worship. A wise man with a control of magic, he assumes the form of an old man. But the æsir were wiser in that they possessed the power of prophecy, and, foreseeing his journey, they prepared visual delusions for him. He thinks he arrives at a great hall, and, assuming the name Gangleri, he meets the chieftains there, Hár (High), Jafnhár (Equally-high), and Thridi (Third) and declares his intention to determine whether there is any learned man there. Hár says that Gangleri will not emerge whole if he is not the wiser, and a series of questions and answers ensues, the questions put by Gylfi/Gangleri, the answers given by usually by Hár with occasional amplification by Jafnhár or Thridi. These questions treat the mythology: first the issue of a supreme deity; then the creation of the cosmos, the identity of the gods and goddesses and some of the myths attaching to them, and then myths untreated there or in *Skáldskaparmál*; and finally Ragnarök and its aftermath. Then Gylfi/Gangleri hears a crash, and the hall disappears.

Snorri quotes liberally from eddic poetry in *Gylfaginning*, especially from *Völuspá*, *Vafthrúdnismál*, and *Grímnismál*. The arrangement of the subjects he treats, following the discussion of the "highest and foremost of the gods," which is Gylfi/Gangleri's first question, is essentially that of *Völuspá* in its sweep from beginning to end of mythic time. Snorri also seems to have known eddic poems beyond those he quotes, and he also paraphrases myths that he probably knew from skaldic poetry; but he quotes no skaldic poetry outside the device of the frame, at the beginning of *Gylfaginning*.

If the arrangement of materials to some extent follows *Völuspá*, the frame story itself is reminiscent especially of *Vafthrúdnismál* and other contests of wisdom. We learn Gylfi's motivation for his journey, and he conceals his name. Hár stipulates a wager of heads, but this motif is dropped; indeed, the nearest



King Gylfi of Sweden questions Hár, Jafnhár, and Thridi, from DG 11, a fourteenth-century manuscript containing Snorri Sturluson's Prose Edda. (Werner Forman/Art Resource)

analogy to the hall's disappearance at the end of the text is Thor's visit to Útgarda-Loki, not any myth of Odin. Gylfi takes the Odin-role in this contest of wisdom, as the traveler under an assumed name, and indeed this assumed name, Gangleri, is one of Odin's in *Grímnismál*, stanza 46 and elsewhere. This is somewhat ironic, since Hár, Jafnhár, and even Thríði are also names of Odin, the latter two also in *Grímnismál*. But as we shall see, Hár, Jafnhár, and Thríði probably also, in Snorri's view, were no more Odin than Gylfi was.

These three sections, in the opposite order from the one in which I just presented them (i.e., *Gylfaginning*, *Skáldskaparmál*, *Háttatal*) and probably in the opposite order from the one in which Snorri wrote them, make up, with a prologue, Snorri's *Edda*, as the work is called in one of its manuscripts. The meaning of this word is not clear, but it seems to have to do with Latin *edo*, in the sense "to compose," and probably therefore meant something like "Poetics." Certainly Snorri's *Edda*, as a whole, is first and foremost a handbook of poetics, even if it is now far more famous as an explication of mythology.

As I have mentioned, *Skáldskaparmál* contains a warning to young skalds about the pagan nature of the material. It seems that Snorri wished to make this statement more forcefully, and he did so in the prologue to his *Edda*. Here, too, he advances his understanding of the historical nature of the gods and gives us the key to understanding *Gylfaginning*. Snorri starts the prologue to his *Edda* by stating, "Almighty God created heaven and earth and all things that accompany them, and finally two people, from whom genealogies are reckoned, Adam and Eve, and their progeny multiplied and went all around the world." Ultimately, however, after the Flood, people lost sight of God, but they observed that there were similarities and yet differences among humans, animals, and the earth, and they began to trace their genealogies from earth. And seeing the importance of the heavenly bodies for time reckoning, they assumed that some being had ordered the course of these bodies and probably existed before they did and might rule all things. This knowledge they possessed was worldly knowledge, for they lacked spiritual knowledge.

This is medieval speculation on the origin of paganism, and it ascribes to pagans a kind of natural religion, one based on unenlightened observation of the environment. It was especially attractive to Icelanders like Snorri, who traced their genealogies from pagans and for whom the conversion of their land to Christianity was a relatively recent event. The first extant work of Icelandic history writing is a little treatise called *Íslendingabók* (Book of Icelanders), by the priest Ari Thorgilsson the Learned, who wrote about a century before Snorri did, and it is plain that for Ari the conversion was the most important event in the history of the Icelanders. In the Sagas of Icelanders, which were composed for the most part in the thirteenth century but which are often set in pagan Iceland, the

“noble heathen” is a stock character. All that conversion required, according to this theory of natural religion, was for Icelanders to regain sight of God. Unlike the pagans whom Icelanders learned about when they translated and read the lives of the early saints of the Christian church, Nordic pagans were not doomed souls in league with Satan. They were merely sheep who had lost their way.

Snorri now adds a historical dimension to his prologue. After presenting a standard medieval view of the world as consisting of Africa, Europe, and Asia, he says that near the center of the earth, in Tyrkland, lies the city of Troy. A king there was called Múnón or Mennón, who was married to Tróan, the daughter of King Priam; their son was Trór, “whom we call Thor.” He was raised by Duke Loricus, whom he subsequently killed, and he took over the kingdom of Loricus, Trákía (Thrace), “which we call Thrúdheim. Then he traveled widely from country to country, explored the entire continent, and alone defeated all berserks and all giants and the greatest dragon and many animals.” He married Síbil, a seeress, “whom we call Sif.” He begat an entire family, and eighteen generations later was born Vóden; “we call that one Odin.”

Troy was a known place, and Agamemnon and Priam were historical figures known in Iceland from the twelfth century onward. Snorri sets Thor in that environment; that is, he tells us that there was a historical figure whom the Nordic peoples called Thor who lived before Christ was born and who performed historical acts (it is important to remember that berserks and dragons were not as fantastic to medieval historians as they seem to us) that look very much like some of the myths about Thor that later were to be told by the Nordic peoples.

The idea that gods derive from humans whose actions are reinterpreted and deified by later generations is called “euhemerism,” after the Greek philosopher Euhemeros (fl. 300 B.C.E.), whose claim to have discovered an inscription showing that Zeus was a mortal king elevated to deity was generalized into a theory that has had considerable currency down into modern times.

Snorri’s euhemerism in the prologue to his *Edda* continues with Odin, whose gift of prophecy informs him that his future lies to the north. He sets off from Tyrkland with a large band of followers, young and old, men and women, and they brought many precious things with them. Wherever they went people said great things about them, “so that they seemed more like gods than humans.” Odin tarries for a while in Saxony and there sets up his sons as kings. For example, Beldeg, “whom we call Baldr,” he makes king of Westphalia. Traveling through Reidgotaland, “which is now called Jutland,” he establishes the Skjöldungar as the kings of Denmark. His final destination is Sweden. “That king is there who is named Gylfi. And when he hears of the journey of those Asia-men, who were called æsir, he went to meet them and invited Odin to take as much power in his kingdom as he wished, and those good times went with