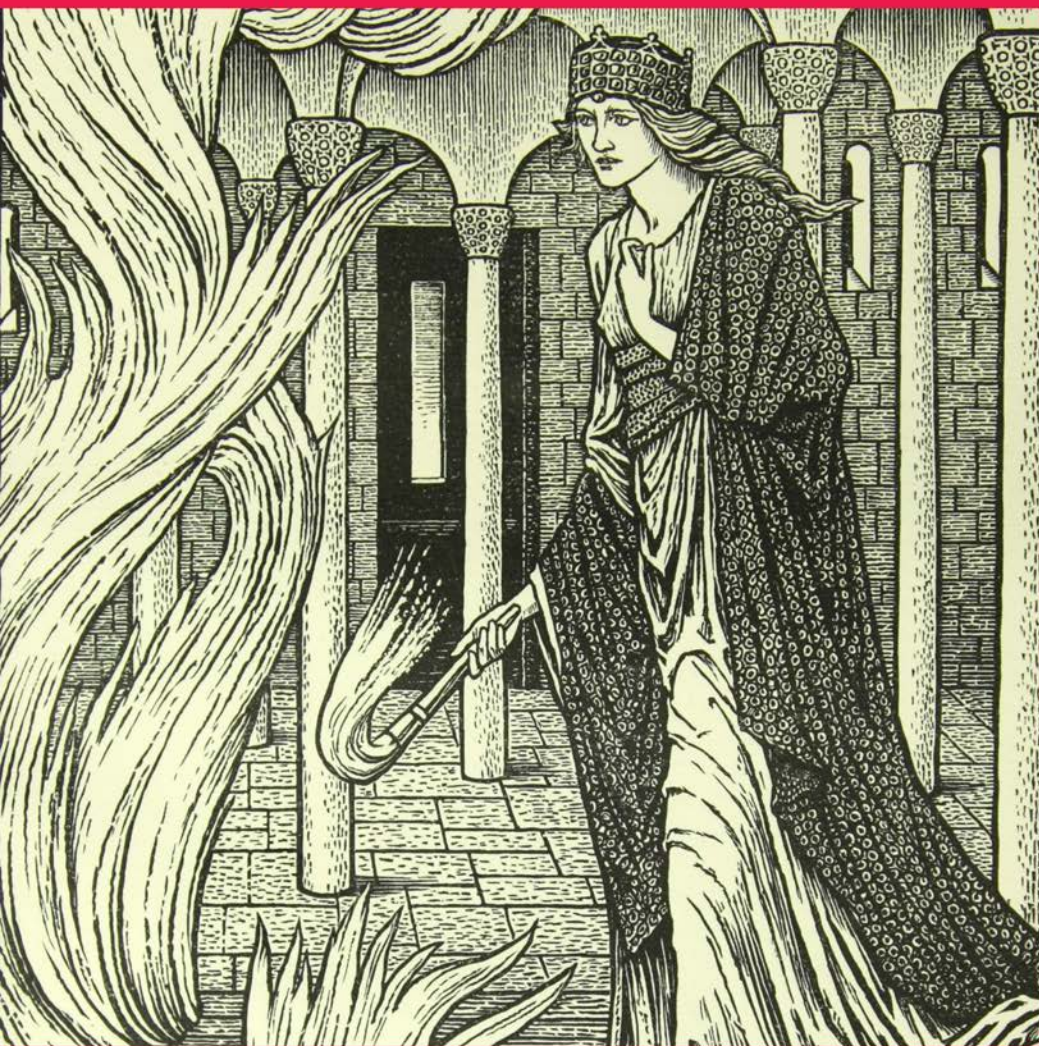


REVISITING
THE POETIC EDDA
Essays on Old Norse Heroic Legend



Edited by Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington



Revisiting the Poetic Edda

Bringing alive the dramatic poems of Old Norse heroic legend, this new collection offers accessible, ground-breaking and inspiring essays which introduce and analyze the exciting legends of the two doomed Helgis and their valkyrie lovers; the dragon-slayer Sigurðr; Brynhildr the implacable shield-maiden; tragic Guðrún and her children; Attila the Hun (from a Norse perspective!); and greedy King Fróði, whose name lives on in Tolkien's Frodo. The book provides a comprehensive introduction to the poems for students, taking a number of fresh, theoretically-sophisticated and productive approaches to the poetry and its characters. Contributors bring to bear insights generated by comparative study, speech act and feminist theory, queer theory and psychoanalytic theory (among others) to raise new, probing questions about the heroic poetry and its reception.

Each essay is accompanied by up-to-date lists of further reading and a contextualization of the poems or texts discussed in critical history. Drawing on the latest international studies of the poems in their manuscript context, and written by experts in their individual fields, engaging with the texts in their original language and context, but presented with full translations, this companion volume to *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology* (Routledge, 2002) is accessible to students and illuminating for experts. Essays also examine the afterlife of the heroic poems in Norse legendary saga, late medieval Icelandic poetry, the nineteenth-century operas of Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, and the recently published (posthumous) poem by Tolkien, *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*.

Paul Acker is Professor of English at Saint Louis University, where he teaches Old English, Old Icelandic, and History of the English Language.

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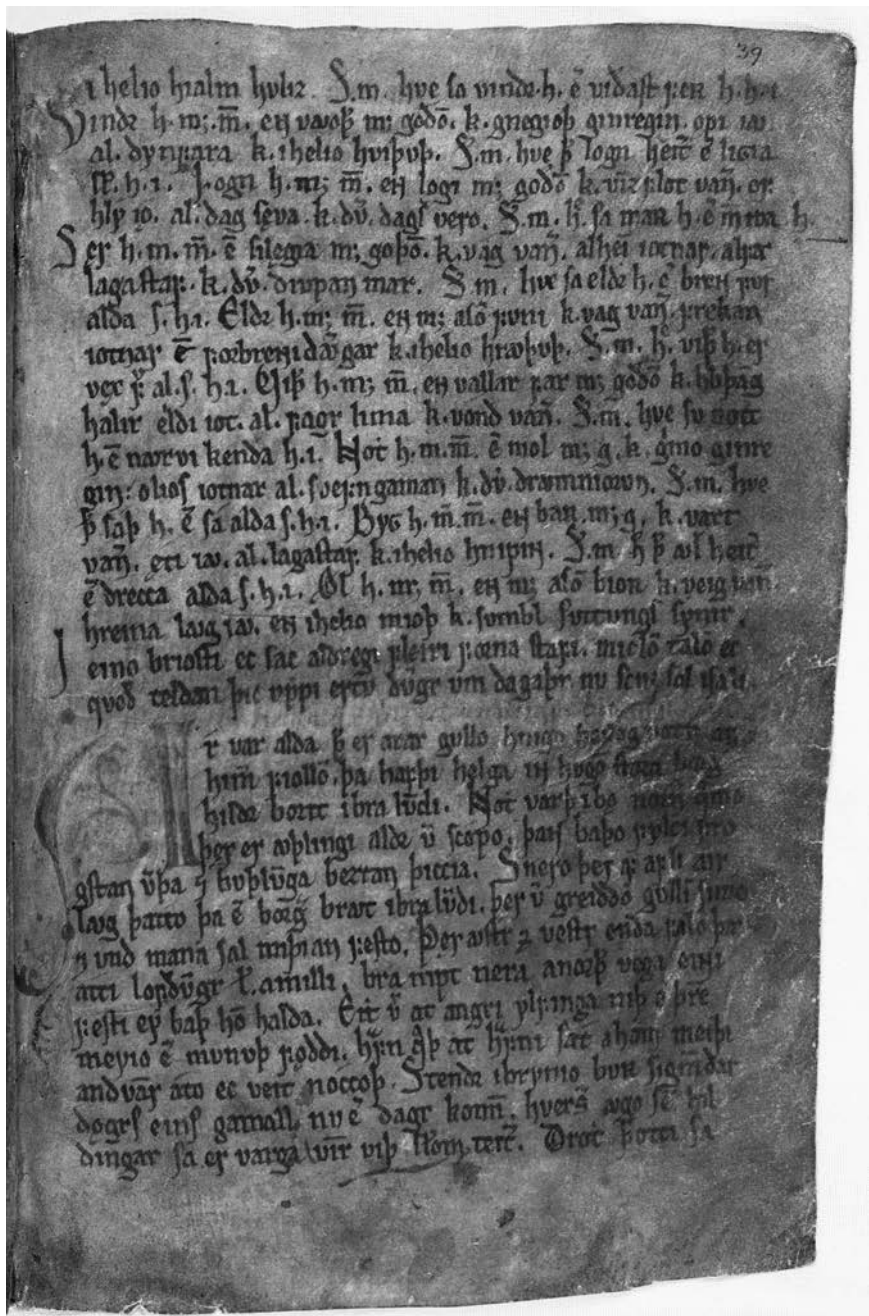
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Frontispiece Codex Regius, GKS 2365 4to, f. 20, beginning of heroic poems.

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and Carolyne Larrington**

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Guðrún setting fire to Atli's hall. Woodcut designed by Edward Burne-Jones for William Morris, *Sigurd the Volsung* (London: Kelmscott Press, 1898).

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Foreword

Tom Shippey

A heroic image of the Old North is by now deeply fixed in popular consciousness. Who can forget Kirk Douglas as Einar Ragnarsson in the 1958 movie *The Vikings*, mortally wounded by his half-brother and pleading mutely, not for help or mercy but for a sword to be put in his hand so that he can go to his god Odin like a Viking and be carried off to Valhalla by Odin's valkyries? The whole image complex has long been an embarrassment to scholars, who explain patiently and repeatedly that whatever Astérix the Gaul may say, Norsemen did not habitually drink out of their enemies' skulls,¹ a belief founded on an ancient mistranslation;² that there is little evidence for an organized Odinic religion, only for diversified and often local cults; that Valhalla really should be Valhöll; and so on. The scholarly explanations so far have not carried much weight. The fact is that the images of the Viking berserker and the Viking funeral have now "gone viral," along with much of Norse mythology, to be used in historical fiction, fantasy fiction, comic books, and heavy metal music. One of the signs that something has gone viral is the fact that no one can trace exact sources any longer. Even the scriptwriters for movies like Kenneth Branagh's *Thor* and Christopher Ray's *Almighty Thor* (both 2011) probably could not say where their ideas and images originated.

The universal familiarity of this quasi-heroic ideal is especially surprising when one considers how "narrow-shouldered" it is, to use a phrase from the stock market. If Snorri Sturluson, in the thirteenth century, had not written his *Prose Edda*, and in particular the *Gylfaginning* section of it, with its extended description of Valhalla and the fateful statement that "all those who fall in battle are [Odin's] adopted sons" (*óskasynir eru allir þeir er í val falla*),³ and if Bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson, in the seventeenth century, had not taken into safe keeping the major manuscript of Eddic poems now known as the Codex Regius, found in an unknown Icelandic farmhouse, then the majority of the texts transmitting Old Norse heroic legend would have been unknown. Also in the seventeenth century, the young enthusiast Thomas Bartholinus might not have written his "Three books on the causes of contempt for death among the still-pagan Danes" (*De causis contemptae a Danis adhuc gentilibus mortis*, 1689), a work

that caught the attention of the learned European world, held it for more than a century, and is still echoed at many removes in the popular images of today (including, in addition to the Viking “contempt for death” of his title, the role of valkyries, Valhalla, and the special fate of those who die in battle).

Why should such works, coming from remote Iceland, not written in the languages of learning, and to begin with barely comprehensible, have made such a deep and lasting impression? Scandinavian nationalism and the search for noble origins were no doubt the first motive, but the poems and stories soon spread beyond Scandinavia. There are two more general reasons, one historical, one literary.

The historical reason was a growing realisation that there was something recognizable in the heroic poems of what came to be called “the Elder Edda,” if not in the mythical ones. It was soon noticed that the Gothic king *lörmunrekk* who appears in *Hamðismál*, where he has his arms and legs cut off by the brothers *Hamðir* and *Sörli* in revenge for his execution of their half-sister *Svanhildr*, must be the king already familiar, as *Hermanaricus*, from the Roman historians *Ammianus Marcellinus* in the fourth century, and *Jordanes* two centuries later. *Ammianus* reported that the king had committed suicide in despair at defeat by the Huns,⁴ while *Jordanes*’s story was that he had been killed by the brothers *Ammius* and *Sorlius* in revenge for the death of their sister *Sunilda*.⁵ The earlier story sounds more plausible, but the later one is clearly much the same as the one in the Old Norse poem, though the poem must be at least four centuries later. *Jordanes* shows that a story, and perhaps poems, about King (H)ermanaric must have been circulating by the mid-sixth century, most probably in Gothic.

The *Atli* of the poems *Atlakviða* and *Atlamál* was even easier to identify. He must be *Attila*, the Hun king, the famous Scourge of God. Even his name, it was belatedly realized, was Gothic. It must have been a nickname, a diminutive of Gothic *atta*, “father,” so “little father.” The account of his death in the two Norse poems—betrayed and killed by his avenging fury of a wife *Guðrún*—hardly squares at all with the more prosaic account given by his contemporary, the Byzantine historian *Priscus*, which is that he died of a nosebleed on the night after his marriage to a lady called *Ildico* (possibly a Gothic name). But as *Ursula Dronke* suggests, the story in the Norse poems could have arisen from contemporary rumor.⁶ It is as if the Khan’s bodyguards’ first thought, that there must have been foul play, went into circulation before the truth was realized, or as if others had simply refused to believe in a mere nosebleed: was the only person present, the woman, not from an enemy nation?

The plot was thickened by a further realization, namely, that the character in the Norse poems, *Guðrún*’s brother *Gunnarr* son of *Gjúki*, could also be identified as a king of the Burgundians, *Gundaharius* son of *Gibi-cha*, mentioned by two contemporary chroniclers as well as the slightly

later *Lex Burgundionum*.⁷ Gundahari was indeed destroyed along with his kingdom by a Hunnish assault in 437 AD: though not by Attila (who died sixteen years later), and not in the dramatic circumstances of the Norse poems, playing his harp defiantly in the snake-pit. The *Þiðrekr* of other Norse and German texts, in which he is drawn into the legendary orbit of the Nibelungs, was furthermore readily identifiable as King Theodric the Great (died 526), a Gothic king generations later than Ermanaric and Attila. The chronology did not work at all, and the Norse accounts were usually incompatible with those of Roman and Byzantine historians. Still, the conviction grew that there was something in it or something behind it. And as the many attempts to historicize “King Arthur” have shown, there is nothing more attractive to the modern rewriter, scholarly or popular, than the thought of getting through a legend to what must have been the true story behind it.

Conviction was increased by the nineteenth-century discoveries of Germanic philology. The Gundahari/Gunnar/(Old English) Guthere equation was rendered completely convincing by awareness that the names had gone through precisely correct processes of linguistic change. *Hlöðskviða* (part of the *Eddica minora*)⁸ was corroborated first by the fact that names found in the same line of the Old English poem *Widsiþ* (115), Heaporic, Hliþe, and Incgenþeow, appear to be the same as those of two half-brothers in the Norse poem and the saga surrounding it, Hlöðr and Angantýr, as well as their father Heiðrekr: so there was a story about them in wide circulation, not just in Scandinavia. And once again the origin must surely have been a Gothic one, for *Widsiþ* ascribes that whole batch of heroes to a time when “the army of the Hræd[e]”—the Hreth-Goths?—“had with hard swords to defend their ancient throne against the men of Attila around the wood of the Vistula.”

Christopher Tolkien, in an extended study of *Hlöðskviða* (also known as “The Battle of the Goths and Huns”) regretfully concluded that there was no way to identify the events of the poem, and the saga in which it is embedded, with what little information about battles on the steppe that reached the Classical world;⁹ but noted further that the place-name *Harvaðafjöll*, found in a verse-fragment in the saga, was an exact phonetic descendant of **karpat-*, “regularly transformed into **χarfap-* by the operation of the Germanic Consonant Shift” and must mean the Carpathian mountains.¹⁰ Name and place no longer meant anything to Norse poets, but they had preserved the name correctly, and the place was consistent with the “Vistula wood” of *Widsiþ*. Once again, there was something behind it—and maybe more to discover. The last thought led generations of scholars into attempts to trace how Norse, English, and German stories had been passed on, involving complex theories of Gothic, Vandalic, Herulian, or Lombard mercenaries returning home to the North bearing tales with them or perhaps swapping them as Varangian guardsmen in Byzantium. The whole industry reached a peak with Hermann Schneider’s two-volume *Germanische Heldensage*

(1928–1934). J. R. R. Tolkien's signed copy of this is (or used to be) in the Taylorian Library at Oxford.

The big disappointment, however, was what one might call the pre-Nibelung story of Sigurðr, or Siegfried, and Brynhildr, which makes up a majority of the heroic poems in the Eddic corpus and would make up more if it were not for the notorious missing eight pages in the middle. Gregory of Tours's *Historia Francorum*, written in the late sixth century (Gregory died in 594), has a good deal to say, especially in Book IV, about a Gothic princess Brunhild and her husband, the Frankish king Sigibert.¹¹ Points of similarity are that Sigibert fought the Huns (but Sigurðr did not, though the Nibelungs did), his name begins with the Sigi-prototHEME (but this was a common one, Gregory mentioning more than a dozen others), he was assassinated by treachery (like many Merovingians), and Brunhild was extremely distressed at his murder (though not to the point of suicide, for she long outlived her chronicler Gregory). The similarities are no better than general, and the identification has found little favor.

The disappointment, however, led to another once-popular view, which solved two embarrassments at once.¹² German patriots of the nineteenth century found it distressing that none of the rediscovered Germanic poetry or legend (Norse, English, German) contained any trace of the hero Arminius, whose defeat of the Roman general Varus in the Teutoburger Wald in AD 9, with the annihilation of his three legions, kept most of "Germania" permanently free of the Roman Empire: the English writer Sir Edward Creasy listed it in 1851 as one of his "Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World" (and also argued that while Arminius was not exactly English, the English, as Saxons, were closer kin to him than modern Germans). Perhaps, patriots suggested, Arminius was just what the Romans called him, and his Germanic name was really—well, Sigefrith, or something similar. His brother, after all, was called Segestes even by the Romans. If this were the case, then the other embarrassing gap, a poetic hero (Siegfried) without a historical model, could be remedied by matching him to a historical model (Arminius) without poetic descendants. But this theory too looked like a clutch at a straw, though it did not invalidate the more convincing equations mentioned above.

The other reason for the dissemination of the Norse heroic image, and one that has become increasingly rather than decreasingly attractive, is the literary one. Put simply, there is little poetry in the world like Eddic poetry. And it is moreover markedly different even from the heroic poetry of Greece, Rome, and England with which it has often been compared. It introduced a new literary sensation to the European world: one of "Gothic" extremism, fierce, macabre, often cruel, and sometimes (in a cruel kind of way) rather funny. This too has become something of an embarrassment for modern scholars, but the world outside scholarship has long been riveted by it.

Among its stylistic qualities (they are all connected) are enigma, surprise, allusion, concision—and one for which we have no obvious name. Taking

enigma first, one might wonder, reading *Atlakviða*, why in the world Gunnarr decides *sem konungr skyldi*, “as a king should,” to take the bait offered by Atli and ride to visit him? He knows it is a trap. The bait of riches offered means nothing to the Nibelung kings, the richest men in the world. And he has already decided otherwise. The only answer seems to be that he reverses his decision *because he has been warned*. Now he has been warned of danger, not going might look—to anyone really unobservant—as if he were afraid? Guðrún’s well-meant wolf-hair has acted as the opposite of a dare. Gunnarr’s behavior is weird, even suicidal, but not incomprehensible within its own value system.

Surprise: in the same poem, and in *Atlamál*, why does Gunnarr demand his brother Högni’s heart before he will answer questions about the Nibelung treasure? The answer, when it comes, is satisfying within the same value system. Gunnarr loves his brother, as he shows by his approving commentary on the heart—hard, unflinching, the heart of a warrior—and it may not be the case that he does not trust him. What is the case is that he has complete trust in himself. Once Högni is dead, there is only one person who knows where the hoard is, and that makes the secret completely sure. As saga heroes sometimes say when asked what they believe in, the right answer is, “I believe in me myself” (*Ek trúi á sjálfan mik*).¹³

Allusion and concision: in *Hamðismál*, the conversation between Erpr and his two half-brothers, Hamðir and Sörli, has long seemed inscrutable. The first clue to follow is perhaps that while Erpr is a blood relation of his half-brothers—they share a father, but not a mother—he has no blood relationship at all with the half-sister they are riding to avenge, she being the child of their mother by a different father. His offer to join their suicide mission is accordingly a generous one, showing that he takes an inclusive view of family responsibility. What he wants is a reciprocal acknowledgment. He wants his half-brothers to call him “brother.” They refuse to do so, realising their mistake, and using the word *bróðir* (st. 28), only when it is too late.¹⁴ In *Hlöðskviða* we have what is almost a reversal of the scene. There Hlöðr and Angantýr are again half-brothers, though Hlöðr is not legitimate. On their father’s death, however, Angantýr, like Erpr, is ready to take a broad view of their relationship. Almost the first word he says, when Hlöðr comes to claim inheritance, is *bróðir*. Whether their negotiation would have proved successful—Angantýr offers a third, Hlöðr wants half—we cannot tell, for it is broken off by the fateful words of Gizurr, which have to be quoted in the original language. He says, on hearing the offer:

Petta er þiggjanda / þýjar barni,
barni þýjar, / þótt sé borinn konungi.

Catching the full force of this in modern English is not easy, especially the contemptuous subjunctive *sé*. One might suggest, “That’s an offer that can’t be refused, not by a bondmaid’s child, yes, a bondmaid’s child, fathered by

a king *though he may have been.*” But the English phrasing is more than twice as long as the Norse, and in the Norse Gizurr’s insult is reinforced by alliteration and chiasmus.

Behind all these features of literary style, one should add, there lies a consistent attitude that has been readily understood and passed on into popular culture, though we have no agreed name for it. The poets, and the culture that produced them, seem to have regarded self-control and self-possession as the highest virtues. They are habitual understaters. They present heroes whose response to disaster is irony or silence. “Banding words” (*máloð skipta*) is rebuked by Helgi in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana inn fyrri* and again by Sörlu in *Hamðismál*. Sometimes we are asked to notice unconscious self-betrayal by a look or gesture. In the mythological Eddic poem *Völundarkviða*, when Völundr is trapped, robbed, and enslaved by King Niðhad, he naturally says nothing, but Niðhad’s wife notices his response to the taking of his wife’s ring: “his eyes are like a shining serpent’s” (*ámun ero augo ormi þeim inom frána*). In Snorri’s tale of Thor’s visit to Útgardar-Loki, when Thor finds out that one of his magic goats has been crippled, he says nothing, but “his knuckles whitened” (*hvítinuðu knúarnir*) on the haft of his hammer. The author of *Völsunga saga* quotes a stanza from an Eddic Sigurðr poem that has not survived, which says that after Brynhildr rejected his offer to repudiate Guðrún and marry her, Sigurðr turned away, once more saying nothing: but in his grief, his chest swelled so much that the links of his chain-mail burst.

Though the heroes may choose not to speak, however, heroines have different speech privileges, and one of their privileges is the right to lament. So we have the laments of Sváva and Sigrún in the Helgi poems, of Guðrún in the second *Guðrúnarkviða*, and of Oddrún in *Oddrúnargrátr*. This does not mean that they are any less committed to the heroic idea than the heroes, as Guðrún shows by sending her sons off to certain death, and by her stony—or is it fierce?—inability to weep in the first *Guðrúnarkviða*. Brynhildr is as unyielding as any of the Eddic menfolk and as set on revenge, though she does not take her revenges in person. Her laugh of triumph when she hears her rival weeping is climactic in both the “Sigurðr Fragment,” *Brot af Sigurðarkviðu* (st. 10), and (in almost the same words) in “The Short Lay of Sigurðr,” *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* (st. 32). The giantess slaves of *Grottasöngur* combine lament with rage and magical vengeance.

Popular though Vikings and Viking imagery have become, much of the above has just been too tough for modern taste. Rewriters of the Völsung/Nibelung story have consistently shied away from its more disturbing aspects. Hollywood has produced makeovers of Homer and King Arthur and (several times) *Beowulf*, and it has borrowed Norse mythology enthusiastically but has left the *Poetic Edda* alone. One can see why. The Eddic poets did not do happy endings, and the poems repeatedly express the conviction that heroes and heroines show their true quality not through success but in defeat, nowadays an unpalatable thought. Nevertheless, the heroic

poems of the *Edda* deserve respectful attention for two reasons. One is that they so nearly vanished from the world: it would have been a major loss, both of great poetry and of a cultural perspective alien to us, but not completely incomprehensible. The other is that though they may have survived for the most part in a single manuscript, they are clearly not the work of one great master-writer but express a collective poetic through individual talents, sometimes sharply distinctive.

NOTES

1. In René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo's *Astérix et les Normands* (1966), the Normans or Norsemen habitually offer each other "a skull": "O non, je ne refuse jamais un petit crâne."
2. Detailed by Margaret Clunies Ross, *The Old Norse Poetic Translations of Thomas Percy: A New Edition and Commentary, Making the Middle Ages*. Vol. 4. Turnhout: Brepols, 2002.
3. Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Anthony Faulkes. London: J. M. Dent, 1987. 21.
4. Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res gestae*, xxxi/3. <www.thelatinlibrary.com/ammianus/31.shtml#3>. 3 May 2012.
5. Jordanes, *De origine actibusque Getarum*, chapter xxiv <www.thelatinlibrary.com/iordanes.html>. 3 May 2012.
6. See *The Poetic Edda: Vol I, The Heroic Poems*. Ed. Ursula Dronke. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969. 32.
7. Dronke 30–32.
8. On the *Eddica minora*, see Margaret Clunies Ross (Chapter 9, this volume).
9. Christopher Tolkien, "The Battle of the Goths and Huns." *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* 14 (1953–1957): 141–163 (141).
10. *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, ed. Christopher Tolkien. London: Nelson, 1960, repr. London: HarperCollins, 2010. xxiii and note.
11. See Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*. Trans. Lewis Thorpe. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974.
12. For a detailed history of this, see Roberta Frank, "Siegfried and Arminius: Scenes from a Marriage." *Germania Remembered 1500–2009: Commemorating and Inventing a Germanic Past*. Ed. Christina Lee and Nicola McLelland. Tempe, AZ: AMRTS, forthcoming 2012.
13. As, for instance, in *Finnboga saga* ch. 19.
14. Tom Shippey, "Speech and the Unspoken in *Hamthismal*." *Prosody and Poetics: Essays in Honor of Constance Hieatt*. Ed. M.J. Toswell Toronto: U of Toronto Press, 1995. 180–96.

Acknowledgments

Four of the chapters in this volume have been published previously in different forms. Their original places of publication are cited below; all are reprinted with permission.

David Clark's chapter first appeared in *Gender, Violence, and the Past in Edda and Saga* by David Clark (2012) as [Chapter 2](#), pp. 46–66, “Heroic Homosociality and Homophobia in the Helgi Poems.” Reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press.

Edgar Haimenl's chapter, translated by Antje Frotscher, was first published as “Sigurd—ein Held des Mittelalters. Eine textimmanente Interpretation der Jungsigurddichtung.” *alvíssmál* 2 (1993): 81–104.

Carolyne Larrington's chapter first appeared in a somewhat different form in *Quaestio Insularis: Selected Proceedings of the Cambridge Colloquium in Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic* 11 (2010): 1–20.

Tom Shippey's chapter is revised from *Tolkien Studies* 7 (2010): 291–324.

The illustrations in Paul Acker's chapter are printed with permission. The editors would like to thank Christer Hamp and Halle “Runristare” Dahlberg for granting us the use of their excellent photographs of runestones, more of which can be seen on their websites (cited in Acker's chapter). We also thank David Henry and Pinkfoot Press for scanning [Figure 3.1](#) from their reprint of Kermode's *Manx Crosses* and Florence Boos of Iowa University for helping us secure a photo of our cover image.

Introduction

Revisiting the Poetic Edda

Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington

A little less than midway through the principal manuscript of Eddic poetry, the Codex Regius (Reykjavík, AM GKS 2365 4to), on f. 20r of 45 surviving folios, the scribe marks a major division. Halfway down the page, the poem *Alvíssmál* ends with the line “vppi ertv dvergr, vm dagaþr nv scínn sól i sali” [the day has dawned upon you, dwarf; now sun shines into the hall]. The mighty god Þórr has vanquished his underworld antagonist Alviðss, delaying him until dawn when the sun (we gather from other sources) turns him into stone, returning him to his proper element, for dwarfs live inside stones.¹ The realm of the gods fills with sunlight. It is a fine ending for the collected **mythological** poems of the Poetic Edda, for that is what is happening on this manuscript page (reproduced as our frontispiece).

The scribe skips a line and begins a new poem with an oversized red capital letter A, five lines tall (it is the only time the scribe skips a whole line, and the initials for other poems have been a maximum of three lines tall).² The first half-line of this poem, *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, reads, “(Á)r var alda” [It was early in time]. It is a fine beginning for the collected **legendary-heroic** poems of the Poetic Edda, set in the olden times, much like the Old English heroic poem *Beowulf*, which begins “in geardagum,” in the days of yore (ON *ár* and OE *gear* are cognates). *Völuspá*, the first mythological poem of the Poetic Edda, back on the first page of the Codex Regius, also begins when “Ár var alda” (st. 3.1), but that was a time even before creation. The heroic time is ancient but within human memory and the heroic locale is our world, even if it has more supernatural elements and beings like norns and valkyries. The first lines of *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* continue: “þat er arar gvlllo,/ hnigo heilog votn af himinfíollom” [when eagles screamed and holy streams from Heaven’s crags fell]. The wild, craggy setting would have appealed to Tolkien, who painted one of his “great eagles” atop a snow-covered mountain at the top of the world.³

It was into this world that the hero Helgi was born, whom the norns or Nordic fates declare will be the best and most famous of kings (*fylki frægestan ok buðlunga beztan*). Neither word used to describe him as king is the ordinary one, *konungr*; rather, they are poetic words, for the best of kings deserves to have his name live on in heroic verse and so in memory. Thus it

is said of Sigurðr, the greatest hero in the Poetic Edda and in Germanic legend as a whole, that “hans nafn mun aldri fynrask í þýðverskri tungu ok á Norðurlöndum, meðan heimrinn stendr” [his name will never be forgotten in the German tongue and in the northern lands, for as long as the world stands] (*Völsunga saga* ch. 34).

Sigurðr is known as *Fáfnisbani*, slayer of the dragon Fáfnir, and so he is not only a great warrior and killer but specifically the killer of the greatest antagonist in Germanic legend, a dragon (see Acker, [Chapter 3](#), for the specific nature of Eddic dragons). Similarly, Helgi is named *Hundingsbani*, slayer of his great (human) antagonist, the rival king Hundingr, who “long had ruled over lands and thanes” (*HHI* st. 10). Helgi is not just a warrior but a leader of warriors; the word *fylkir* used to describe him means literally one who marshals the *fylki* or battle array (see La Farge 72). The first poem about Helgi is full of battles, with Óðinn’s hounds (wolves) running ravenous on the field and valkyries riding like lightning in the sky overhead, their chain-mail stained with blood (the name of another great valkyrie, Brynhildr, means “chain-mail-battle”) and flashes of light coming from their spears (*HHI* sts. 13–15). Helgi slays some sons of Hundingr, but another son, Lyngvi, survives for Sigurðr to fight him; Lyngvi had earlier killed Sigmundr, father of both Helgi and Sigurðr. There is a great battle; according to *Völsunga saga* (ch. 17), “Many a spear and many arrows could be seen hurtling through the air, the fierce sweep of the axe, cleft shields, gashed hauberks, helms slashed open, cleft skulls, and many a man was seen to fall to the ground” (tr. Finch 29). The Eddic poem *Reginsmál* (st. 26) tells us that Sigurðr carved the blood eagle in Lyngvi’s back and reddened the earth with blood, giving pleasure to that other devourer of corpses, the raven. Accordingly, Sigurðr, like Helgi, earns fame not just as a warrior but as a leader of warriors, “the most magnificent of war-kings” (*göfgastan herkonunga*; *Frá dauða Sinfjötla*, last line).

More can and will be said in these pages about the nature of Eddic heroes. Tom Shippey has already commented in the Foreword about these heroes placing a high value on self-control. Edgar Haimerrl ([Chapter 2](#)) writes about the education of Sigurðr, in both strength and wisdom, which for Eddic heroes involves mythological and runic lore. David Clark ([Chapter 1](#)) writes how Helgi Hundingsbani maintains “homosocial bonds” by the distribution of wealth (much as Beowulf does) and how his warriors assert their heroic masculinity through the exchange of insults. Helgi Hjörvarðssonar’s men bond through competitive boasting; Helgi and his brother engage in sibling rivalry over a valkyrie bride (see also Larrington 2011).

Eddic heroines are equally if not more intriguing than their male counterparts. After the lacuna (see below), readers of the Codex Regius manuscript rejoin the story of Sigurðr at a crisis point. The heroic confidence and courage with which the heroes Helgi and Sigurðr faced their opponents and their interlocutors, the sunlight of Helgi’s youth, and his bold sea journeys over the tossing waves have dissipated into an uncertain

world of intrigue and courtly deception (see Larrington 2012). Two powerful women, the former shield-maiden Brynhildr and Guðrún, the sister of the heroes Gunnarr and Högni, contend for the love of the dragon-slayer. Thwarted by magical potions of forgetfulness, Brynhildr loses the battle but encompasses the death of the man she loves and fulfills the oath she has sworn to hold Sigurðr in her arms or to die: “Hafa skal ec Sigurð—eða þó svelt! / mög frumungan, mér á armi” [I shall have Sigurðr—or I shall die—/ that young man I’ll have in my arms] (*Sgk* sts. 6/3–4). As Guðrún is choked by her inexpressible sorrow, Brynhildr’s cackling laughter resounds in the palace of the Gjúkungs. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir ([Chapter 6](#)) reads Brynhildr and the other women in the heroic poetry, in terms of speech act theory; she argues that women use words as weapons to achieve their aims; although some speech acts fail, others are extremely successful. While Guðrún’s frozen grief melts into tears and her formal lament for her dead husband releases her emotions, Brynhildr is giving orders for the construction of her funeral pyre, ordering hounds, hawks, and servants to be company for her on the road to Hel, where she will be united with Sigurðr. In these poems, the focus is on female feelings and women’s speech: rage, wild exultation, and profound sorrow occupy the poets’ imagination.

Sigurðr’s widow Guðrún metamorphoses from the traumatized and grieving woman discussed by Sävborg ([Chapter 4](#)) and Hill ([Chapter 5](#)) into a terrifying, even monstrous, wife and mother. In *Guðrúnarkviða* II and III and *Oddrúnargrátr*, women’s emotion subsides into quieter recollection of the many sorrows that these women have to face. Guðrún must make peace with her brothers and offer herself up once again in the “exchange of women” process; despite her prophetic misgivings, she is married off to Brynhildr’s brother—for the Gjúkungs owe him a woman after letting his sister die (see Quinn 2009). Atli’s court is a place of sorrow; moreover, Brynhildr’s sister, the one whom Gunnarr should have married, utters, in solidarity with her dying friend, Borghildr, a *tregróf* [chain of woes], lamenting her tragic fate. Oddrún’s brother Atli has foreclosed her bid to bring the strife between the two houses to an end.

Guðrún cannot save her brothers from Atli. When her husband breaks all his oaths and murders her brothers in the quest to gain the treasure Sigurðr won from Fáfnir, Guðrún sacrifices her children and feeds their flesh to her husband, making sure he knows the full horror of what he has done before she finally kills him. Carolyn Larrington ([Chapter 7](#)) focuses on the relationship between Guðrún and her children. Reading the Atli poems in terms of sacrificial practice and women’s responses to their exchange between male groups, she argues that *Atlakviða* is informed by old ideas of sacrifice and ritual, while in the last two poems in the Codex Regius, *Guðrúnarhvöt* and *Hamðismál*, Guðrún makes strategic choices between vengeance for Svanhildr, her daughter by Sigurðr, and survival with dishonor for her last pair of sons, born of her third marriage. As these brothers,

Hamðir and Sörli, ride furiously off on a mission of revenge, which they regard as hopeless, their mother seems finally set to emulate Brynhildr, who invited her to join her on Sigurðr's funeral pyre so many years before, and she anticipates her passionate reunion with her first husband: "Beittu, Sigurðr, inn blacca mar, / hest in hraðføra, láttu hinig renna!" [Bridle, Sigurðr, the dark-coloured shining horse, / the swift-footed charger, let it gallop here!] (*Ghv* sts. 18/2–3). Sigurðr will be waiting for her as she finally ascends the blazing pyre and brings her tragedy to an end.

Women's mourning, and its concomitant action, vengeance, inform these final poems. The elegiac mode is foregrounded, its minor key only intermittently reverting to the bolder pace of the heroic: Gunnarr and Högni galloping in fury to Atli's court, or rowing so mightily across the fjord to his farmstead that the rowlocks split. Hamðir and Sörli imitate their uncles in their rage-filled ride to avenge their sister, yet, fatally, they pause to strike down their half-brother whose riddling words challenge their sense of who is truly part of the family. Brynhildr rages and laughs; even on the road to Hel, she vindicates the choices she has made when challenged by the *gýgr* "giantess", who bars her way, while Guðrún moves from sobbing innocent to dry-eyed murderess, from prophetic pawn in the patriarchal game of exchange to steely actor on her own account.

The last heroines of the heroic world are, unexpectedly perhaps, the enslaved giantesses Fenja and Menja whose captor, the merciless Fróði, orders them to grind and grind at the magical mill-stone Grotti, grinding out gold and good fortune. But as Fróði's intransigence is countered by the slow-building rage of the giant women Fenja and Menja, who fatefully grind out annihilation for him, the mill-stone shatters. Judy Quinn ([Chapter 8](#)) offers a new ecological reading of *Grottasöngur*, showing how the appropriation and misuse of a natural resource that belongs to the domain of the giants causes the downfall of a king. Women here have the final word, patrolling the ways in which human kings can behave.

*

Reading the Codex Regius is complicated by the eight-leaf gap at the center of our heroic poems. The final verses of *Sigrdrífumál* (*The Lay of Sigrdrífa*) were written into a gathering that subsequently became detached from the manuscript, most likely before it left Iceland for Denmark in the mid-seventeenth century, and the next gathering after the lacuna begins some way into a poem relating the fate of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, the so-called *Brot* (Fragment of a Poem about Sigurðr). How the legendary dragon-killer got from his conversation with the valkyrie Sigrdrífa on the mountain top where she had been sleeping to the court of the sons of Gjúki, how he came to marry their sister, and what his involvement was in the wooing and winning of Brynhildr for his brother-in-law, Gunnarr, would be unknown to us were it not for the prose accounts of the

intervening events given in summary in Snorri Sturluson's *Skaldskaparmál* and in the fuller *Völsunga saga*. The saga is preserved in a single manuscript, MS NKS 1824 b 4to, a manuscript of 80 leaves written by an Icelandic scribe (perhaps in Norway) and dating to *ca.* 1400 (Olsen lvi-lviii). The saga explains how Sigurðr leaves the valkyrie-instructor (in the Edda, Sigrdrífa; in the saga, Brynhildr) and then re-encounters her at her foster-father's home. There they become betrothed, and Brynhildr bears Sigurðr a son. When he visits the Gjúkung court, however, as foretold by the prophetic birds of *Fáfnismál*, Sigurðr is given a drink of forgetfulness [*óminnis veig*] by Grímhildr, the siblings' mother. He forgets Brynhildr and agrees to marry Guðrún, sister of Gunnarr and Högni. He also agrees to assist Gunnarr on a wooing journey to Brynhildr, who is in a fortress surrounded by fire and who has vowed only to marry that man who can cross the flame wall. Gunnarr's horse will not carry him across, so he exchanges appearances with Sigurðr, whose horse Grani takes him through the flames to Brynhildr. The couple sleep chastely together for three nights, a drawn sword between them. It is only at the double wedding feast that Sigurðr remembers his previous relationship with Brynhildr, but he resolves to let things be. Guðrún and Brynhildr quarrel over whose husband is superior, however, and Guðrún reveals the imposture. From then on, Brynhildr is bent on Sigurðr's destruction. The poems *Brot* (*Fragment*) and *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* (*Short Poem about Sigurðr*) give allusive and swift-moving accounts of what happens next; these vary from one another, as well as from the *Völsunga saga* version and the traditions preserved in other medieval texts, such as *Das Nibelungenlied* in Middle High German and the mid-thirteenth-century Norse *Piðreks saga*.

*

Our first volume about the Poetic Edda (*The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology*) appeared ten years ago. That collection combined classic chapters on the mythological poetry of the Edda with newly translated and newly commissioned chapters. This volume, dealing with the heroic Eddic poems and their legacy in medieval and post-medieval writing, offered an opportunity to commission a number of leading and upcoming scholars to write new chapters for the collection. One of the following chapters is a translated version of Edgar Haimel's important study of the "Young Sigurðr" poems, while David Clark's chapter has been published in his recent collection of essays on Eddic poetry, gender, and revenge. The mythological poetry of the Edda was relatively easy to define, as consisting of the first 11 poems preserved in the Codex Regius manuscript of the Edda (GKS 2365 4to), with the addition of three other poems preserved in later medieval manuscripts—*Rígsþula* (List of Ríg), *Baldrs Draumar* (Baldr's Dreams), and *Hyndluljóð* (Song of Hyndla)—and usually regarded

by scholars as mythological in their scope. Heroic poetry is much less easy to define; while the remaining poems of the Codex Regius clearly belong to the tradition and form a whole episodic cycle, a large quantity of verse in Eddic meter has been preserved in other, usually heroic, contexts. We have added *Grottasöngur* (The Song of Grotti), preserved in the Codex Regius manuscript of the *Snorra Edda* (GKS 2367 4to), to the poems considered in detail here, and we have invited a consideration of some of the other heroic Eddic poems (the so-called *Eddica minora*) in a separate chapter by Margaret Clunies Ross (Chapter 9).

The following chapters do not, as in our previous volume, treat each poem individually. There are twenty heroic poems in the Codex Regius (plus *Grottasöngur*), and many of them are closely linked in subject and theme, following an arc from the birth of Sigmundr's son Helgi to the death of the last of the Völsung dynasty and the vengeance for that death in *Hamðismál* (*The Poem of Hamðir*). The poems fall naturally into related groups: the two poems about Helgi, the slayer of Hundringr, and one poem about his namesake and near-double, Helgi Hjörvarðsson; the poems about the young Sigurðr, which are found before the lacuna; the poems that narrate the death of Sigurðr, Guðrún's laments for him, and the histories of Brynhildr's ride to Hel and of Oddrún, sister of Brynhildr and Atli. The concluding group of poems follows the later events of Guðrún's life in two poems about her marriage to Atli, and two final poems which recount the fate of her last remaining sons and her own resolution on suicide.

The final section of this book examines the medieval and post-medieval reception of the heroic poetry. Two chapters, by Margaret Clunies Ross (Chapter 9) and Elizabeth Ashman Rowe (Chapter 10), show how heroic Eddic themes survived and thrived outside the Codex Regius manuscript. Clunies Ross gives an overview of the so-called *Eddica minora*, showing the variation between different *fornaldarsögur* in terms of how they make use of the Eddic poetry they contain, whether the prose simply links substantial poems together, or whether poetry, as in *Völsunga saga*, is summarized but not quoted. Rowe finds that with the obvious exception of *Völsunga saga* and the references to its characters in *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, Eddic stories were not retold in *fornaldarsögur*; yet Eddic names and themes or motifs are frequently redeployed from the mid-thirteenth century onward.

Post-medieval treatments are explored in the final chapters of the collection. David Ashurst (Chapter 11) compares and contrasts the depiction of Sigurd/Siegfried by William Morris and Richard Wagner, showing the different conceptions of freedom that underpinned the interpretation of the hero. Finally, Tom Shippey (Chapter 12) puts into context and analyzes a poem composed by J. R. R. Tolkien, published only recently: *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*. Tolkien had a profound understanding of the effects and constraints of Eddic meters, and Shippey's readings throw a clear light on not only Tolkien's poetry but also the workings of the heroic poetry of the Edda.

NOTES

1. See Acker. The implication here, though, is that Alvíss is turned into stone and thus killed.
2. In this space, barely visible in the facsimiles, a lengthy title is written in red: “her hefr vp qveþi fra Helga hvndings bana. þeira oc h. volsunga qviþa” [Here begins a poem about Helgi slayer of Hundingr and his men (and about) H(öðbroddr). Völsungs’ Poem]. Usually when a new poem begins, the scribe writes the final words of one poem on the right and the first words of the next poem on the left, with a short title written in red between them.
3. Reproduced in Hammond 121. Eddic quotations are from Neckel & Kuhn.

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