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The dating of Eddic poetry – evidence from alliteration

ABSTRACT: Eddic poetry contains instances where the words *reka* and *reiðr* alliterate as if they had initial *v*, corresponding to an earlier stage of the language (10th century or earlier). Traditionally, this has been understood as a sign that the poems in question are old. The alternative possibility is that 12th and 13th century Icelanders could have used *vr*-initial words in poetry in imitation of archaic poems and East Norse dialects. I argue against this latter possibility. Icelandic poetry known to be from the 11th century or younger contains no examples of *vr*-initial words. Furthermore, the manuscript spelling of the words in question strongly suggests that the scribes were unfamiliar with *vr*-initial forms. Finally, the evidence from the *vr*-initial and *r*-initial forms aligns well with other dating evidence.

KEYWORDS: Eddic poetry, dating of poetry, alliteration, archaism.

1. INTRODUCTION¹

The dating of Eddic poetry has long been a debated topic and since the dawn of historical linguistics various linguistic criteria have been brought to bear on it. A consensus remains elusive and many scholars are skeptical that any conclusions can ever be reached. In my view, the situation is not so dire. Already in the mid-19th century, useful contributions had been made to the problem, and in this article I reexamine and defend one of the first dating criteria to be proposed.

In several poems of the Poetic Edda, the words *reka* (“drive, avenge”) and *reiðr* (“angry”) alliterate with words beginning with *v*. This indicates that at their time of composition the poems in question had more archaic *v*-initial forms: *vreka* and *vreiðr*. It would thus seem that the poems having this trait are relatively old.

Daniel Sävborg has argued that this is not actually a useful dating criterion since the *v*-initial forms were still found in the East Norse languages and were thus “living, well-known forms that all Icelanders knew were variants to those they used themselves”.² This linguistic trait might thus have been something that Icelandic poets used as a stylistic effect long after the initial *v* had been lost in West Norse.

I will present evidence which, in my view, indicates that the instances of *v*-initial forms in the Poetic Edda are much more likely to be a genuinely archaic trait rather than learned imitation or a sign of East Norse influence. On this view, the *v*-initial forms represent valid evidence of a relatively high age

1 I am grateful to Jón Axel Harðarson, Kristján Árnason, Daniel Sävborg, Þorgeir Sigurðsson and the anonymous referees for numerous valuable comments and corrections.

2 “levande, väl kända former som alla islänningar visste var varianter till dem de själva använde” (Sävborg 2004, 84).

for *Atlakviða*, *Fáfnismál*, *Hávamál* (or a part of *Hávamál*), *Lokasenna*, *Sigrdrífumál* and *Vafþrúðnismál*. Conversely, the *r*-initial forms in *Atlamál* and *Grípisspá* are an indicator of a relatively young age for those poems.

2. THE EDDIC EVIDENCE — *REIÐR* AND *REKA*

There are a number of cases in the Eddic poems where the word *reiðr* (“angry”) alliterates with words with initial *v*. In seven of those cases, all in poems with the *ljóðaháttir* meter, the other alliterating word is *vega* (“fight, kill”). It seems clear that this is a formulaic combination:

Lokasenna 15.4–5 *vega þv gacc / ef þv reiþr sér* (Bugge 1867, 116)³
“go and fight if you are angry”

Lokasenna 18.6 *vilcat ec at iþ reiðir vegiz* (Bugge 1867, 116)
“I don’t want you to fight each other in anger”

Lokasenna 27.6 *oc veri þa at þer reiþom vegit* (Bugge 1867, 117)
“and then you, angry one, would be attacked”

Sigrdrífumál 27.3 *hvars scolo reiþir vega* (Bugge 1867, 232)
“wherever they shall fight in anger”

Fáfnismál 7.3 *sei maþr þic reidan vega* (Bugge 1867, 220)
“one would see you fight in anger”

Fáfnismál 17.3 *hvar scolo reiþir vega* (Bugge 1867, 222)
“where they shall fight in anger”

Fáfnismál 30.3 *hvars reidir scolo vega* (Bugge 1867, 224)
“wherever they shall fight in anger”

³ In citations of individual verses or verse couplets I omit punctuation marks but use a slash (/) to indicate verse breaks.

To be sure, in *Lokasenna* 18.6 and 27.6 there are other *v*-initial words in the line. It seems unlikely that the words *vilkat* (“I don’t want”) and *væri* (“would be”), which would normally be lightly stressed, carry the alliteration. Nevertheless, a skeptic might view these lines as less certain than the others.

Since *Fáfnismál* has three certain occurrences of *reiðr* alliterating with *v* it would be natural to regard the fourth instance where the same root morpheme occurs in the poem as also alliterating with *v*. In this case we would also have initial *vr* in the word *rangr* “wrong” (which we will later return to):

Fáfnismál 33.5–6 berr af **reidi** / **ravng** orð saman (Bugge 1867, 224)
“he combines wrong words in anger”

A further instance is in *Atlakviða*, composed in a loose variant of *fornyrðislag*. Here the other alliterating words are *vín* (“wine”) and *valhöll* (“palace”):

Atlakviða 2.3–4 **vin** i ual **havlo** / **reiði** saz þeir húna (Bugge 1867, 282)
“wine in the palace / they feared the anger of the Huns”

Finally, there is an instance in *Þrymskviða*, composed in *fornyrðislag*, which needs some discussion:

Þrymskviða 1.1–2 **reiðr** var þa **Vingþórr** / er hann **vacnaði**
(Bugge 1867, 124)
“Vingþórr was angry when he woke up”

Normally, an initial noun or adjective in a line must alliterate so we would expect the initial *reiðr* to go back to a *v*-initial form. What casts doubt on this analysis is a parallel line, later in the poem, where the word *reiðr* clearly does not alliterate:

Þrymskviða 13.1–2 **reið** varþ þa Freyia / oc fnasaþi (Bugge 1867, 125)
 “Then Freyja became angry and snorted”

It is possible that the poet regarded this alliteration pattern as perfectly legitimate, which weakens the case for restoring *v* in *reiðr* in Þrymskviða 1.1. Alternatively, the poet may have sacrificed perfect alliteration here in favor of parallelism with the previous stanza. It is also possible that Þrymskviða 13.1 is a young line, added to the poem after the original alliteration pattern of Þrymskviða 1.1 had become obscure due to loss of initial *v*.

The conclusion is that there are six certain cases in the Eddic poems of *reiðr* alliterating as if it had initial *v* (*Lokasenna* 15; *Sigrdrífumál* 27; *Fáfnismál* 7, 17, 30), three likely cases (*Lokasenna* 18, 27; *Fáfnismál* 33) and one quite ambiguous case (Þrymskviða 1). We now move on to another word.

There are two instances in the Eddic poems where the word *reka* (“drive, drive out, avenge”) alliterates with *v*-initial words. Both are found in *ljóðaháttr* poems:

Vafþrúðnismál 53.3 þess mvn Viþarr **reca** (Bugge 1867, 73)
 “Viðarr will avenge this”

Hávamál 32.3 enn at **virþi recaz** (Bugge 1867, 47)
 “but they quarrel over a meal”

A further possible case is in *Atlakviða*:

Atlakviða 13.7–8 **rako** þeir **vannstyggva** / **vollo** algrona (Bugge 1867, 285)
 “they drove their horses over the green plains”

Odd lines of this type typically have double alliteration in *Atlakviða* but there are exceptions to this (e.g. *Atlakviða* 28.1–2 *Ykviþ er hvelvognom / haptr er nv i bondom*) so it cannot be said that the meter requires the restoration of *v* here.

As there is no general rule whereby *r* can alliterate with *v*, it is clear that the explanation for these alliteration patterns is historical. In the West Norse dialects, words beginning in *vr* universally lost their initial *v*. But in East Norse, the *v* was retained in many words. Thus, Swedish still has an initial *v* in *vred* (“angry”) and *vräka* (“drive out”).

There is, then, a *prima facie* case for regarding the poems which show traces of initial *vr* as old compositions, predating a phonological change in West Norse. However, the value and interpretation of this dating criterion has been debated since the 19th century. I will not summarize the historical debate here (see Fijestøl 1999) but concentrate on responding to the most lucid and recent formulation of the case against this dating criterion – made by Daniel Sävborg (2004). It should be stated at the outset that Sävborg’s comments on *vr* alliteration form a small part of a larger article and are not central to his general argument. I have chosen his remarks as the point of departure because his reservations are natural and sensible – they need to be addressed.

3. SÄVBORG’S ARGUMENT AND THE *THIRD GRAMMATICAL TREATISE*

Sävborg argues that putatively old linguistic features are in reality not particularly useful for dating the Eddic poems because:

Linguistic evolution did not proceed at the same pace throughout the North, so some part of the putative “old” fea-

tures may have been fully alive for some Scandinavians far into the High Middle Ages. This is true e.g. for the preservation of *v* in words such as (*v*)*reka* and (*v*)*reiði*, the best known of the linguistic dating criteria. (Sävborg 2004, 83–84; my translation)⁴

It is certainly true that the East Norse dialects preserved a number of *v*-initial forms, and Sävborg is right to call attention to this. He further argues:

I myself am more inclined than Fidjestøl to imagine the *vr*-forms as archaizing stylistic effects in young poems. The fact that the *vr*-forms were still used in Scandinavia surely shows that these were not *dead* linguistic forms, forms which were only known from very old poems, but living, well-known forms which all Icelanders knew were variants to those they used themselves. It was known that the variants were primarily regionally distributed but also that the *vr*-forms were the oldest – “vinðandin *forna*” is what Óláfr hvítaskáld calls the phenomenon (Fidjestøl 1999, 232–3). It is therefore reasonable to assume that the poets of such an antiquity-minded and literarily conservative phenomenon as Norse poetry could use those well-known variants as a poetic effect. (Sävborg 2004, 84; my translation)⁵

4 “Språkutvecklingen gick olika fort i Norden, varför en del av de utpekade “gamla” dragen för många nordbor kan ha varit fullt levande långt in i högmedeltiden. Det gäller t.ex. bibehållet *v* framför ord som (*v*)*reka* och (*v*)*reiði*, det mest kända av de språkliga dateringskriterierna” (Sävborg 2004, 83–84).

5 “Självt är jag mer benägen än Fidjestøl att tänka mig *vr*-formerna som arkaiserande stileffekter i unga dikter. Det faktum att *vr*-formerna ännu brukades i Skandinavien innebär ju att det inte rörde sig om *döda* språkformer, om former som enbart var kända från mycket gamla dikter, utan om levande, väl kända former som alla islänningar visste var varianter till dem de själva använde. Man visste att varianterna i första hand var regionalt betingade, men också att *vr*-formerna var de äldsta – “vinðandin *forna*” kallas fenomenet av Óláfr hvítaskáld (Fidjestøl 1999, 232–233). Det är därför rimligt att anta att diktarna av ett så forntidsinriktat och litterärt konservativt fenomen som norrön poesi kunde använda dessa väl kända varianter som ett poetiskt grepp” (Sävborg 2004, 84).

Óláfr hvítaskáld (1210–1259) was a poet of the Sturlung family. His so-called *Third Grammatical Treatise* (TGT) applies Latin grammatical and rhetorical theories to the Icelandic language, using many quotations of poetry for illustration. On our present subject he had the following to say:

Prothesis is the addition of a letter or syllable in the beginning of a word, as Egill composed:

Vröngu varrar gungnis
varrar lungs um stunginn

Here a *v* is added to this name, *vröngu*, in order for the alliteration in the *dróttkvætt* meter to come out right. (Finnur Jónsson 1927, 61; my translation)⁶

When Óláfr speaks of adding a letter to the word he is presumably speaking from the standpoint of a contemporary performer who would normally pronounce the word in question without a *v* but needs to add it when reciting this couplet for the sake of alliteration. His subsequent comments reveal that he is well informed on the matter:

Auferesis is the opposite of prothesis and it removes something from the beginning of a word or syllable, such as when *v* is removed from this word **vröngu*, because the Germans and Danes have *v* in front of *r* in this word and many others and we believe this to be old language. But now this is called the old *vinðandi* in

6 “Próthesis er viðlagning stafs eða samstöfu í upphafi orðs sem Egill kvað: 51. Vröngu varrar gungnis / varrar lungs um stunginn. Hér er við lagt *v* í þessu nafni, vröngu, til þess at réttir sé stuðlar í dróttkvæðum hætti.” (Jónsson 1927, 61). The A manuscript has (three times) the obscure form *vrungu*, sometimes regarded as past tense of a putative verb **vrínga*, cognate to English *uring*. This cannot be what Óláfr intended for two reasons. The first is that no such verb is attested in North Germanic while the text of the TGT indicates that it is discussing a word found both in Icelandic (with initial *r*) and in Danish (with initial *vr*). The second is that the text uses the word *nafn* (name) which covers nouns and adjectives but not verbs. Perhaps the repetition of <ung> in *gungnis*, *lungs* and *stunginn* induced the scribe to write *vrungu*.

poetry because it is nowadays not used in the Norse language. (Finnur Jónsson 1927, 61–62; my translation)⁷

Óláfr's statements here are in line with our present understanding of the phonological development. Sävborg is right in saying that here we have a confirmed example of a 13th century Icelander being aware that forms with initial *vr* were found in an older stage of Icelandic, and that they are still found in Danish.

So far so good. But I part company with Sävborg when it comes to his proposal that all Icelanders were aware of these facts, or that “producing *vreiði* instead of *reiði* must have been easy for any Icelander”.⁸ Óláfr hvítaskáld cannot be regarded as an Icelandic everyman and the contents of the TGT are not things we can assume that the typical Icelander, or even the typical poet, was aware of. Óláfr's treatise shows a high level of education and learning. When it came to traditional poetry and grammatical knowledge, he may well have been the most knowledgeable person in Iceland. He was also unusually well situated to make inferences about the differences between the Nordic languages as he had spent time at the Danish court. He even cites King Valdimarr himself for some runic information (Finnur Jónsson 1927, 29).

Furthermore, Óláfr does not write that the use of initial *vr* is still practised in Icelandic poetry. He says it is an old phenomenon no longer found in the Norse language, and the example

7 “Auferesis er gagnstaðlig próthesi ok tekr hon af upphafi orðs staf eða samstöfu sem þá at v sé tekit af í þessu nafni [vrungv, þviat þýðerskir menn ok danskir hafa v fyrir r í þessu nafni] ok mörqum öðrum, ok þat hyggjum vér fornt mál vera, en nú er þat kallat vindandin forna í skáldskap, þviat þat er nú ekki haft í nórænu máli.” (Jónsson 1927, 62). The part enclosed by brackets is found in A but missing in W – a scribal mistake due to homeoteleuton (the words þessu nafni occur twice and the scribe jumped from the first instance to the next).

8 “att däremot åstadkomma ett *vreiði* i st.f. *reiði* måste ha varit lätt för vilken islänning som helst” (Sävborg 2004, 86)

he chooses as an illustration is by a 10th century poet, Egill Skallagrímsson. Nor is it reasonable to understand Óláfr as recommending the use of initial *vr*. If anything, the heading of this section “hér eru merktir lestir metaplasmí” (“faults of the metaplasm type are listed here”)⁹ could be taken to discourage its use.

To get a better idea of the possible use of initial *v* we will look at poetry outside the Poetic Edda.

4. INITIAL V AND INITIAL R OUTSIDE THE POETIC EDDA

Apart from the Poetic Edda, there are four known instances of alliteration necessitating initial *vr* in the Old Norse poetic corpus, one of which has already been cited:

Bragi gamli, *Ragnarsdrápa* 19.1–2
vildit vrøngum ofra / **vágs** hyrsendir ægi (*Skj* B I, 4)¹⁰

Þjóðólfr ór Hvini, *Haustlǫng* 11.5–6
 þú skalt **véltr** nema **vélum** / **vreiðr** mælti svá leiðir (*Skj* B I, 16)

Egill Skallagrímsson, *lausavísa* 47.1–2
vrøngu varrar Gungnis / **varrar** lungs of stunginn (*Skj* B I, 53)

Eilífr Goðrúnarson, *Þórsdrápa* 21.1–2
vreiðr stóð **Vrøsku** bróðir / **vá** gagn faðir Magna (*Skj* B I, 144)

It is striking that all four instances are by poets composing before the 11th century. The works of Bragi and Þjóðólfr are the

9 Metaplasm is defined as “the transformation of correct speech into another form for the sake of necessity or beauty” (framskapan nǫkkurrar rétttrar ræðu í aðra mynd fyrir nauðsynja sakir eða fegrðar) (Jónsson 1927, 62).

10 For the remainder of this article I do not translate quotations of poetry. Dróttkvætt line-pairs generally make little sense out of context and translations would be of little use to the reader.

most archaic skaldic poems preserved and are traditionally dated to before 900. Egill Skallagrímsson and Eilífr Goðrúnarson were pagan 10th century poets. This fits well with the traditional conception in which the use of initial *vr* is a genuinely archaic trait. Note that the quote from Eilífr Goðrúnarson is one more case of the collocation *reiðr + vega*.

Taking stock of the results, there are four roots which show traces of initial *v* in alliteration:

reiðr/reiði/reiðask (eight secure instances); Swedish *vred*; Danish *vred*

rangr/rengja (two secure instances); Swedish *vrång*; Danish *vrang*

reka (two secure instances); Swedish *vräka*

Røskva (one secure instance); believed to be related to Old Norse *røskvask* “grow, come of age” and Gothic *ga-wrisqan* “bear fruit” and likely to Old Norse *røskr* “vigorous”.

The mythological name *Røskva* does not occur elsewhere in old poetry (see the end of section 9 for discussion of the possibly related *røskr*). But the other three words are common enough and have the potential to occur in alliterative patterns. Now, if it was “easy for any Icelander” to use a form like *vreiðr*, then I would expect to find some record of this in the works of poets active in the 11th century and later. But this is not what we find. In *dróttkvætt* poetry attributed to 11th century poets, there are at least 17 cases of *reiðr* or related words occurring in alliterative position. In every case, an initial *r* is required. The instances are as follows:¹¹

11 A reviewer asks whether the adjective *reiðr* “ready” rather than (*v*)*reiðr* “angry” could be present in some of the examples. As far as I can see, the conventional interpretation is in every case that the latter word is used.

Arnórr Þórðarson, *Haraldsdrápa* 5.3–4
þjóð galt ræsis **reiði** / ronn þess's fremstr vas manna (*SkP* II, 265)

Arnórr Þórðarson, *Haraldsdrápa* 6.1–2
eymðit ráð við Rauma / **reiðr** Eydana meiðir (*SkP* II, 267)

Arnórr Þórðarson, *Þorfinnsdrápa* 6.7–8
rausnarmannr at ræsis / **reiðr** ellifu skeiðum (*SkP* II, 236)

Bolverkr Arnórsson *Drápa about Haraldr harðráði* 5.1–2
rétt við rausn at hætta / **reiðmæltr** jöfurr skeiðum (*SkP* II, 290)

Eiríkr viðsjá, *lausavísa* 4.1–2
hlotit höfum rjóðr af **reiði** / randir þuðra branda (*Skj* B I, 200)

Haraldr harðráði, *lausavísa* 1.3–4
rjóðum vér af **reiði** / rønd es í hlýtk standa (*SkP* II, 42)

Óttarr svartí, *Knútsdrápa* 1.7–8
reiðr hafðir þú rauðar / randir Knútr fyr landi (*SkP* I, 769)

Sigvatr Þórðarson, *Austrfararvísur* 3.1–2
vasa fýst es rannk rastir / **reiðr** of skóg frá Eiðum (*SkP* I, 587)

Sigvatr Þórðarson, *Bersöglisvísur* 9.1–2
skulut ráðgjafar **reiðask** / ryðr þat konungr yðrir (*SkP* II, 20)

Sigvatr Þórðarson, *Bersöglisvísur* 11.7–8
rán hykk rekkum þínum / **reiðrs** herr konungr leiðask (*SkP* II, 22)

Sigvatr Þórðarson, *Flokkur about Erlingr Skjálgsson* 2.1–2
rakkr þengill hjó rekka / **reiðr** gekk hann of skeiðar (*SkP* I, 633)

Sigvatr Þórðarson, *Nesjavísur* 8.3–4
rønd klufu roðnir brandar / **reiðir** upp á skeiðar (*SkP* I, 568)

Steinn Herdísarson, *Nizarvísur* 2.5–6
næst vas þats réð rísta / **reiðr** atseti Hleiðrar (*SkP* II, 361)

Stúfr blindi, *Stúfsdrápa* 3.1–2
 sóðu rjóð af **reiði** / rann þat svikamönnum (*SkP* II, 353)

Þjóðólfr Arnórsson, *Magnúsflokkur* 16.1–2
 rynn lézt ræsir Þrœnda / **reiðr** þorðir bú meiða (*SkP* II, 83)

Þórðr Kolbeinsson, *Eiríksdrápa* 7.5–6
 sótti **reiðr** at rjóðum / rann engi því manna (*SkP* I, 499)

Þorleikr fagri, *Flokkur about Sveinn Úlfsson* 3.1–2
 færir **reiðr** sás rauða / rjnd hefr opt fyr ljndum (*SkP* II, 315)

In the same corpus, there is one instance of *rangr* and one of *reka* participating in alliteration. Again, there is initial *r*:

Þórðr Kolbeinsson, *Lausavísa* 5.7–8
 remmitungls at **rjngum** / randalfr greipt þú kalfi (*Skj* B I, 208)

Sigvatr Þórðarson, *Austrfararvísur* 20.7–8
 riptar **reknar** heiptir / Rjgnvaldr gefit aldar (*SkP* I, 611)

There thus seems to be very substantial evidence that initial *vr* had gone out of use in Norse/Icelandic poetry by the early eleventh century. This fits a broader pattern since a number of changes in Old Norse poetry seem to occur in the early 11th century, including a substantial reduction in the frequency of *a/q*-rhymes (Benediktsson 2002, 102–103; Myrvoll 2014, 147–163), a substantial increase in the frequency of certain trochaic types of line (Sigurðsson 2010, 19) and some other metrical innovations (Myrvoll 2009, 166–167; Gade 2001, 66–69).

To be sure, we might imagine that even if typical poets did not use initial *vr*, poets particularly concerned with old and archaic poetry might have done so. But the fact remains that there is no example at all of a post-10th century poet using initial *vr*. The Sturlung poets, for example, were surely interested

in archaic poetic forms, but even in their works we only find alliteration with initial *r*:

Snorri Sturluson, *Háttatal* 17.7–8
ránsið ræsir stöðvar / **reiðr** glaðr frømum meiðum (*Skj* B II, 65)

Snorri Sturluson, *Háttatal* 66.7–8
svá kann rán at refsa / **reiðr** oddviti þjóðum (*Skj* B II, 79)

Sturla Þórðarson, *Hákonarflokkur* 1.7–8
rönd klauf ræsir steinda / **reiðr** á land af skeiðum (*SkP* II, 746)

Sturla Þórðarson, *Hákonarflokkur* 7.7–8
þjóð fekk ræsis **reiði** / rán gekk slíkt at vánum (*SkP* II, 751)

Even if it is conceded that initial *vr* went out of use in *dróttkvætt* around the year 1000 it might still be suggested that it remained in use in the Eddic meters. Was it, perhaps, a stylistic effect particularly associated with *fornyrðislag* and *ljóðaháttr*? The problem with this idea is that there is a fairly substantial corpus of *fornyrðislag* and *ljóðaháttr* poetry outside the Codex Regius – most of which uncontroversially postdates the 10th century. Nowhere in this corpus is there an example of *reiðr*, *reka* or *rangr* alliterating with initial *v*. But there are examples of alliteration with initial *r*:

Gísl Illugason, *Erfikvæði um Magnús* 11.5–6
þars af **reiði** / ríkisvendir (*SkP* II, 424)

Hugsvinnsmál 13.1–2
ráðhollr ok réttðæmr / ok í **reiði** stiltr (*SkP* VII, 368)

Hugsvinnsmál 60.3
reiðr við rekka lið (*SkP* VII, 397)

Hugsvinnsmál 70.1–2
 ef þik ríkir menn / dæma **rangliga** (*SkP* VII, 403)

Hugsvinnsmál 105.1–2
 reiðrar konu / skaltu eigi rógi trúa (*SkP* VII, 422)

Hugsvinnsmál 114.4–5
 reiðr er þér betri / sá er rækja vill (*SkP* VII, 428)

Skaufhalabálkr 20.1–2
 rétti hann trýni / en **rekr** upp sjónir (*Kölbing* 1876, 244)

Vambarljóð 39.1–2
 reiður gekk þaðan / rekka drottinn (*Davíðsson* 1898, 50)

Orvar-Odds saga III.3,5–6
 þeir hafa **reiðir** / rómu háða (*Skj* B II, 311)

Orvar-Odds saga IX.29.1–2
 várum **reiðir** / þás randberendr (*Skj* B II, 330)

To sum up, we have a very substantial and varied corpus of medieval Icelandic poetry. If it was easy for any Icelander to produce *vr*-initial forms, even after the 10th century, then it is surprising that there is no clear example of this. The examples we have of *vr*-initial forms fall neatly into two groups: a) the Poetic Edda and b) four pre-1000 poems. Everywhere else we look we find only *r*-initial forms.

5. IS THERE A *VR*-FORM IN *SÓLARLJÓÐ*?

I am only aware of one suggested case of initial *vr* in a late poem, stanza 26 of *Sólarljóð*. This merits some discussion. The poem is most frequently dated to the 13th century but the oldest surviving manuscripts date to the mid-17th century. There are many textual problems and the preservation cannot be regard-

ed as good. In particular, many verses are metrically defective in all surviving manuscripts. Examples of defective alliteration include:

- 1.4–5 yfir þa gøtu / er hann vardadi (*Skj A I*, 628)
- 7.6 með almattkum gudi (*Skj A I*, 629)
- 30.1–2 syndir þvi vallda / ad vier hriggvir forum (*Skj A I*, 632)
- 70.4–5 lasu einglar / helgar bækr (*Skj A I*, 638)
- 76.1–2 bingvor ok listvor / sitia j herdis dirum (*Skj A I*, 639)

Stanza 26, which is our concern here, has the following text in the oldest manuscript:

Reidi verk
 þau þu unnit hefr
 bæt þu ei illu yfir
 grættan gala
 skaltu með godum hlutum
 þat salu sama. (*Skj A I*, 632)

No-one could call this a well-preserved stanza and all editors emend it. Typically, editors change *gala* to *gæla* in line 4 and add the word *kveða* after *þat* in line 6. This makes some sense of the second half. But the first half is problematic as well since the first two lines lack alliteration. A proposal to fix this was presented already in the 19th century (see e.g. Bugge 1867, 361). The argument is as follows:

In some 14th century poems, we find forms like *vunnit* with analogical restoration of *v*. If we imagine this was the case in *Sólarljóð* then *verk* in line 1 could alliterate with *vunnit* in line 2. But since the second part of a compound noun cannot alliterate unless the first one does as well (Fidjestøl 1999, 236), we need to restore initial *v* in *reidi*. Then we have *vreidi-verk* alliterating with *vunnit* and a case of initial *vr* in a late poem.

Every part of this argument is questionable. To begin with, it is not clear that *Sólarljóð* is a young enough poem for a form like *vunnit* to be possible. But even if we accept an emendation to *vunnit*, it does not follow that we need to emend *reiði* to *vreiði*. Poetry contemporary to *Sólarljóð* does not rigidly adhere to the rule that the second part of a compound noun cannot alliterate alone. Compare *Heilags anda vísur* 3.4–5: “sú hefr **einkagjöf** grænkat / geðfjöll liði snjöllu” (*SkP* VII, 453).

It is therefore not surprising that there is no consensus on this way of restoring alliteration to the text. Björn M. Ólsen argued for different emendations, printing the lines as “Reiðiverk, / þá er þér runnit hefir” (Ólsen 1915, 11, 37). E. A. Kock suggested emending the first line to *Ill reiðiverk* or *Ofreiðiverk* (Kock *NN* §2147). The most recent editions simply note that the alliteration is defective and make no attempt to restore it (Njarðvík 1991, 62; Larrington and Robinson 2007, 312–313). This seems reasonable. The text of many stanzas in *Sólarljóð* is corrupt and beyond our ability to restore.

In my view, *Sólarljóð* 26 is far from being good evidence of a *vr* form in a late poem. And even if the *vreiði-vunnit* theory were accepted we would not escape the fact that the combination of *vreiði* (attested in 10th century poems) and *vunnit* (attested in the 14th century) is itself anachronistic. This would not inspire confidence that late medieval poets were capable of accurately imitating Viking Age alliteration patterns.

6. MANUSCRIPT SPELLING

As discussed in section 2, there are eight instances of alliterative *vr* in the Poetic Edda which I regard as secure. The spelling of those forms in the Codex Regius (the only manuscript to preserve the stanzas in question) is as follows:

<reiþr>, <reidan>, <reiþir>, <reidir>, <reiþir>, <reiþi>, <reca>, <recaz>

It is interesting that in no case does the scribe write the forms with an initial *v*. If the scribe was aware that those words needed to be pronounced with an initial *v* to conform with alliterative requirements, he has certainly not left us any hint of such knowledge.

More interesting is the preservation of the skaldic poems which have initial *vr*. In section 3, I discussed the fragment by Egill quoted in the *Third Grammatical Treatise*. In that case, both manuscripts that preserve the text (W and A) have an initial *v* (<vrungu> and <vrungu>). This is natural enough, since the text itself explains the presence of those letters.

The lines by Eilífr Goðrúnarson appear as follows in the Codex Regius of the Prose Edda (R₃):

reiðr stoð roskv broþir / vagagn faþir magna (*Skj A I, 152*)

As we can see, the words *reiðr* and *roskv* are written with initial *r*, despite the alliterative necessity of initial *v*. These lines are also preserved in the Codex Trajectinus (T), Codex Wormianus (W) and Codex Uppsaliensis (U). In all four manuscripts both words have initial *r*. Particularly interesting is the text in W, which has <ra> in the second line instead of <va>. A likely explanation here is that the scribe of W realized that the lines lacked alliteration in his exemplar and he decided to fix this, at some cost to the lucidity of the text. If the scribe was concerned with alliteration, why didn't he restore initial *v* in <reiðr> and <roskv>? The most straightforward explanation is that he was not familiar with the *v*-initial forms of those words.

The lines by Þjóðólfr ór Hvini appear as follows in R_S :

þv skalt velltr nema vælom / reiðr mælti sva leiðar (*Skj* A I, 18)

Again the orthography of the manuscript shows an *r*-initial form where a *v*-initial form is required by the alliteration. The stanza is also preserved in T, which also shows an *r*-initial form.

Finally, and most intriguingly, the lines by Bragi gamli appear as follows in R_S :

vildid ravngum ofra / vags byrsendir ægi (*Skj* A I, 4)

In addition to R_S and T, this stanza is also preserved in AM 748 I b 4to (A), AM 757 a 4to (B) and AM 748 II 4to (C). The manuscripts have the following readings:

ravngum (R_S , T)
 vravngvm (A)
 orðngum (B)
 vaungum (C)

In A we find, at long last, a metrically sound *v*-initial form. We should note that the *Third Grammatical Treatise* is contained in A, and arranged in the manuscript before the Prose Edda parts from which this Bragi quote is taken. Perhaps the scribe of A was paying attention to the TGT's explanation of *v*-initial forms in ancient poetry (see however footnote 5). At any rate, it seems likely that A has faithfully preserved the form of its exemplar since the forms in B and C can also be explained by their exemplars having a *vr*-initial form.¹² The scribe of C

¹² The conclusions here might be somewhat clearer if the relationship between the manuscripts of the Prose Edda were known in more detail. For substantial recent progress on that question see Sävborg 2012.

was presumably confronted with a form like <vraungum>. He may have seen this as a non-word and changed it, perhaps with an eye to the alliteration, to a similar word that was part of his vocabulary. The scribe of B was surely confronted by a form like <vraungvm> and understood the initial <v> as the negative prefix *ú/ó*. He then chose the *ó*-form of the prefix for the manuscript he was writing. For all we know, the scribe of A may also have thought he was writing *úröngum*.

The findings on the Eddic manuscripts can be summed up as follows: R, R_s, T and U show no evidence of familiarity with *vr*-initial forms, always writing the words in question with an initial *r*, regardless of alliteration. The same can be said for W (apart from the TGT itself), B and C but here there is additionally some positive evidence that the *vr*-initial forms were unfamiliar to the scribes. Finally, the scribe of an ancestral manuscript common to A, B and C must have been familiar with a *vr*-initial form of *rangr*. It is hard to tell whether the scribe of A was also familiar with this (perhaps aided by the TGT) or whether he faithfully transmitted to us a form he did not understand.

The scribes who wrote the extant Eddic manuscripts were surely not less informed about poetics and language than the average Icelander. If Icelanders had been generally familiar with the forms *vreiðr* and *vreka*, I would expect such knowledge to be reflected in the manuscripts. But it never is. The only word which ever appears in Icelandic texts with *vr*-initial orthography is *vrangr*, the word discussed by Óláfr hvítaskáld. And even for this specific word, the only preserved manuscripts which have a *vr*-initial form are W and A, the manuscripts containing the TGT.

7. FORMS WITH INITIAL R IN THE POETIC EDDA

In the first section I examined *vr*-initial forms in the Poetic Edda. But there are also cases where the alliteration requires initial *r*. There are two certain instances of this in the word *reiði*:

Gripisspá 26.1–2 vilcat ec reiði / rics þioþkonvngs (Bugge 1867, 208)

Gripisspá 49.1–2 Mvn fyr reiði / ric brvdr vid þic (Bugge 1867, 211)

A further two instances are likely but not certain:

Atlamál 54.1–2 Ravscr toc at rþa / þott hann reiþr vęri (Bugge 1867, 300)

Atlamál 78.7–8 scavmm mvn ro reiði / ef þv reynir gerva (Bugge 1867, 305)

The first is not certain because conceivably *rþskr* and *vreiðr* could alliterate. The second is not certain because *ró* and *reynir* could alliterate alone. But in both cases double alliteration (*rþskr–ræða–reiðr*; *ró–reiði–reynir*) is more plausible.

Finally, there is a case of initial *r* in *rengja* (a verb derived from *rangr*):

Atlamál 4.1–2 Rvnr nam at rista / rengþi þęr Vingi (Bugge 1867, 292)

The evidence here would seem to indicate that *Gripisspá* and *Atlamál* might be younger than the poems examined in section 1. But we should be careful in assuming that they are very young since instances of initial *r* are found even in the oldest skaldic poetry (cpr. Fidjestøl 1999, 234–235).

8. COMPARISON WITH THE EXPLETIVE PARTICLE

In recent work on the dating of Old Norse poetry, the linguistic feature that has received the greatest attention is the frequency of the *um* / *of* expletive particle (Fidjestøl 1999, 207–230; Gade 2001, 55–65; Sävborg 2004, 83–89; Þorgeirsson 2012). As first noted by Hans Kuhn (1929), the *um* / *of* particle, a substitute for (or remnant of) unstressed Germanic prefixes, is most amply present in the oldest poetry and found progressively less in younger poetry. This can be used as a rough guide in the dating of Eddic poetry.

In section 1, six poems were identified as having secure instances of alliteration with initial *vr* and in section 7, two poems were identified as having secure instances of alliteration with initial *r*. If *vindandin forna* is, as I have argued, a useful dating criterion, we would expect the second group to have younger poems than the first group. The poems in the second group should then have a lower frequency of the expletive particle than the poems in the first group. And this is what we do find:

Poem	Particles per 100 verses ¹³	Initial <i>vr</i> or <i>r</i> ?
<i>Vafþrúðnismál</i>	4.4	<i>vr</i>
<i>Sigrdrifumál</i>	3.9	<i>vr</i>
<i>Hávamál</i>	3.3	<i>vr</i>
<i>Lokasenna</i>	3.3	<i>vr</i>
<i>Atlakviða</i>	1.7	<i>vr</i>
<i>Fáfnismál</i>	1.5	<i>vr</i>
<i>Grípissþá</i>	0.7	<i>r</i>
<i>Atlamál</i>	0.4	<i>r</i>

¹³ I have used the numbers in Fidjestøl (1999, 224), combining his figures for the three parts of *Hávamál*.

The six poems with initial *v* have 1.5–4.4 particles per 100 verses. The two poems with initial *vr* have 0.4–0.7 particles per 100 verses. The match is perfect, though of course the sample size is small. When different and independently motivated dating criteria lead to the same results, our confidence in both of them is increased.

9. OTHER VR-INITIAL WORDS

So far, I have investigated the alliteration of three Old Norse words, or rather roots:

reiðr / reiði / reiðask
rangr / rengja
reka

These roots have the advantage that Old Norse poetry requires initial *vr* in each of them on more than one occasion. Furthermore, they all have clear cognates in East Norse with initial *vr*. I think these are, by far, the best evidence we have when attempting to use *vindandin forna* as a dating criterion. But as many other words have been brought into the discussion, I will briefly treat them here (see also Fidjestøl 1999, 240–245).

The verb *rata* “wander about” may well be related to Gothic *wraton* “travel” but the apparent Swedish cognate *rata* suggests that the initial *v* may have been lost at an early stage in North-Germanic. The phrase *víða rata* occurs in *Hávamál* 5.2, 18.2 and *Alvíssmál* 6.2. As these are off-lines, it would be metrically preferable for *rata* to have initial *r* but the evidence here is weak at best. Even more speculative is the idea that the name *Ratatoskr*, which alliterates with *r* in *Grímnismál* 32.1–2, should have initial *vr*.

The word *rógr* and related words may have had initial *wr* in

Proto-Germanic but it is likely that *w* was lost early on before a rounded back vowel, a development which affected East Norse as well as West Norse (Fidjestøl 1999, 240; Eklund 1991, 173–174). I think no chronological conclusions can be drawn from the cases in the Poetic Edda where *rógr* alliterates with *r*.

The word **reini* “stallion?” seemingly occurs twice in *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* (20.6 and 21.1) but in both cases we are dependent on emendations. There are some quite plausible East Norse cognates with *vr* but none are exact. There is too much uncertainty here for this to be strong evidence.

The mythological name *Rindr* may alliterate with *v* in *Baldurs draumar* 11.1–2 but the line has a lacuna, so secure conclusions are not to be expected. I cannot agree with Fidjestøl (1999, 244) when he calls this a “strong case”. In *Grógaldr* 6.3 the name alliterates with initial *r* but in the absence of further evidence this doesn’t tell us much. The name occurs as *Rinda* in the *Gesta Danorum*, leaving us with no Danish support for an initial *vr*.

A general problem here is that the development of initial *vr* in North-Germanic shows lexical isoglosses between forms with *vr* and *r* in a number of words. The fact that a particular dialect had initial *vr* in one word at a particular time is thus no safe assurance that it had initial *vr* in another word (Schulte 2008, 177). In my view, the sources we have on *reiðr*, *rangr* and *reka* are extensive enough that we can form a reasonably solid picture of the development of their initial consonantism. This is much less true for the other words discussed.

The one case which remains to be addressed is a possible cognate of *Rōskva*, the adjective *rōskr*. This word occurs in *Rígsþula* 1.5–6 “ramman ok rōskvan / Rīg stiganda” (Bugge 1867, 141). There are three other cases in the poem where two

adjectives are linked by 'ok', in each case the words are in the accusative and they alliterate (1.3 *øflgan ok alldinn*; 4.3 *þungan ok þykkar*; 21.5 *rauðan ok rioðan*). This parallelism allows us to conclude that *rǫskvan* should alliterate as well. The word also occurs three times in *Atlamál*, alliterating with *r* (54.1–2 *Ravscr toc at rǫða / þott hann reiþr vęri*; 60.3–4 *ravscr mvnc þer reynaz / reynt hefi ec fyrr brattara*; 90.1–2 *Ravscr toc at rǫða / račpiz or svefni*).

Outside of *reiðr*, *rangr* and *reka*, the word *rǫskr* is probably the strongest case for the *vindandi* dating criterion. *Rígsþula* has 0.5 particles per 100 verses and would fit in well between *Gripisspá* and *Atlamál* in the table in section 8. The problem is that we have no East-Norse cognate and no ironclad proof that *rǫskr* and *Rǫskva* are indeed related.

10. CONCLUSIONS

When faced with poems which show a linguistic trait reflecting an early state of the language and other poems which exhibit the opposite trait, what can be concluded about the age of the poems? All else being equal, we normally assume that the first group of poems is older than the second group. This is the working assumption on which our efforts to date poetry with linguistic criteria rest.

In particular cases, however, it may turn out that a putatively archaic trait is useless or largely useless for the purposes of dating. This can happen if there is evidence that poets employed the trait in question throughout the period of interest with no significant changes in frequency. If there are numerous examples of poems from a late period with the feature, then the presence of the feature can hardly be strong evidence for an early date of a particular poem. Furthermore, if the supposed

archaic trait gives dating information which strongly conflicts with information from other criteria, some of our assumptions are likely to be wrong.

In the case of the *vindandi* linguistic trait and the Eddic poems, very little speaks against the validity of the criterion. It is true that some 13th century Icelanders knew about *vr*-alliteration – at the very least Óláfr Þórðarson and his readers knew of this possibility in the word *vrangr*. But there is no evidence that any post-10th century Icelanders actually used this trait in their compositions, and the numerous examples of alliteration with initial *r* speak against it. The spelling of the manuscripts also speaks against late use of *vr* alliteration, since even the knowledge of it does not appear to have been widespread. Another possible reason to suspect problems in the *vindandi* data would be if it conflicted badly with other dating criteria regarded as reliable. This turns out not to be the case. I thus think there is no clear justification for regarding the *vindandi* evidence as invalid.

But even if the *vindandi* evidence is valid it is necessarily dispositive in every case. The texts of the poems clearly had some fluidity, and at the very least we must reckon with the possibility of interpolation.¹⁴ A verse pair that shows alliteration of *reiði* with *r* could conceivably be a late addition to an old poem. And it is not impossible that some poets used alliteration with *vr* as an affectation to give a poem archaic flair. But the available evidence gives no concrete support to this idea.

With those caveats in mind, I think the *vindandi* evidence gives some reason to believe that *Atlakviða*, *Fáfnismál*, *Hávamál*, *Lokasenna*, *Sigrdrífumál* and *Vafþrúðnismál* are early

¹⁴ Some scholars argue that the instability of texts in oral tradition makes dating the original poems impossible or meaningless (e.g. Sigurðsson 2013). This idea merits detailed exploration which I must postpone for now.

poems and that *Atlamál* and *Grípissþá* are younger works.

This article has used Daniel Sävborg's 2004 article "Om eddadikternas ursprung och ålder" as a point of departure. It should be noted that apart from Sävborg's comments on the *vindandi*, which I have evaluated critically, I very much agree with the thrust of his article. Sävborg is, in particular, correct that Heusler's (1906) dating of the Eddic poems is not based on any solid foundation and should be discarded. He is also correct in saying that the dating problem is not in principle unsolvable; that useful contributions towards solving it already exist, and that we can hope for more progress in the future.

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