Eddic Poetry

Terry Gunnell

The Main Manuscripts

It must always be remembered that when scholars refer to eodic poetry, or to the Poetic Edda, they usually mean the contents of a single, fully insignificant-looking, medi-
eval manuscript known as the Codex Regius of the Elder Edda, rather than a genre defined on the basis of a particular school of authorship or literary style. The manuscript in question, known as manuscript A, contains a body of 29 poetic works in Old Norse-Icelandic, 10 of them dealing with mythological material, and 19 with Scandinavian and Germanic heroes of ancient times. As will be shown below, this material varies in terms of poetic form, as do works in other manuscripts that have been classified as belonging to the same "eodic" category.

The term "eodic poetry" essentially covers those anonymously transmitted "poems" (as we may call them for the moment) that deal with the myths or heroic world of the Nordic countries and make use of the *fölkaheiti* or *myndhöfli* verses (see chapter 15). This is a group well understood by most scholars as a means of distinguishing these works from modern poetry, but it is also somewhat misleading, not least because the generalized classification tends to obscure the variety and individuality of the works in question. Indeed, several features indicate that the Codex Regius is first and foremost a thematic collection of material from differing backgrounds, similar to other well-known medieval manuscript, such as the German *Corpus hormaeum* (which includes, among other things, both drinking songs and an imitatio choralis) and the Icelandic personal collection known as *Hnúlólv*.

For logical reasons, the Codex Regius (Gunnell 1996:19) so-called 2365 (see Ölsna 2001) is today regarded as one of the national treasures of Iceland. Signifi-
cantly, it was one of the first two manuscripts to be returned to Iceland from Denmark in 1791. Its central importance is that it contains a (slightly noisy) key to the pagan religious world not only of the settlers of Iceland, but also of the people of Scandinavia as a whole, displaying the kind of raw poetic material that Snorri Sturluson utilized when assembling his prose Edda c.1220, and of which saw Grammarius was clearly aware when writing his *Gesta Danorum* c.1200. It must never be forgotten, however, that the manuscript in question was written nearly 300 years after the official acceptance of Christianity in Iceland (999/1000). The manuscript's contents may well have ancient pagan roots, but researchers seeking to make out of this material a lesson should remember that it is likely to have been written in oral tradition long before it came to be "recorded", and that while it now exists in written form, it was originally meant to be received orally and visuall y in performance rather than read privately.

Very little is known about the origin and early history of both the Codex Regius and the fragmentary *AB* 748 (the manuscript, the latter being another, relatively small collection of mythological poems which is nowadays retained in Denmark and is believed to have been written shortly after the Codex Regius in c.1100 (for this manuscript, see Wescott 1945). To judge from the small size of these manuscripts and the "conventional" ways in which they make use of space, it would be judged by the people of the time as being no more important, for example, the *Ljóðaháttur* and *Flateyjarbók* manuscripts of the sagas, or the *Skáldskaparmál* of the Eddic. What is certain is that the Codex Regius was in the possession of Brynjsxifur Simonsson, bishop at the Skálholt diocese in southern Iceland, in 1644. We also know that Brynjsxifur transferred the manuscript as a gift to the king of Denmark in 1662. It is conceivable that Brynjsxifur was the recipient of the manuscript by the Icelandic poet Hallgrímur Pétursson, who had it written in *þinghætt* (see Karlsson 2000:232).

It is Bishop Brynjsxifur who appears to have been responsible for referring to the contents of the Codex Regius manuscript as "Eddic". The manuscript itself has no title page, but Brynjsxifur seems to have been aware of the links between the poetic works it contains and the prose *Edda* of Snorri Sturluson. Brynjsxifur himself refers to the manuscript as *samhöfli Edda*, to distinguish it from the so-called Snorri-Edda (that is, Snorri's prose *Edda*). Believing erroneously that it had been written or compiled by the early Icelandic scholar Sæmundur Sigfusson (1076-1133).

As the Swedish palaeographer Gustav Lindblad has pointed out, however, the genes of the Codex Regius manuscript is by no means as simple a matter as Bryn.jsxifur Simonsson supposed (see Lindblad 1986:30). The oral arrangement of the poems by rhyme and subject matter, and the general nature of the introductory prose comments, suggest, it is true, that at least one editor carefully supervised the collection it contains. It is very unlikely, however, that the contents were ordered in this way from the start. Lindblad suggests that the process of compiling the Codex Regius material must have begun around the time when Snorri Sturluson was writing his prose *Edda*, in other words c.1200. It seems clear that Snorri had access to complete versions of *Voluspá*, *Grímnismál* and *Völuspá* similar to those in the Codex Regius. He was obviously also aware of the basic materials of other works from which he quotes odd snatches (sometimes in very different forms, as in the case of the *Siege* that seems to originate in a *Verslóting* version of *Hávamál*, seems to have been unknown to Snorri. Lindblad's argument, based on
The Material

As noted above, the case of the material classified as belonging to the Poetic Edda comes from the Codex Regius. It is thus worth briefly outlining the subjects and nature of this material. The manuscript commences with Völuspa ("The Prophecy of the Seers"), a work which effectively provides an overview and framework, not only for the mythological works which follow, but also, indirectly, for the heroic poems in the second half of the manuscript and for Ragnarskáttur, if final doom, of their own. In short, Völuspa takes the form of a carefully structured monologue in þjóðsagt metre, telling of the creation, destruction and rebirth of the world. Supposedly uttered by a seeress who addresses both gods and humans alike, the poem begins by telling how the world was minted from the seas, and the celestial bodies appeared. The gods then give order to things and bring about the first signs of civilization. The following sections (ss 8–180) tell of the first three from outside with the arrival of three giant maidens, the subsequent creation of dwarfs and humans, and the appearance of the world ash, Yggdrasil, and the norms, or Fates. The end is already in sight.

The first part of the poem (ss 21–77) underway the last, between the Ásir gods (Öðinn and his fellow creators) and the Vanir gods (of whom Frey and the goddess Frigg are among the best-known; on the two groups of deities see chapter 17); a conflict that is won only by the highest gods and self-sacrifice (of which are key features of the heroic poems). The accounts of the past is now concluded and the inevitability of Ragnarök is even clearer.

After a short pause in which the poet describes an earlier meeting with Öðinn in which he opened up to her a vision of the future, she now proceeds to describe that vision. Stanzas 30–43 are marked by the ominous refrain: "Vinir er einn, elles brú" (Do you understand yet, or what?), which first occurs in st. 27); it describes how she saw the valkyrar (völva) appear, Baldur being dead and Loki being bound. The final battle itself is then described, as the gods meet their deaths at the hands of the monsters and giants, and the world and Yggdrasil burns.

This, however, is not the end of the poem, because the final stanzas (ss 54–60) detail the unfolding of a new world, and the appearance of a new generation of gods accompanied by the serpent Níðhöggr, whose presence underlines the potential for further destruction.

Völuspa is the first of four poetic works in the manuscript which centre on the figure of Öðinn, and concentrate on the presentation of genealogical, mythological and magical knowledge. Like Völuspa, Háttatal ("The Words of the High One"), Vafþrúðnismál ("The Words of Vafþrúðnir") and Grímnismál ("The Words of Grímnismál") all take the form of direct speech, this time, however, in theþjóðsagt metre. In all likelihood, the extant Háttatal is an amalgamation of several earlier poetic works. Generally assumed to be spoken by Öðinn, it is usually divided by scholars into five parts: Geislaháttr ("The Visitors' Songs"; ss 1–77); Dauði ("Öðinn's Exempla"; ss 78–110); Lódjóðsníval ("Words for Lodjóðsní"; ss 111–37); Háttatal ("The List of Rulers"; ss 138–45); and Lóðr ("The List of Chants"; ss 146–64). The first part is essentially a guide to survival in the Viking Age world, aimed at the small farmer. As such it offers us a valuable insight into the daily life and values of the time, ranging from advice to look behind doors to underlining the necessity of avoiding too much alcohol, of behold your tongue when among your peers, and of remembering to repay the favours done to you by a friend. The key point, however, is for the listener to remember that after death, the reputation you have acquired in life (see ss 70–74). There is a change in tone in the following section (ss 75–80) which lead to a Ragnarskáttur, and final doom, of their own. In short, Völuspa takes the form of a carefully structured monologue in þjóðsagt metre, telling of the creation, destruction and rebirth of the world. Supposedly uttered by a seeress who addresses both gods and humans alike, the poem begins by telling how the world was minted from the seas, and the celestial bodies appeared. The gods then give order to things and bring about the first signs of civilization.

The last two sections of the poem have particular value because they seem to take us into the heart of pagan ritual activity. Starring with information about the origin and serving of tua (ss 138–9), they proceed to list 18 magical spells or charms (max) designed to help the warrior and the lover. Vafþrúðnismál and Grímnismál are also more esoteric than narrative (though both have narrative frameworks). The former, like Áslómslóður and Guðr Gæstombaða (see below), takes the form of a knowledge contest presented in direct speech, here between Öðinn and the giant Vafþrúðnir. The encounter in Vafþrúðnir's hall is carefully structured. Óðinn announces his arrival and has to prove his worthiness by answering four questions on fundamental mythological knowledge ending with the name of the battlefield where the last battle of all will take place (ss 11–18). This section forms a brief overture to the questioning of Vafþrúðnir, which now begins as Öðinn asks a new alongside Vafþrúðnir, and the contest becomes more heated. With an alternating account of the creation of the earth to that given in Völuspa, Vafþrúðnir goes on to answer 12 questions about the origin of day, night, the stars, the earliest giants and the generations that follow, eventually moving on to the subject of preparations for the final battle (ss 20–43). The last six questions involve the future, dealing with the world dying and after Ragnarök. For his final
fishing with the giant, Bör, books the Mjögulsarar, the world-encircling serpent of Norse mythology.

Lokumeinn ("the ram of Loki", that is, "Loki's Corner of Lies"), while briefly involving Bör, centers on the figure of Loki. This is yet another apparently dramatic name, also composed in direct speech and in Ísfjölnubla. This introduction has been designed to provide the work with a context. Lokumeinn describes how Loki arrives at a banquet of the gods and proceeds to accuse each of them in turn of various mortal crimes. Humorous and lively in tone, the work pertains both to a mythological gaming-quest in which the listeners are expected to guess the identity of each god who speaks before being named by Loki. The conflict is resolved only by the later arrival of Bör, who ejects Loki by force.

Ísfjölnubla ("The Lay of Byrnja") continues this burlesque tone, recounting in Ísfjölnubla the myth of how Bör had gone to Jörundarheim dressed as a bride in order to regain his stolen hammer from the giant Brynja. The poem, which was later transformed into a well-known Norwegian ballad, has retained the attention of scholars from various fields in recent years not least because it is open to interpretation on different levels of meaning. Ísfjölnublakerla ("The Lay of Völundr") comes next, and does not concern Bör, it is regarded by some as being out of place in the general framework of the Codex Regius, not least because it is followed by a fifth Bör poem, Aésnafólsa ("The Words of Ásni""). This latter poem presents a knowledge bridge between Bör and a dwarf who has kidnapped his daughter (once again wholly in direct speech and in Ísfjölnublakerla), in which the dwarf has to list the names given by different races of beings (Eisir, Vanir, giants, dwarfs and elves) to various natural phenomena. Whether the absence of text is deliberate or the result of a mistake by the scribe, Ísfjölnublakerla offers a bridge between the historical mythological world, of the gods, giants and elves, and the lower world of dwarfs and humans covered in the next, heroic section of the manuscript, since it deals with supernatural figures while also introducing the themes of greed and blood-vendange that run through the heroic poems.

The poem begins (as 1–5) by offering an early version of the riddler-legend of the swan-wife (or seal-wife), telling in Ísfjölnublakerla, that this swan should be of the line of húsavinn, the first swan of the swan-maiden. Völundr's retirement as a smith come to the attention of a king named Njálr who has him hamstrings and placed on an island where he is forced to make creatures for the king. Völundr, however, takes revenge by killing the king's young sons, running their skulls into goblins, their eyes into precious stones and their teeth into brooches (their deaths are paralleled by those of Ásl's sons, described later in the heroic sections). The last scene depicts Völundr taking to the skin, laughing as the king learns from his daughter that Völundr has raped her.

After Aésnafólsa, the manuscript moves on to semi-mythological heroic poems starting with these works on two apparently Norwegian heroes named Helgi literally, the "sacred one": Helgakvida Hundingsbana I ("The First Lay of Helgi Hundingsbana"), Helgakvida Hrymrarkvida ("The Lay of Helgi Hrymrarkvida") and Helgakvida
Edic Poetry

The two poems dealing with Helgi Hundingbana, Helgaskvida Hundingbana I is the birth of the hero, the spinning of his fate by the seer, his defeat of Hunding, and his son and, finally, of a man named Hphðboddr who is a rival for Helgins Sinjott and Hphðboddrs representative, Guðmunds.

Helgaskvida Hundingbana II is relatively fragmentary, but covers the same material, a part which seems to have contained the number of difficulties, at least because he firmly wished to avoid writing valuable manuscript space with unnecessary direct repetition of material that had already appeared in the previous Helgi poems. This part, at Sigrin reports on Helgis grave mound in order to meet him when he returns from the dead for one night.

The next section of the manuscript is dedicated to the intertwined fates of five key figures: Sigrin, the lady of Fafnir, his wife Guðrun, Guðrun, her bide Badadottr, and her brother Atli (Astrid, king of the Huns). Associated with them are other historical and legendary figures from the Age of Migrations, such as

Jemnævsk (Ermancir) and Pjöðrek (Dóhhir; Dóhkin; Dietrich, Theoderic), both kings of the Ostrogoths.

Broadly speaking, the poems in this section can also be divided into three schematic groups. They are introduced by Gripeþapt (The Prophecy of Gripeþ), which is unusual in that it seems to have been deliberately composed in the thirteenth century as a framework for the poems that follow, running as a loose poem addressed to Sigurd about his future life and the consequences of his death. Following this comes a group of three poetic works: Regional, Fafnir and Sigurðrjanal (The Words of Regional, of Fafnir and of Sigurd). These three works were composed with all of the mythical material of the dwarf Andvari's gold (which is, the Rohan gold), and then proceed to cover Sigrins youth, as he meets Olon as a man, as he slays the serpent Fafnir and his mentus Regional, and finally as he is educated in the use of reins and in poetic wisdom by the sáwy Sigurðr whom he has awaken on a mountain-side.

In their present form, these works seem to be amalgamation of several earlier works composed in different poetic metres, either of a fylking type poem about Sigurd's youth, while another seems to have been a semi-dramatic work composed in fylking and direct speech, concentrating on his killing of Fafnir (and probably also his meeting with Sigurðrjanal). The Work of Regional is the stein, first encounter with the sáwy Sigurðr Svína, who names himself, between Atli and a goddess called Heitrine (a section of a sáwy referred to as a Forlag in the Text of Helgingr). The final dialogue is between the Helgins and Sveins, with the former beseeching the latter to his brother.

Of the two poems dealing with Helgi Hundingbana, Helgaskvida Hundingbana I is the birth of the hero, the spinning of his fate by the seer, his defeat of Hunding, and his son and, finally, of a man named Hphðboddr who is a rival for Helgis Sinjott and Hphðboddrs representative, Guðmunds.
The following two poems, Asalakthasa ("The Lay of Asali") and Asalathana ("The Lament of Asali"), both cover in detail the deaths of Gunnar, Hogni and Ari. Here we find the heroic parallel to the mythological Ragnarök described in the first part of the manuscript. The two poems are obviously closely related even if their styles are different. The first poem presents the epic events in flashes that are rich in allusions, while the second places them in a loving setting, adding scenes to amplify the elements of fate, the heroism with which Gunnar and Hogni meet their deaths, and the events of Gudrún’s harrow as she serves up her sons for her husband to eat.

The last poem to fall into place in the Codex Regius deals with events that take place at the time of Gudrún’s marriage (her third) to a king named Jónrak. Gudrún’s daughter Sigurðr, Svitáblindh, has been sampled to death by horses at the holding of her husband Jórmnande, on a charge of committing sorcery. Both Gudrún and her son Harðbörn ("The Whetting of Gudrún") and Hamðimal ("The Words of Hamðir") tell how Gudrún eggs her sons Hamðir, Syrli and Efró to avenge their half-sister’s death. In both poems, Hamðir questions his mother’s motives by reference to her past, knowing that the mission will lead to his and his brothers’ deaths. The former poem, however, follows the model of other eddic poems of lament, as Gudrún recovers the arrows of her life to her sons. The final strophe (st. 21) indicates that the poem was meant to have universal application:

Atli, and especially with Atli’s execution of Gunnar and Hogni, and the resulting according to Gudrún herself (served up at Asali as a meal), and of her husband, in that it is essentially a monologue supposedly spoken by Gudrún to Jórmnande, who is between the earlier poems and those that come next, it traces Gudrún’s life from cover on female characters, prophecies are spoken about the future (the deaths of gifting his warning dreams. The listeners’ knowledge of the legends is here deliberately

played on. Gudrúnakvaði III ("The Third Lay of Gudrún", also largely in the form of speeches, covers a side episode in which Gudrún has to undergo an ordeal to prove that she has been true to love, and so is drowned in a bog, like many sacrificial victims of the Iron Age found in Denmark and northern Germany. Gudrúnakvaði V ("The Lament of Oddnýr"). which like the previous poems may have had a relatively short life in oral tradition, takes up another lonely related side to this situation, Oddnýr feels drawn to release the sorrows and injustices of her own life, Sigurðr, Brynhildr and her brother.
Age and Provenance

As the above summaries indicate, there can be little doubt that the subject matter of the poetic works under discussion is older than the manuscripts in which they are contained. Along with problems of philology and interpretation, some of the questions more often addressed by scholars have been the date and provenance of the 'poems', the interrelationships of various texts, and the relationships of the poems to classical and Christian learning. (On earlier scholarship concerning dating, see especially Fiddler 1959.)

As noted above, it is now generally accepted that the Codex Regius was based on smaller earlier collections going back perhaps to the early thirteenth century. Since its contents are not attributed to any named author and almost certainly exist in oral tradition before that time, it is highly questionable whether the manuscript reflects the 'original composition' (of which we can use such an expression) of any of the works it contains. We may assume that the Nordic oral tradition, which probably varied as much from time to time as from place to place, involved a mixture of memory and improvisation (see Harris in Gleesloning and Besamusca 1983: 210–42; Sigurðsson 1990, 1998: xx–xxxii), but all we have is that the extant texts can confidently be said to reflect in the form in which the works were 'recorded' or memorized by scribes in the thirteenth century.

At the same time, it is also clear that the traditions we have are faced with a close relationship to those encountered in other non-Scandinavian works like the Old English Widsith (which mentions Jaynmserki, Deor (which mentions both Jærmserki and Vígló) and Beowulf (which mentions Sigmund, Sigfröð's father, and Fæter, who represents the same figure as Sigmund's son Sníþbit).), and even the Old High German Hildebrandlied, all of which go back at least to the ninth or tenth centuries. Similarities in metre are found in early poetic rúts inscriptions like that on the tenth-century Rúkt stone in Sweden (which also mentions the name Bjöðfræk), while mythological and heroic motifs known from the eddic poems are depicted in early carvings in wood, ivory and stone from Gotland, Norway and England. Variants on the figure of Völundr seem to have been known throughout early medieval northern Europe, while the originals of Gunnar, Atló, Jærmserki and Póskrith geit back even further, to the Age of Migrations. The material had been in people's minds and on their lips long before it was recorded.

Studies of oral traditions show that its subject matter is unlikely to survive unchanged in oral form for a long period of time, especially if it undergoes changes in context (Sigurðsson 1998: xx-xxii). Details and poetic expressions that have acquired fixed and/or formulaic status may, however, often survive intact. This needs to be borne in mind when considering, for example, references in the eddic poems to archaeological objects that would not necessarily have been known to the
scribes, such as the brúnaite ("insected crystal goblet") and the damascened knife mentioned in Skírnismál (ss 37 and 38).

At the same time, it is clear that several eddic poems reflect the influence of the language and imagery of skaldic poetry, a feature that is commonly regarded as evidence of a relatively late origin. Particular examples of such influence are seen in Helgskýpa Handringshána I, Hymiskviða, Hymiskviða and Gährdrskviða.

It must be considered unlikely, however, that the mythological poems were originally composed by Christian writers, and certainly not those poems that seem to refer directly to visual arts, such as Sigrdrífa, Skírnismál and the latter part of Húnamál, all of which of, which, it would appear, were expected to be performed "live" (see below). Scholars have long debated the possibility of later Christian influences, for example, Völuspá, Völuspá in stornum, and even the bardicke Lagvastinga and Harðv fliesargi (signing with questionable logic that believers could not make fun of the gods they believed in). Nonetheless, the remains are probably the majority of the mythological poems have deep roots in the period before Christianity was formally declared in Iceland in 999/1000. The poems give us, as the very least, a more genuine picture of the variety and nature of Old Norse paper belief than does the prose Edda, which is essentially an attempt to construct a coherent narrative from conflicting ancient sources.

The Poetic Edda obviously contains elements of varying age. This brings up the question of provenance. As already noted, the morn of much of the narrative material lies outside Iceland. The same would seem to apply to some larger elements, such as, for example, Sigdrífa (ss 16 and 17), Helgskýpa Handringshána II (ss 33 and 37) and the prose accompanying Fafnismál. These features may in another respect belong to older oral formulae rather than to the works as wholes; but they do not less indicate the existence of a northern Germanic tradition that crossed Scandi-
navia, although scholars have at different times pointed to possible origins in the British Isles, at least for Sigdrífa, the Helgi poems and Völuspá in stornum, on the basis of linguistic evidence and Celtic myths (such as that of reincarnation). Certain Christian motifs might point in the same direction. Yet other scholars, less comfortable with the idea of these works having lived to a fluid oral tradition among ordinary people before being recorded, have raised the possibility of influence from classical learning, especially with regard to Húnamál (cf. the Dóttirítt Cnut). See the discussion of this in Ólafsson (1992: 117; Sigurðsson 1998: 55) and Völuspá (cf. the Christian Cæsus Snípudla and the Prophecia Suiðfugr master as de Roode 1997: 93–104).

The discussion of age and origin may well go on for ever. As already noted, the only certainty is that the extant poems were recorded in Iceland in c.1270. Everything concerning their history before that date is a matter of speculation. This realization has led in recent years to less discussion of dating and provenance and more concern

Context and Performance

As already indicated, it must never be forgotten that the poetic works under discussion here were often more received orally than read in silence. They should be analysed with this in mind, in much the same way as plays are examined today, with the scope of the work being seen as determined by the audience, the setting, and the demands of performance, and the work itself being acknowledged as intended for reception in a living context, visually, orally and temporally. It should also be recognized that much is lost in translation from the original language. (Compare, for example, the written heart of the eddic poems with the recent experiments of these works in performance conducted by the medieval music group, Sequel: see Edda [Deutsche Harmonia Mundi: DHM 07477 73781] or The Rhingold Group (Mack: Apex MA: 2001).)

There is all the more reason, in the light of these considerations, to question the general classification of the works under discussion as 'poems', rather than as 'songs', 'chants' or 'dramas'. As already noted, the format of the works varies not only in measure, but also in content, style, likely origin and context, and manner of presentation. Some works, such as Grettisvætur and Dóttirítt Cnut, seem to have a close relationship to work-songs; others, such as those depicting the deaths of Helgi Hypevælsson, Guðrøvar and Hógni, and Hamfr and Sepli, seem to have been designed to encourage warriors to emulate acts of heroism, thus connecting them potentially to the ancient tradition that Tacitus refers to in chs 3 of his Germania. (On the early forms of oral Germanic poetry, see, for example, Opland 1980: 7–33.) Yet others seem to be designed for female audiences, especially at times of grief, providing examples of social whatering in the face of loss (as in Guðrøvarvætur 1 and 3). An element of applicability beyond the immediate context is apparent in the old stephers of Guðrøvarvætur (as shown above) and Almásl, for example. Yet other narrative works may have been meant simply to entertain, perhaps at weddings, as in the case of Prymekviða, or at male or female gatherings (cf. the different gatherings to the same theme in Helgskýpa Handringshána I–II, Almásl and Almásl, and Guðrøvarvætur and Húnamál: see further Sigurðsson 1998: xxvii–xxviii).

This leads on to yet another central question too rarely considered by philologists, who are often to regard the material as set written 'texts', rather than as snapshots of a living spoken tradition: in terms of performance and content, there is a radical difference between the works composed in Játalfrjós and those in Írarýgisslaug. The very nature of the medium (as set written medium) the medium in "brúnaite"
material is united by the fact that its authorship was seen as being unimportant. What we are dealing with is essentially folk material, drawn from early Scandinavian oral traditions which at some stage seems to have adopted the poetic form as a means of dealing with mythological and heroic subjects. One central value of this material is the more genuine value it provides of the diversity of this tradition than would be gained if we had to rely solely on the literary products which we now have.

As such, it presents us with a measure of living insight into the non-orthodox, general world-view, not only of the poets but also of the common audiences of Iceland and of the very least reasons to Scandinavia, in the Middle Ages.

APPENDIX: THE POETRY:/editorial, MANUSCRIPTS, FORM, LIVING AND DEATH OF DIRECT SPEECH

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(Continued)
NOTES

1 There are many obscure parallels here in the varying approaches adopted in the folk collections at the beginning of the century. Indeed, other thirteenth-century European manuscripts such as the Cambr. B3456 in Germany, and the contrasting Aunts in France, point to a growing interest in

permanently recording folk material for pos-

sively alongside most enlightening material.

2 The most reported editions of the text of the "idyll" poems are those of Helgesson (1957-1962) and Neckel and Koeh (1962), which provide not only merely

worthy versions (see also Signumhöf 1979), and the diverse editions of some poems published by Skånke (1969-1975). Dansk, however, prefers to alter the original texts for some poems to make them more

understandable. In the present discussion, references to poems are listed in the Codex Reginae ed.

3 A somewhat different version of Helgesson, used in the early thirteenth-century manuscript Halmstaholm.

4 "Traditions in this chapter are based loosely on those given by Langstone (1990)."

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Family Sagas
Vestern Olson

The Icelandic word saga, pl. sagor – a derivative of the verb saga, "to speak", "to say" – meant "a tale" or "a story. It is sometimes also used to describe a sequence of events out of which a story could be made. Sagas about Icelanders from a certain period and written by anonymous authors are known as Islander sagas, 'sagas of Icelanders', or as they are frequently referred to in English, 'family sagas', albeit that this latter term is really only appropriate for some of them. It is used only about tales of considerable length which centre on the lives of people from a relatively small group of Icelandic families. The important part of the action in such tales takes place during the first century of the Icelandic Commonwealth, from c.930 to c.1030 though introductory sections may deal with events in Norway and Iceland during the main period of the settlement of Iceland, c.870–930. While the saga heroes may travel to foreign lands, most frequently Scandinavia or the British Isles, the main action usually takes place in Iceland and is rooted in the ways in which men feared vigorously and eventually resolved their conflicts through the operations of a judicial system whose courts were unopposed by any countenancer executive power. Excessions to this familiar pattern are the two Víðiría sagas, in which most of the action takes place in either Greenland or North America,1 and Egísi saga, whose hero, although born in Iceland, is mainly involved in conflicts in Norway and England. Such elements hardly justify referring to these 40 works or so as a separate genre, but taken together the sagas are characterized by a group of features which play a remarkably less important role in early Icelandic sagas and tales. There are, therefore, good reasons for the long-standing tradition of dealing with this group of sagas as a single entity, regarding them as a separate family within the saga-tribe.

An important characteristic of many sagas is that the prose is sometimes interpreted with poetry, usually single stanzas spoken by the characters themselves, but exceptionally whole poems that are quoted in the main text. This poetry is often an important vehicle for the expression of thoughts and feelings that it would be improper for a character to give expression to in conversation. While especially
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Edited by Rory McTurk

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