
Reviewed by:

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This volume is the first to appear of a series produced by a consortium of scholars aiming to present modern editions of the corpus of Skaldic poetry. The books will be accompanied by a Web site, at present partially accessible online at http://skaldic.arts.usyd.edu.au. The future relationship between the books and the Web site, more specifically the cost of access to the latter, has yet to be determined. As will be seen from the comments below, the electronic publication will facilitate efficient use of the paper volumes.

Skaldic poetry has often been treated as the neglected stepchild of medieval Scandinavian literature. Few non-Icelandic ears are attuned to the assonances, alliteration, and meter that make it “skaldic” and thus fail to appreciate it, while the complex language of kennings and the amount of work required to unravel a verse stating “the king killed the warriors” may encourage readers to skip the poetry altogether. They do so at their peril, as these verses play important roles, whether as “references” proving the historicity of an account or as literary ornamentation confirming or commenting on the action.

The present edition makes this complex poetry much more accessible. Briefly, each poem is preceded by an introduction (including a biography of the poet, if known) and is then presented, verse by verse, in a format that is conveniently summarized on the inside covers. A normalized version of each verse is followed by a version in prose word order. That in turn is translated into English; square brackets are used to explain the referents of metaphors and kennings. The reader who is satisfied with the editor’s interpretation of the verse in question can stop here; for scholars, there are sections listing the manuscripts in which the verse is found, previous editions, and detailed notes on the verse itself. These notes discuss problematic readings and alternative interpretations, as well as providing information pertaining to the context or literary features of the verse. For those who wish to delve deeper, the Web site will provide diplomatic transcriptions and photographs of the manuscript(s) used. It will also include a database enabling users to search for poets, poems, kennings (and elements thereof), metrical features, and bibliography. Much care has gone into the construction of the Web site and the database that underlies it; even this technologically inept reviewer was able to navigate the existing version with ease.

Numerous scholars have been responsible for individual poems and verses under the
oversight of the volume editor and five general editors, all of whom are recognized experts in the field. Access to manuscripts and advice on readings were facilitated by the paleographic expertise of Valgerður Erna Þorvaldsdóttir, who for several years served as the project’s ground crew in Iceland.

The editors have taken a major step forward in the presentation of medieval Icelandic literature by not normalizing all the poetry to the standard, reconstructed twelfth-century form; poetry from the fourteenth century (in part 2) has been normalized to the linguistic standards that prevailed at that time (described on pp. lxv–lxvii). The poems (and the table of contents) are arranged chronologically, with the first of the two codices that constitute the present volume containing twelfth- and thirteenth-century poems, the second, fourteenth-century poems with the corresponding normalization. Although there are indices of first lines, names (personal names, nicknames, and ethnic names), and indigenous terms, there is no alphabetical index of titles or subjects of the poems in this volume. That would have been a useful addition for those wanting to check quickly whether a poem in which they are interested is included or not (they can, of course, do this on the Web site). Technical terms used in the volume are to be found on pages xxxiii–xxxv, and a convenient guide on how to use the edition concludes the introduction. The bibliography is at times frustrating, expanding abbreviations such as “FOGT = Fourth Grammatical Treatise” but providing no further entry for that work (here again, the Web site comes to the searcher’s aid, and the matter will undoubtedly be rectified in vol. 3).

A major problem faced by anyone who undertakes a project like this one is how to organize the material. The editors have chosen to divide the poetry, not according to its actual content, but according to the literary genre in which it appears. Given the prosimetric nature of much Icelandic literature, and the importance of context in evaluating poetry, such a decision can be defended. However, it is worth emphasizing that (as stated in the introduction) the present two-volume set contains only a fraction of the corpus of medieval Scandinavian Christian poetry. Fragments dealing with St. Nicholas and St. Thomas will be published in volume 3, *Poetry from Treatises on Poetics*, while poems about St. Olaf of Norway or the holy bishop Guðmundr Arason have been reserved for, respectively, volume 2, *Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas* (though “Geisli,” because of its seminal role in the genre of Christian skaldic poetry, is included in the present volume—in spite of the fact that it is found in manuscripts of royal sagas), and volume 4, *Poetry on Icelandic History*. Regarding the latter, it should be pointed out that the poetry written about Guðmundr was not, in fact, contemporary with his lifetime; it makes use of existing prose about him in precisely the same way as poems about Eustace/Placitus or Katherine presuppose knowledge of the saints in question. The poetry about Guðmundr cannot be sources for the sagas, as is sometimes the case in other genres. One wonders, too, what is specifically Christian about “Hugsvinnsmál”—a translation of the Disticha Catonis—or the doggerel “Lausavísa on Lawgiving,” which is found in legal manuscripts and describes the characteristics of a “lawman” (here a legal expert—one who speaks the law—rather than the lawgiver, the king). It is presumably included by virtue of its reference to Moses and Christ or the pious prayer that concludes it. The far more pious verse from “Hafgerðingadrápa” will appear in volume 4.

Such matters are, of course, only temporary frustrations. Volume 2 (also in two parts)
has already appeared, and the Web site, even in its present form, provides an excellent index to the overall project. More serious is the decision to limit the Christian poetry included in these volumes to that composed before 1400. In fact, much of the poetry included here is preserved in sixteenth-century manuscripts, along with other poems that have been rejected on linguistic grounds. Linguistic arguments are always tricky, and consideration of the features of skaldic verse that late poems incorporate or reject would have been immensely facilitated by the inclusion of the poems edited by Jón Helgason in Íslensk Midaldakvæði and, for that matter, the poems attributed to the last Catholic bishop, Jón Arason. Their omission negates the statement in the introduction that the only medieval Scandinavian poetry excluded from this edition is “the Elder Edda and closely related poetry” (p. xli). On the other hand, the editors are to be complimented on the inclusion of two Latin verses composed in skaldic meter, “Stanzas Addressed to Fellow Ecclesiastics” (pp. 471–75).

The general introduction to the volume is clear and concise and, on the whole, accurate. One exception happens to concern an article that I published in 2003, which does not assert that the Icelandic church was “reluctant to use skaldic verse as a medium of devotion” (p. xlv) but rather examines the significance of its under-representation as applied to saints, and that only in the period before Snorri Sturluson’s euhemeristic interpretation of the pagan gods authorized references to those gods in poetry composed by clerics—a question that was still of concern to Snorri’s nephew, Ólafr hvitaskáld (d. 1259). One of the important issues here is the question of the lay or clerical, monastic or secular, status of the poets and of the precise nature of the kennings in the poetry they composed. Readers will have to wait for the publication of the entire corpus of Christian skaldic poetry (or use the Web site) before making up their minds on the question.

The completed seven-volume work, and in all probability the associated Web site, will be a major boon to scholars of literature and of medieval Scandinavian history and culture. The presentation is well thought out, and the edition is easy to use. The editors and all involved in this undertaking are deserving of praise. It is the hope of this reviewer that they will follow this project with the publication of yet one more volume: medieval Icelandic Christian poetry from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.