
Reviewed by:

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Few bodies of medieval vernacular verse are stranger, richer, more various, and less read than the skaldic verse of the North. The five-hundred-year history of this poetry — from dark beginnings in ninth-century Norway to a final burst of splendor in fourteenth-century Iceland — survives in the form of five-thousand stanzas (each usually eight lines in length), preserved in more than three hundred and seventy manuscripts held in at least fifteen institutions. Many occur as verse inserts in prose sagas; the longer poems edited in this volume tend, in contrast, to be found outside a prose context, often in pre-Reformation compilations of devotional works.

Skaldic verse should be of interest to medievalists from many disciplines: history, linguistics, anthropology, archaeology, mythology, theology, interreligious cultural polemics, art history, comparative literature, and oral poetics; but up to now access to the corpus has been restricted to a small group of Old Norse scholars with facility in the modern Scandinavian languages used in the standard edition of skaldic verse (now almost a century old) and in the standard research tools, commentaries, and studies. No longer. In *Poetry on Christian Subjects*, the first of nine planned volumes in the series Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages, each verse is accompanied by an English introduction, translation, and notes. The texts are based on a fresh examination of all known manuscripts; the notes and introductions, on an exhaustive survey of earlier editions and scholarship. The interpretation of individual verses differs in many instances from previous commentaries, sometimes reflecting a more conservative approach to emendation.

This first volume, which is also available electronically (fully searchable, including images and transcriptions of the base manuscripts) is informative, beautifully produced, and a glorious achievement in every way. It is also, for those in the field, a dream come true.

A new edition of the corpus has been a desideratum since the 1930s, when Hans Kuhn listed in alarming detail what such an edition should include. In 1947, Jón Helgason announced plans for a new edition, but none appeared. In 1983, Hans Kuhn complained that over the past half-century stillness had enveloped skaldic scholarship. In a review of the field published in 1985, I described a pattern of behavior that entomologists called stigmergy. When four or five termites were put together in a chamber, they seemed to stroll around without purpose. But when more termites were added, real work began. They picked up each other's fecal pellets, stocked them in even columns, and soon the foundations of the termitarium were laid — elegantly and, as far as one can tell, in harmonious accord. That summer, at the Sixth International Saga Conference taking place near Hamlet's Elsinore, Bjarne Fidjestol, Margaret Clunies Ross, and perhaps a dozen other skaldicists met in an underground bunker at L.O.-skolen and discussed far into the night the possibility of a new edition. The lack of a computer home seemed at the time an
insurmountable obstacle (in the 80s we were still thinking of main-frames); and we disbanded, bleary-eyed, despairing that between "to be or not to be," the latter had won. Or so we thought. For just as it was typical of Bjarne to think imaginatively, so it was of Margaret, fearlessly from a base in far-off Sydney, to make things happen, to turn vision into reality.

The cast of characters involved in the new edition is large, international, and — in contrast to past scholarship in the field — not predominately male. Margaret Clunies Ross, the editor of this first volume, and her fellow General Editors — Kari Ellen Gade (Indiana), Edith Marold (Germany), Gudrún Nordal (Iceland), and Diana Whaley (England) — guide a consortium of more than forty Contributing Editors, fifteen of whom edited texts for this first volume. These editors are, alphabetically, Katrina Attwood (U. of York); Martin Chase (Fordham); Kari Ellen Gade (Indiana); Jonathan Grove (U. of Cambridge); Beatrice LaFarge (Frankfurt); Carolyne Larrington (Oxford); Jonna Louis-Jensen (Copenhagen); David M. McDougall (Toronto); Ian C. McDougall (Toronto); Peter Robinson (Birmingham); George S. Tate (Brigham Young); Valgerdur Eriña thorvaldsdóttir (Reykjavík); Tarrin Wills (Sydney and Aberdeen); Kirsten Wolf (Wisconsin); and Stefanie Würth (Tübingen).

Poetry on Christian Subjects comprises the bulk of Icelandic skaldic poetry on Christian themes composed by poets between the mid twelfth and the beginning of the fifteenth century. In comparison with viking-age skaldic verse and with secular skaldic poetry of the twelfth and thirteenth century, the poems housed in this volume — with the exception of Lilja — have not received their share of scholarly attention. It is perhaps only fitting that they should now come first, in volume 7, a number with Christian associations. (The General Editors, when organizing the corpus into nine volumes, were presumably not thinking about the importance of that number in Norse pagan mythology, but Odin, god of poetry would have been pleased.)

Poetry on Christian Subjects contains twenty-eight poems, all but six anonymous, ranging in length from one to one hundred stanzas. The earliest, firmly dated to 1153, is Einarr Skúlason's Geisli "Light-beam," a formal praise poem celebrating the miracle-working royal saint King Óláfr Haraldsson. The long poems of a homiletic nature in this volume include: Harmsól "Sun of Sorrow," which urges its hearers to repent their sins as King David and Mary Magdalene did; Leidarvísan "Way Guide," a versified version of the Sunday letter; Líknarbraut "Way of Grace," which focuses on Christ's Passion and the Cross; and — the longest and often considered the pearl of Christian skaldic verse — Lilja "Lily," a poem whose name refers to the Virgin Mary. The introductions and notes include theological and literary analysis as well as philological scholarship and illustrate the close relationship between this poetry and contemporary European/Icelandic Latinity as well as some differences. The majority of the poems in this volume treat the lives of the saints and apostles and the miracles of the Virgin Mary: then as now, hagiography was hot. There are three poems on S. John, one each on S. Peter, S. Andrew, S. Catherine of Alexandria, and S. Eustace/Placidus, three catalogue poems devoted to all the apostles, to all holy men, and to all holy women respectively, and at least seven poems praising Mary. The influence of traditional Norse poetry is strong in two intriguing gnomic and visionary works: Sólárjóð "Song of the Sun," in which a dead Christian appears to offer up grotesque visions of this world and the next; and Hugsvinnsmál "Sayings of the Wise-minded One," a free rendering of the Distichs of Cato.

It is impossible in a short review to do justice to the learning and interpretive range of the separate editors, some of whom have spent several decades working on a given poem. The twenty-eight individual editions in this volume differ most in the Notes section, where some
Commentaries reflect an editor's life-long preoccupation with a particular poem while others are by scholars who generously and more than competently completed the editing of short poems at short notice. I searched for errors and typographical mistakes and came up empty-handed.

There is much in this volume for specialists to mull over: for example, the use of specialized meters for certain themes, changes over time in the formation of kennings, the self-conscious adaptation of prestigious secular praise forms for Christian devotion, the importation of new words such as *manna* "manna" or *edik* "vinegar," and the treatment of foreign personal names. Those outside the field now have a chance to discover for themselves the jagged conglomerate of the sensual and spiritual that is skaldic verse, the delight in hearing the sounds of words work magic. They will observe the royal saint Óláfr Haraldsson giving "meat to the pale-footed blackcock of battle [RAVEN]," the king whose "sun of the sword-hilt [SWORD]" congruously "clove the thin-grown clouds of battle [SHIELDS] at Stiklestad." Men in this verse are "fir-trees of the reindeer of the boat-house of lobsters [SEA>SHIP>SEAFARERS]," "chieftains of the feather-bed of the otter [GOLD>MEN]," "slingers of the fires of Mist <valkyrie> [SWORDS>WARRIORS]," and "bushes of the strong storm of the snake of battle" [SWORD>BATTLE>WARRIORS]." God promises dire punishment "if the trees of the fire of the way of the wake-elk [SHIP>SEA>GOLD>MEN]" work on holy days or do not pay the correct tithe. S. Catherine of Alexandria is referred to nine times by pagan goddess-names, while the empress she converts is identified through valkyrie-names.

The new edition should stimulate research. Historians of art may now be able to provide contemporary parallels for a skald's comparison of the angel Gabriel to a "peacock's beauty." Anglo-Saxons, puzzled by the *facenstafas* "deceitful staves" of *Beowulf* can now ponder the meaning of the cognate "heathen feiknstafir 'terrible staves'" that illuminate the damned in "Song of the Sun." The royal saint Edmund died around 870 fighting heathen Danish vikings: why does the skald of "*Drápa about Holy Men*" depict him lying between two women who, whenever he appears tempted, give him a cold bath? Confusion with another English saint or a reflex of Icelandic attitudes toward English weirdness? The fourteenth-century skald's "Never let me loose, Christ, in the sudden squall of the wind of vices; chastise and tame as often as possible my burning heart with the rod of mercy..." will seem familiar to readers of John Donne's sonnet "Batter my heart, three-person'd God," since the same medieval tradition lies behind both.

Readers of this volume will learn how hard medieval Icelandic audiences had to work to decode skaldic verse, making choices, as the editors do, between alternate meanings and building relationships between parts. The skewed syntax and segmented clauses of the Icelandic poets would have kept their hearers alert and vulnerable, open to a dimension of experience unavailable in prose.

This is a landmark publication, renewing one's faith in the possibilities of scholarship. The editors' methodological rigor, profound learning, and solidly grounded conclusions have placed the study of skaldic verse on a new footing. We owe a debt of gratitude to all those involved in bringing this series into being, not least its five General Editors, among whom the editor of this volume has pride of place.