



J.R.R.  
TOLKIEN  
THE LEGEND OF  
SIGURD  
&  
GUDRÚN

*Edited by* CHRISTOPHER TOLKIEN

# The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún



J. R. R. Tolkien,  
Edited by Christopher Tolkien



# THE LEGEND OF SIGURD AND GUDRÚN

BY  
J.R.R. Tolkien

Edited by Christopher Tolkien

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## FOREWORD

In his essay *On Fairy-Stories* (1947) my father wrote of books that he read in his childhood, and in the course of this he said:

I had very little desire to look for buried treasure or fight pirates, and *Treasure Island* left me cool. Red Indians were better: there were bows and arrows (I had and have a wholly unsatisfied desire to shoot well with a bow), and strange languages, and glimpses of an archaic mode of life, and above all, forests in such stories. But the land of Merlin and Arthur were better than these, and best of all the nameless North of Sigurd and the Völsungs, and the prince of all dragons. Such lands were pre-eminently desirable.

That the ancient poetry in the Old Norse language known by the names of the *Elder Edda* or the *Poetic Edda* remained a deep if submerged force in his later life's work is no doubt recognised. It is at any rate well-known that he derived the names of the dwarves in *The Hobbit* from the first of the poems in the Edda, the *Völuspá*, 'the Prophecy of the Sibyl' – remarking in a lightly sardonic but not uncharacteristic tone to a friend in December 1937:

I don't much approve of *The Hobbit* myself, preferring my own mythology (which is just touched on) with its consistent nomenclature . . . to this rabble of Eddaic-named dwarves out of *Völuspá*, newfangled hobbits and gollums (invented in an idle hour) and Anglo-Saxon runes.

But it is certainly not well-known, indeed scarcely known at all (though it can be discovered from existing publications), that he wrote two closely associated poems treating of the Völsung and Niflung (or Nibelung) legend, using modern English fitted to the Old Norse metre, amounting to more than five hundred stanzas: poems that have never been published until now, nor has any line been quoted from them. These poems bear the titles *Völsungakviða en nýja*, the New Lay of the Völsungs, and *Guðrúnarkviða en nýja*, the New Lay of Guðrún.

My father's erudition was by no means confined to 'Anglo-Saxon', but extended to an expert

knowledge of the poems of the Elder Edda and the Old Norse language (a term that in general use is largely equivalent to Old Icelandic, since by far the greater part of Norse literature that survives is written in Icelandic). In fact, for many years after he became the professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford in 1925 he was the professor of Old Norse, though no such title existed; he gave lectures and classes on Norse language and literature in every year from 1926 until at least 1939. But despite his accomplishment in this field, which was recognized in Iceland, he never wrote anything specifically on a Norse subject for publication – except perhaps the ‘New Lays’, and for this, so far as I know, there is no evidence one way or the other, unless the existence of an amanuensis typescript, of unknown date and without other interest, suggests it. But there survive many pages of notes and draftings for his lectures, although these were for the most part written very rapidly and often on the brink of illegibility or beyond.

The ‘New Lays’ arose from those studies and belong to that time. My inclination is to date them later rather than earlier in his years at Oxford before the Second War, perhaps to the earlier 1930s; but this is scarcely more than an unarguable intuition. The two poems, which I believe to have been closely related in time of composition, constitute a very substantial work, and it seems possible, as a mere guess, since there is no evidence whatsoever to confirm it, that my father turned to the Norse poems as a new poetic enterprise after he abandoned the Lay of Leithian (the legend of Beren and Lúthien) near the end of 1931 (*The Lays of Beleriand*, p.304).

These poems stand in a complex relation to their ancient sources; they are in no sense translations. Those sources themselves, various in their nature, present obscurities, contradictions, and enigmas: and the existence of these problems underlay my father’s avowed purpose in writing the ‘New Lays’.

He scarcely ever (to my knowledge) referred to them. For my part, I cannot recollect any conversation with him on the subject until very near the end of his life, when he spoke of them to me and tried unsuccessfully to find them. But he briefly mentioned the work in two letters to W.H. Auden. In that of 29 March 1967 (*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, edited by Humphrey Carpenter, no.295), thanking Auden for sending his translation of the *Völuspá*, he said that he hoped to send him in return ‘if I can lay my hands on it (I hope it isn’t lost), a thing I did many years ago when trying to learn the art of writing alliterative poetry: an attempt to unify the lays about the Völsungs from the Elder Edda written in the old eight-line fornyrðislag stanza’ (that being the name given to the Norse alliterative stanzaic metre used in the greater number of the ‘Eddaic’ poems, the ‘Old Lore Metre’). And in the following year, on 29 January 1968, he wrote: ‘I believe I have lying about somewhere a long unpublished poem called *Völsungakviða en nýja* written in fornyrðislag 8-line stanzas in English: an attempt to organise the Edda material dealing with Sigurd and Gunnar.’

To ‘unify’, to ‘organise’, the material of the lays of the Elder Edda: that was how he put it some forty years later. To speak only of *Völsungakviða en nýja*, his poem, as narrative, is essentially an *ordering* and *clarification*, a bringing out of comprehensible design or structure. But always to be borne in mind are these words of his: ‘The people who wrote each of these poems [of the Edda] – not the collectors who copied and excerpted them later – wrote them as distinct individual things to be heard isolated with only the general knowledge of the story in mind.’

It may be said, as it seems to me, that he presented his interpretation of the sources in a mode that can be received independently of the doubts and debates of ‘Eddaic’ and ‘Nibelung’ scholarship. The ‘New Lays’ themselves, elaborate poems closely modelled in manner as in metre on the ‘Eddaic’ lay are therefore paramount; and they are presented here in plain texts without any editorial interference.

all else in the book is ancillary.

~~That there should be, nonetheless, so much else in the book requires some explanation. It may be felt that some account should be given of the actual nature of my father's distinctive treatment of the legend. To provide a comprehensive account of the much discussed problems that he sought to resolve would lead all too easily to the first appearance of the 'New Lays' after some eighty years with a great weight of scholarly discussion hung about their necks. This is not to be thought of. But it seems to me that the publication of his poems provides an opportunity to hear the author himself, through the medium of the notes with which he prepared for his lectures, speaking (as it were) in characteristic tones on those very elements of doubt and difficulty that are found in the old narratives.~~

It must also be said that his poems are not at all points easy to follow, and this arises especially from the nature of the old poems that were his models. In one of his lectures he said: '[In](#) Old English breadth, fullness, reflection, elegiac effect, were aimed at. Old Norse poetry aims at *seizing a situation*, striking a blow that will be remembered, illuminating a moment with a flash of lightning – and tends to concision, weighty packing of the language in sense and form . . .' That 'seizing a situation', 'illuminating a moment', without clear unfolding of narrative sequence or other matters with a bearing on the 'moment', will be found to be a marked characteristic of the 'New Lays'; and here some guidance may be looked for in addition to the brief prose statements that he added to some of the sections of the *Völsungakviða en nýja*.

After much deliberation I have therefore provided, at the end of each poem, a commentary, which is intended to clarify references, and passages that may seem obscure; and also to point out significant departures made by my father from the Old Norse sources or between variant narratives, in such cases indicating his views, where possible, by reference to what he said in his lectures. It must be emphasized that nothing in those notes suggests that he had written, or had it in mind to write, poems on the subject himself; on the other hand, as one might expect, congruence between the views expressed in his lecture notes and the treatment of the Norse sources in his poems can often be observed.

As a general introduction in this book to the Elder Edda I have cited at length a more finished lecture with that title; and following this I have contributed brief statements on the text of the poems, the verse-form, and some other topics. At the end of the book I have given a brief account of the origins of the legend and cited some other related verses of my father's.

In thus making much use of my father's notes and draft discussions on 'the Matter of Old Norse', and the tragedy of the Völsungs and the Niflungs, hastily set down and unfinished as they are, I have chosen to try to make this book, as a whole, as much his work as I could achieve. Of its nature it is not to be judged by views prevailing in contemporary scholarship. It is intended rather as a presentation and record of his perceptions, in his own day, of a literature that he greatly admired.

In the commentaries I refer to the two poems as 'the Lay of the Völsungs' (*Völsungakviða*) and 'the Lay of Guðrún' (*Guðrúnarkviða*). But in the title of the book, *The Legend of Sigurd and Guðrún*, I have taken up the subordinate title that my father gave to the *Völsungakviða* on the opening page of the manuscript, *Sigurðarkviða en mesta*, 'the Longest Lay of Sigurd', on which see [p.234](#).

The sections of this book are each preceded by drawings made by Mr Bill Sanderson. These are derived closely from wood carvings that adorn the wide door-posts of the twelfth century church of Hylestad in the south of Norway, which are now preserved in the Oldsaksamlingen of the University of Oslo.

The scenes depict in continuous vertical series on each side of the doorway the story of Sigurd's most famous deed, which in the Lay of the Völsungs is told in section V, *Regin*: the slaying of the dragon Fáfnir, which gave him the name *Fáfnisbani*. The carvings begin with the forging of swords by Regin the smith and their testing. Then follow the slaying of Fáfnir; Sigurd tasting his blood with his finger, which enabled him to understand the voices of the birds (stanza 41 in the Lay); the slaying of Regin (stanza 45); and Sigurd's horse Grani, famous in legend, foal of Sleipnir, the mythical horse that Ódin rode: he is shown here laden with the treasure of the dragon, although not portrayed by that artist as so huge a burden as it is in the Völsunga Saga and in the Lay (stanza 48). The continuous carving ends with a different scene: Gunnar playing the harp in Atli's snake-pit (the Lay of Guðrún, stanza 135): in this version playing it with his feet, his hands being bound (see [p.330](#)).

It will be seen that there is no reference in this book to the operas of Richard Wagner that are known by the general title of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, or *The Ring*.

For his work Wagner drew primarily on Old Norse literature. His chief sources, known to him in translation, were the lays of the Poetic Edda and the Saga of the Völsungs, as they were my father's also. The great epic poem *Das Nibelungenlied*, written about the beginning of the thirteenth century in Middle High German, was not a source for Wagner's libretti in at all the same sense as were the Norse works, though this may be superficially disguised by his use of German name-forms (Siegfried, Siegmund, Gunther, Hagen, Brünnhilde).

But Wagner's treatment of the Old Norse forms of the legend was less an 'interpretation' of the ancient literature than a new and transformative impulse, taking up elements of the old Northern conception and placing them in new relations, adapting, altering and inventing on a grand scale, according to his own taste and creative intentions. Thus the libretti of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, though raised indeed on old foundations, must be seen less as a continuation or development of the long-enduring heroic legend than as a new and independent work of art, to which in spirit and purpose *Völsungakviða en nýja* and *Guðrúnarkviða en nýja* bear little relation.





## INTRODUCTION

Many years ago my father referred to the words of William Morris concerning what he called ‘the Great Story of the North’, which, he insisted, should be to us ‘what the Tale of Troy was to the Greeks’, and which far in the future ‘should be to those that come after us no less than the Tale of Troy has been to us.’ On this my father observed: ‘How far off and remote sound now the words of William Morris! The Tale of Troy has been falling into oblivion since that time with surprising rapidity. But the Völsungs have not taken its place.’

It is obviously desirable that a theme and a mode become so exotic should be ‘introduced’ in some fashion; and for this first publication of my father’s ‘Norse’ poems I have thought that it would be both interesting and suitable if such an introduction could be provided by the author rather than the editor.

Nowhere in his Norse papers is there any reference whatsoever to the New Lays, except for a collection of four small slips of paper of unknown date on which my father hastily wrote interpretative remarks about them (they are given on pages [51](#)–55). While of great interest in themselves they do not constitute any large view of the mode and matter of his Norse lays in an historical context; and in the absence of any such writing I have ventured to include here a substantial part of the opening lecture (with the heading *General Introduction*) of a series in the English Faculty at Oxford titled *The ‘Elder Edda’*.

It is to be borne in mind that this is the draft and record of a spoken lecture to a small audience. No thought of publication could be remotely present. His purpose was to communicate his vision in broad clear strokes. He set the Edda forcibly within a large temporal context, and eloquently conveyed his own conception of this poetry and its place in the history of the North. In other lectures, on particular poems or specific topics, he expressed himself, of course, with caution; but here he could be bold, or even extravagant, not hedging every statement with qualifications in a subject where disagreement over doubtful evidence dogs the steps. Indeed, ‘perhaps’ and ‘probably’, ‘some hold’ and ‘it may be thought’, are notably absent from this account as he wrote it.

My impression is that this was a relatively early writing; and he added later a number of

qualifications to his original statements. There survives also an earlier and much rougher draft lecture with the title *Elder Edda*. This was expressly delivered to a 'club', unnamed; but it was the basis of the much developed lecture of which a part is given here. My father treated that first text in a characteristic manner, retaining phrases amid much rewriting and addition, and produced a new manuscript. It can hardly be doubted that the lecture in its earlier form was what he read, with that title, to the Exeter College Essay Society on 17 November 1926. But how long a time elapsed between the two texts it is impossible to say.

It is primarily in order to hear the voice of the author of the poems presented in this book, writing (in order to speak) personally and vitally of the Poetic Edda, on which he has never been heard since he last lectured on Old Norse at Oxford some seventy years ago, that I print it here, in its later form.

The text is rapidly written and not at all points perfectly legible, and it is here slightly edited and somewhat shortened, with a few explanations added in square brackets and a few footnotes.

# INTRODUCTION TO THE 'ELDER EDDA'

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The poetry that goes by this misleading and unfortunate title attracts occasionally from afar people of various sort – philologists, historians, folklorists, and others of that kidney, but also poets, critics, and connoisseurs of new literary sensations. The philologists (in a wide sense) have as usual done most of the work, and their ardour has not more than usual (probably less than in *Beowulf*) been diverted from at least intelligent appreciation of the literary value of these documents.

It is unusually true here that a real judgement and appreciation of these poems – whose obscurity and difficulty is such that only the devoted labour of many philologists has made them available – is dependent on personal possession of a knowledge of the critical, metrical, and linguistic problems. Without the philologist, of course, we should not know what many of the words meant, how the lines ran, or what the words sounded like: this last is in old Scandinavian verse of possibly more importance even than usual. The poets expended an unusual share of their ingenuity in securing at any rate that the noise of the verse should be fine.

It remains true, all the same, that even robbed of their peculiar and excellent form, and their own tongue whose shape and peculiarities are intimately connected with the atmosphere and ideas of the poems themselves, they have a power: moving many even in school or pre-school days in filtered forms of translation and childish adaptation to a desire for more acquaintance.

There remains too the impact of the first hearing of these things after the preliminary struggle with Old Norse is over and one first reads an Eddaic poem getting enough of the sense to go on with. Few who have been through this process can have missed the sudden recognition that they had unawares met something of tremendous force, something that in parts (for it has various parts) is still endowed with an almost demonic energy, in spite of the ruin of its form. The feeling of this impact is one of the greatest gifts that reading of the Elder Edda gives. If not felt early in the process it is unlikely to be captured by years of scholarly thralldom; once felt it can never be buried by mountains or molehills of research, and sustains long and weary labour.

This is unlike Old English, whose surviving fragments (*Beowulf* especially) – such at any rate has been my experience – only reveal their mastery and excellence slowly and long after the first labour with the tongue and the first acquaintance with the verse are over. There is truth in this generalization. It must not be pressed. Detailed study will enhance one's feeling for the Elder Edda, of course. Old English verse has an attraction in places that is immediate. But Old English verse does not attempt to hit you in the eye. To hit you in the eye was the deliberate intention of the Norse poet.

And so it is that the best (especially the most forcible of the *heroic* Eddaic poems) seem to leap across the barrier of the difficult language, and grip one in the very act of deciphering line by line.

Let none who listen to the poets of the Elder Edda go away imagining that he has listened to voices of the Primitive Germanic forest, or that in the heroic figures he has looked upon the lineaments of his noble if savage ancestors – such as fought by, with, or against the Romans. I say this with all possible emphasis – and yet so powerful is the notion of hoary and primeval antiquity which clings to the name (quite recent) *Elder Edda* in popular fancy (so far as popular fancy may be said to play with so remote and unprofitable a theme at all) that, though the tale ought to begin with the seventeenth century and

learned bishop, insensibly I find myself leading off with the Stone Age.

The Scandinavian lands, archaeology says, have been inhabited since the Stone Age (not to go into niceties of *palaeo* and *neo*). The cultural continuity has never been broken: it has been several times modified and renewed, from the South and East in the main. One seems more justified in Scandinavia – more justified than usual – in saying that most of the people now living there have always been there.

About 400 A.D. or earlier, our inscriptional (Runic) glimpses of the Northern tongue begin. But these people, though speaking a Germanic language – it would seem in a somewhat archaic form – did not take part in the great Germanic heroic age, except by ceasing to be Scandinavian. That is: the peoples whom later we call Swedes, Gautar, Danes, etc., are descendants of people who did not go off as a whole, into the adventure, turmoil, and disasters of that period. Many of the peoples who did go came ultimately out of Scandinavia, but they lost all connexion with it: Burgundians, Goths, Lombards.

Echoes in the form of ‘tidings’, of strange news, and new songs imported ready-made, or made at home from the raw material of news, these peoples did receive from those now obscured and confused events. The material of tale and verse came to them – and found very different conditions in Scandinavian lands to those which produced them: above all they found no wealthy courts in the Southern sense, nor headquarters of powerful warlike forces, no great captains of hosts or kings to encourage and pay for poetic composition. And more, they found a different local store of mythology and stories of local heroes and sea-captains. The local legends and the local myths were modified, but they remained Scandinavian, and they could not if we had them, and still less can the tattered fragments of later disjointed memories of them, be taken as a compensation for the loss of nearly all that belonged to more southerly Germania, least of all as the virtual equivalent of those vanished things. Related they were, but they were different.

Then the matter became confused further by the development of a private Scandinavian heroic age – the so-called Viking age, after 700 A.D. The stay-at-homes took to ranging all over the earth – but without losing hold on their ancient lands and seas. Though courtly conditions then arose, *epic poetry* never developed in those lands. The reasons are little understood – the answers to most really pertinent questions are seldom given – and at any rate we must here rest content with the fact. The causes may be sought in the temper of the times and of the people, and of their language which was the reflexion of them. [It was not](#) until relatively late that ‘kings’ in the North were rich enough or powerful enough to hold splendid court, and when this did come about the development was different – verse developed its local brief, pithy, strophic [i.e. stanzaic], often dramatic form not into *epic*, but into the astonishing and euphonious but formal elaborations of Skaldic verse [see pp. [34–37](#)]. In the Eddaic verse it is seen ‘undeveloped’ (if ‘strophic’ verse could ever anywhere at any time ‘develop’ into *epic* by insensible gradations, without a break, a leap, a deliberate effort) – undeveloped that is on the formal side, though strengthened and pruned. But even here the ‘strophic’ form – the selection of the dramatic and forcible moment – is what we find, not the slow unfolding of an *epic* theme.

The latter, so far as represented, was accomplished in prose. In Iceland, a Norwegian colony, there grew up the unique technique of the *saga*, the prose tale. This was chiefly a tale of everyday life; it was frequently the last word in sophisticated polish, and its natural field was not legend. This of course is due to the temper and taste of the audience rather than the actual meaning of the word – merely something said or told and not sung, and so ‘*saga*’ was also naturally applied to such things as the partly romanticized *Völsunga Saga*, which is quite unlike a typical Icelandic *saga*. To Norse use the Gospels or Acts of the Apostles are a ‘*saga*’.



But in Norway at the time we are looking at Iceland was not founded, and there was no great king court at all. Then Harald Fairhair arose and subdued that proud land of many stubborn chiefs and independent householders – only to lose many of the best and proudest in the process, in war or in the exodus to Iceland. In the first sixty years or so of that colonization some 50,000 came to that island from Norway, either direct or from Ireland and the British Isles. Nonetheless in Harald Fairhair's court began the flourishing time of Norse verse to which Eddaic poetry belongs.

This Norwegian poetry, then, is founded on ancient indigenous mythology and religious beliefs, going back heaven knows how far, or where; legends and folk-tales and heroic stories of many centuries telescoped together, some local and prehistoric, some echoes of movements in the South, some local and of the Viking age or later – but the disentanglement of the various strata in it would require for success an understanding of the mystery of the North, so long hidden from view, and a knowledge of the history of its populations and culture, that we are never likely to possess.

In form – and therefore probably also in some of its older content – it is related to other Germanic things. Of course it is in a Germanic language; but its older metres are closely connected with, say, Old English metre; more – it has formulas, half-lines, not to speak of names, and allusions to places and persons and legends, actually current independently in Old English: that is, it is a descendant of a common Germanic verse and tradition of verse which now escapes us: of neither the themes of this old Baltic verse nor its style have we anything left save the suggestions afforded by the comparison of Norse and English.

But this form in the Edda remained simpler, more direct (compensating for length, fullness, richness by force), than that developed, say, in England. Of course, it is true that however much we emphasize the Norwegian character and atmosphere of these poems it is not free from importation. Actually imported themes – such as pre-eminently the Völsung and Burgundian and Hun stories – not only acquired a leading place in the Edda, but may even be said to have received in exile their finest treatment. But this is because they were so thoroughly naturalized and Norwegianized: the very uprooting had set the tales free for artistic handling unhampered by history or antiquarianism, for recolouring by Northern imagination, and association with the looming figures of the Northern gods.

The only really important modification one must make is in favour of the Goths – difficult as it is to decipher the hints that survive the ages, it is clear that these people of Scandinavian origin but whom fate had marked out for a special history and tragedy were followed step by step by the people of the North, and became with their enemies the Huns the chief themes of poets – so much so that in later days *gotar* remained as a poetic word for 'warriors', when the old tales were overlaid and mingled with other matters. From the Goths came the runes, and from the Goths came (it would appear) [Óðinn](#) (Gautr), the god of runic wisdom, of kings, of sacrifice. And he is really important – for the astonishing fact that he is clearly un-Scandinavian in origin cannot alter the fact that he became the greatest of the Northern gods.

This is a sort of picture of the development. This popular local verse of intricate origin was then suddenly lifted up by the tide of Viking wealth and glory to adorn the houses of kings and jarls. It was pruned and improved, doubtless, in style and manners, made more dignified (usually), but it retained in a unique fashion the simpler pithier temper, a nearness to the soil and to ordinary life, which are seldom found in so close a connexion with the graces of 'court' – that is the mastery of the deliberate and leisured artist, even occasionally the pedantry of the genealogist and philologist. But this is in keeping with what we know of the kings of that court and their men.

It must be remembered that the time was a heathen one – still in possession of special, local pagan traditions which had long been isolated; of organized temples and priesthoods. But 'belief' was

already failing, mythology and still more anything that could be more properly called 'religion' were already disintegrating without direct attack from outside – or perhaps better put, without conquest or conversion and without destruction of temples and pagan organization, for the influence of foreign ideas, and of the sudden rending of the veil over the North (rent by men from within) cannot be dismissed. This was a special transition-period – one of poise between old and new, and one inevitably brief and not long to be maintained.

To a large extent the spirit of these poems which has been regarded as (a branch of) the common 'Germanic spirit' – in which there is some truth: Byrhtwold at Maldon would do well enough in Edda or Saga – is really the spirit of a special time. It might be called *Godlessness* – reliance upon self and upon indomitable will. Not without significance is the epithet applied to actual characters living at this moment of history – the epithet *goðlauss*, with the explanation that their creed was *at trúa á mátt sín ok megin* ['to trust in one's own might and main']. [Author's note, added later: Yet on the reverse it must be remembered that this was applied only to certain commanding and ruthless characters, and would not in any case have been worth saying if many (indeed the bulk of) men had not remained believers and practitioners of pagan worship.]

This applies more to the *heroic*, of course, than the *mythological*. But it is not untrue of the mythological. Such tales of gods are of a kind that can well survive to a time when they are rather the themes of tales than the objects of cults, but yet to a time which has not replaced the gods by anything new, and is still familiar with them and interested in them. Nor of course was *blót* [heathen sacrificial feast] given up. Heathenism was still very strong, though in Sweden rather than in Norway. It had not suffered that uprooting from ancient fanes [temples] and local habitations that is so fatal to it – as it proved in England.

The end of the period began with the violent apostolate of that great heathen figure and hero of the North – the christianizing king Ólaf Tryggvason. After his fall, and the fall of many of the greatest men through him or with him, there was a relapse into heathendom. But this was quickly ended by the no less vigorous but far wiser christianizing efforts of Ólaf the Holy, which at the time when Edward the Confessor was reigning in England left Norway completely christianized, and the heathen tradition destroyed.

The tenacity and conservatism of the North, however, can be measured not only by the efforts which had to be made by such great figures as the Ólafs, but in other smaller ways: such as the survival of the runes, so closely if accidentally associated with pagan traditions, even after the North had learned to write in Latin fashion. This happened chiefly in Sweden, but all over Scandinavia runes remained in use (through direct tradition, not revival) for such things as memorial inscriptions down to the sixteenth century.

Nonetheless, after 1050, certainly after 1100, poetry dependent on the heathen tradition was in old Scandinavia moribund or dead – and this means Skaldic verse whatever its subject, quite as much as lays actually dealing with myths, for the Skaldic verse and language depended upon a knowledge of these myths in writer and hearer, both of whom were normally what we should call aristocratic – nobles, kings and courtiers after the Northern fashion.

In Iceland it survived for some time. There the change over (about the year 1000) had been rather more peaceful and less embittered (a fact probably not unconnected with removal and colonization). In fact poetry became a profitable export industry of Iceland for a while; and in Iceland alone was anything ever collected or written down. But the old knowledge swiftly decayed. The fragments, much disjointed, were again collected – but in an antiquarian and philological revival of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Perhaps it would be more true to say, not antiquarian revival, but kindly burial.

This was a new piety which pieced the fragments together without completely understanding them: indeed we often feel we understand them better. Certainly the old religion and its attendant mythology as a connected whole or anything like a 'system' (if it ever possessed one, as is, within limits, probable) has not been preserved at all, and was certainly not within the reach of the great prose artist, metrical expert, antiquarian and ruthless politician Snorri Sturluson in the thirteenth century. How much is lost can be appreciated by anyone who reflects how little we know now of even the major details of the extremely important temples and their 'cultus' and the priestly organization in Sweden or in Norway.

The 'Younger Edda' or 'Prose Edda' of Snorri Sturluson was a pious collection of fragments – to help in the understanding and making of verse which needed a knowledge of myths – when gentle, even tolerant and ironic, learning had supervened upon the struggle between religions.

After that the gods and heroes go down into their Ragnarök,<sup>\*</sup> vanquished, not by the World-girdling serpent or Fenris-wolf, or the fiery men of Múspellsheim, but by Marie de France, and sermons, medieval Latin and useful information, and the small change of French courtesy.

Yet the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, at the darkest hour, saw a resurrection after Ragnarök almost as if there were fulfilled in it the words which the *Völva* [the sibyl who prophesies in the Eddaic poem *Völuspá*] speaks concerning the rearing of a new earth, and the return of men and gods to find and marvel at the golden pieces in the grass where once were the halls in which the gods had played at chess [see the tenth verse of the poem *The Prophecy of the Sibyl* given in Appendix B].

The discovery of the fallen pieces of the old splendour was often accidental, and the research which led to the recovery proceeded from various motives. In England theological zeal was powerfully blended with the historical and linguistic curiosity which it begot by accident. In the North this was not so. But whatever the motives the result was not only the rescue from the wreck of time of such fragments as we have, but swift recognition of their virtue, and regret for the loss of more. This was specially so with the 'Edda'.

The salvage from the ruins left by natural losses, accidents of time, the heedlessness and forgetfulness of men, and the ravages of war and fanaticism (whether theological or classical) was scanty. Nonetheless the eighteenth century seems to have marked its disapproval of these 'Gothic' bones dug from their graves by two fires which contrived to destroy some part of what had been saved and narrowly missed destroying all the best. In 1728 in the fire at Copenhagen much of what had then been collected went up in smoke. Three years later the Cotton collection in London was partly burnt. *Beowulf* was scorched badly. But it escaped, just – for the embarrassment of later Schools of English. At Copenhagen the finder's own parchment transcript of the manuscript of the Elder Edda seems to have been among the losses. Lost it is at any rate. But the manuscript itself survived. Yet the gods and heroes nearly found a final and fatal Ragnarök, which would have left our knowledge and estimate of northern literature in a totally different state.

When the 'Elder Edda' is mentioned, we practically mean a single manuscript – no. 2365 4° in the Royal Collection in Copenhagen: now known as the *Codex Regius (of the Elder Edda)*. It contains 29 poems. There are 45 leaves of it left. After leaf 32 a gathering, probably of [eight pages](#), has been [lost](#). There appear to have been no losses at beginning and end – where losses frequently occur.

This is all we know about this remarkable survivor of time, fire, and flood. In 1662 King Frederic III of Denmark sent the well-known Thormod Torfæus with an open letter to the celebrated Brynjólfur Sveinsson. Since 1639 Brynjólfur had been bishop of Skálholt in Iceland, and had been a keen collector of manuscripts. Torfæus was commissioned to get his help in collecting for the king materials for ancient history, and any antiquities, curiosities, or rarities that could be found in Iceland. In 1663 the bishop sent the choicest of his collection to the king. Among these now priceless treasures was the Codex Regius. Where the bishop had found it, or what was its previous history is unknown, except that he had picked it up twenty years earlier: for on the front page he had written his monogram and a date (LL 1643, i.e. Lupus Loricatus = Brynjólfur), just as we should scrawl our name and a date on a new and interesting acquisition from a second-hand bookshop.

Two hundred and fifty years have followed\* – of examining, puzzling, construing, etymologizing, analysis, theorizing, arguing and sifting argument, of asserting and refuting, until, short as are its contents, Eddaic ‘literature’ has become a land and a desert in itself. From all this study, amidst a vast disagreement, certain things have reached, more or less, the stage of authoritative consensus of opinion.

[We now know](#), at any rate, that this collection of poems should not be called *Edda* at all. This is a perpetuation of an act of baptism on the part of the bishop in which he acted *ultra vires*. The collection had no comprehensive title at all so far as we know or the manuscript shows. *Edda* is the title of one of the works of Snorri Sturluson (died 1241), a work founded on these very poems, and others now lost like them, and it is the title of that work only, by rights; a work which is concerned primarily, even in the earlier parts which are cast in narrative or dialogue form, with the technicalities of Northern poetry, which for us it rescued from oblivion. The name is therefore quite inapplicable to a collection of actual antique poems, collected largely for their merits as verse, not as exemplars of a craft.

Beyond this we can say little about the manuscript. It appears that the Codex Regius belongs palaeographically to say about 1270 (early in the latter half of the thirteenth century), and is itself apparently a copy of an original belonging to 1200 (some say earlier). It belongs in fact actually as we have it to a period thirty years after the death of Snorri; but even if it were not a fact that Snorri used these very poems substantially as we have them, it is clear enough internally that the matter, the manner, and the language of the poems entitles them to the name ‘Elder’.

As for when they were written, we have no information other than an examination of the poems themselves will yield. Naturally the datings differ, especially in the case of individual poems. None of them, in point of original composition, are likely to be much older than 900 A.D. As a kind of central period which cannot possibly be extended in either direction we can say 850–1050 A.D. These limits cannot be stretched – least of all backwards. Nothing of them can have been cast into the form we know (or rather into the forms of which our manuscript offers us often a corrupt descendant), except for occasional lines, allusions, or phrases, before 800. Doubtless they were afterwards corrupted orally and scribally – and even altered: I mean that in addition to mere corruption producing either nonsense or at least ill-scanning lines, there were actual variants current. But in the main these things were the products of individual authors, who, whatever they used of old tradition, even older poems, wrote new things which had not before existed.

The antiquity and origin of the mythology and legends met in the poems is another matter. In general it is not really so important to criticism (however attractive to curiosity) to know what answers can be made to this sort of question, as it is to remember that wherever they got their material the authors lived in the last centuries of heathenism in Norway and Iceland, and treated their material in the style and spirit of those lands and times. Even formal etymology has seldom much to say,



attractive though I personally find it. Even when, as often happens, we can equate a name with its form in other Germanic languages it does not tell us much. Thus *Jörmunrekkr* is *Ermanaríks*, and his name an echo of the history of the Goths, their power and ruin [see pp.322–23, note to stanza 86]; Gunnarr is Gundahari, and his story an echo of events in Germany in the fifth century [see Appendix A, pp.337–39]. But this does not tell us much of the state in which these tales first reached the North, or the paths (certainly various) they came by. And still less does it help us to unravel the literary problems concerning the various treatment of the Burgundian theme in Scandinavia.

But intriguing as all this questioning is, we may end on the note we struck before: it is not of the first importance. Far more important than the names of the figures, or the origins of the details of the story (except where this helps us to understand what is unintelligible or to rescue a text from corruption) is the atmosphere, colouring, style. These are products only in a very small degree of the origin of the themes: they chiefly reflect the age and country in which the poems were composed. And we shall not be far wrong in taking the mountains and fjords of Norway, and the life of small communities in that disconnected land, as the physical and social background of these poems – a life of a special sort of agriculture, combined with adventurous sea-faring and fishery. And the time: days of the fading of a special, individual, pagan culture, not elaborate materially, but in many ways highly civilized, a culture which had possessed not only (in some degree) an organized religion, but a store of partly organized and systematized legends and poetry. Days of a fading of belief, when in a sudden changing of the world the South went up in flames, and its plunder enriched the wooden halls of the Norse chieftains till they shone with gold. Then came Harald Fairhair, and a great kingship, and a court, and the colonization of Iceland (as an incident in a vast series of adventures), and the ruinous wars of Ólaf Tryggvason, and the dying down of the flame, into the gentle smoulder of the Middle Ages, taxes and trade-regulations, and the jog-trot of pigs and herrings.

It may be that it was with that characteristic flourish that my father ended this lecture; at any rate (though the manuscript text continues, and soon turns to a consideration of individual poems) it seems a good place to end it here.

I append here a number of notes and brief statements on various topics that are best treated separately, as follows.

§1 The ‘Prose Edda’ of Snorri Sturluson

§2 The Saga of the Völsungs (*Völsunga Saga*)

§3 The text of the poems

§4 The spelling of Norse names

§5 The verse-form of the poems

§6 Notes on the poems by the author

# §1 THE 'PROSE EDDA' OF SNORRI STURLUSON

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The name *Edda* properly belongs only to a celebrated work by the Icelander Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241). This is a treatise on the distinctive art of Icelandic poetry which in Snorri's day was dying out: the old metrical rules disregarded, the old mythological knowledge essential to it attacked by a clergy hostile to any survival of heathendom. This book, in its three parts, is a retelling in prose narrative of ancient myths and legends; an account of, and explanation of, the strange diction of the old 'court poetry'; and exemplification of its verse-forms.

In my father's lecture ([p.29](#)) he noted that the application of the name *Edda* by Bishop Brynjólf of Skálholt to the poems of the great Codex that he acquired in 1643 was without historical justification. In Brynjólf's time it had come to be supposed among Icelanders interested in the ancient literature that there must have been 'an older *Edda*' from which Snorri's work was derived. Brynjólf himself wrote in a letter in 1641, before he knew of the existence of the Codex: 'Where now are those huge treasuries of all human knowledge written by Sæmund the Wise, and above all that most noble *Edda*, of which we possess now, beyond the name, scarcely a thousandth part; and that indeed which we do possess would have been utterly lost, had not the epitome of Snorri Sturluson left to us rather the shadow and footprints than the true body of that ancient *Edda*.'

Sæmund the Wise (1056–1133) was a priest whose prodigious learning became a legend, but for the title *Sæmundar Edda* that Brynjólf gave to the Codex there was no foundation. Thus arose the conception of the two *Eddas*, the Poetic or Elder *Edda* and the Prose or Younger *Edda*. Why Snorri's work was named *Edda* is not known, but there have been several explanations: by some it is related to the word *óðr* in the sense 'poem, poetry', as if it meant 'Poetics', by others derived from the place Oddi in south-west Iceland, a centre of Icelandic learning where Snorri grew up.

From the 'Poetic *Edda*' emerged the adjective *Eddaic* (and *Eddic*), used in contrast to *Skaldic* (a modern derivative from the Old Norse word *skáld* meaning 'poet'). Of *Skaldic* verse my father wrote in his lecture on the Elder *Edda* ([p.20](#)): 'It was not until relatively late that "kings" in the North were rich enough or powerful enough to hold splendid court, and when this did come about . . . verse developed its local brief, pithy, strophic, often dramatic form not into *epic*, but into the astonishing and euphonious but formal elaborations of *Skaldic* verse.' This 'court poetry', as it may also be called, was an extraordinarily intricate and distinctive art, with extreme elaboration of verse-forms subject to rules of exacting strictness: 'elaborations', in my father's words, 'in which various kinds of internal and final full-rhyme and half-rhyme both vocalic and consonantal are interwoven with the principles of "weight" and stress and alliteration, with the deliberate object of utilizing to the full the vigour, force and rolling beat of the Norse tongue.' To which must be added the huge poetic vocabulary, and the extraordinary cultivation (described below) of the device of the 'kenning'.

'To us,' he wrote, 'thinking of the Elder *Edda*, "Eddaic" means the simpler, more straightforward language of the heroic and mythological verse, in contrast to the artificial language of the *Skalds*. And usually this contrast is thought of as one of age as well: old simplicity of good old Germanic days, unhappily given up in a new taste for poetry become an elaborate riddle.'

'But the opposition between "Eddaic" and "Skaldic" verse is quite unreal as one of *time*, as between older and younger, as of a fine old popular manner being pushed out by a younger, newer fashion. They are related growths, branches on the same tree, essentially connected, even possibly sometimes by the same hands. *Skalds* can be found to write in *fornyrðislag*, the oldest of old metres; *Skaldic* kennings can be found in *Eddaic* lays.'

‘All that remains true of this contrast of age is the fact that the simpler metres, e.g. *fornyrðislag* and the style that goes with it, are far older, much closer, for instance, to other Germanic things, to Old English verse, than the specially Skaldic verse and manner. The Eddaic poems we have belong to the same period as Skaldic, but the metrical traditions and style they employ carries on still, without fundamental alteration, something of the common Germanic tradition. Old and new in metre rubbed shoulders – it was as we have seen already a transition period, a period of poise between old and new not maintainable for long [see [p.23](#)].’

It is the highly artificial Skaldic poetry that is the subject of Snorri’s instruction in his *Edda*, and indeed by far the greater part of what survives of it owes its survival to him. In the second part of the book, *Skáldskaparmál* (‘Poetic Diction’), he treats above all of kennings, with a great number of exemplifying verses by named skalds: but very many of these kennings are wholly incomprehensible without a knowledge of the myths and legends to which they allude – and such themes are not characteristically the subject of the Skaldic poems themselves. In the first part of the *Edda* (the *Gylfaginning*) Snorri drew extensively on Eddaic poetry; and in the *Skáldskaparmál* also he told the stories on which certain kennings rest. The following is a single example.

*Hvernig skal kenna gull?* How shall gold be named?

Thus: by calling it the Fire of Ægir; the Pine-needles of Glasir; the Hair of Síf; the Head-band of Fulla; Freyja’s Tears; the Drop, or Rain, or Shower of Draupnir [Ódin’s gold ring, from which dropped other rings]; Otter’s Ransom; Forced Payment of the Æsir; . . .

[Following](#) such a list as this, Snorri gave explanations of these locutions.

*Hver er sök til þess, at gull er kallað otrgjöld?* What is the reason that gold is called Otter’s ransom?

It is told that when the Æsir, Ódin and Loki and Hœnir, went out to explore the world they came to a certain river, and they went along the river to a waterfall; and by the waterfall was an otter . . .

And thus it is that we have the story of Andvari’s Gold told both by the author of the *Völsunga Saga* and by Snorri Sturluson (see the Commentary on the Lay of the Völsungs, pp.[188–91](#)); but indeed Snorri here continued his narrative into a résumé of the whole history of the Völsungs.

It remains to add that the celebrity of Snorri’s book in the centuries that followed, and most especially of the *Skáldskaparmál*, led, before the emergence of the Codex Regius, to the term *Edda* being widely used to mean, expressly, the technical rules of the old ‘court’ poetry, or ‘Skaldic’ verse. In those days poets complained of the tyranny of *Edda*, or offered apologies for their lack of proficiency in the art of *Edda*. In the words of Gudbrand Vigfússon: ‘An untaught poet who called a spade a spade, instead of describing it by a mythological circumlocution, would be scouted as “Eddaless”’ (*Eddu-lauss*, ‘having no Eddaic art’). Thus the term ‘Eddaic’, as now used, *in opposition* to ‘Skaldic’, is a perfect reversal of its former [meaning](#).

## §2 THE SAGA OF THE VÖLSUNGS (*Völsunga Saga*)

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The Codex Regius of the Poetic Edda is a collection of poems of great diversity, composed by poets who lived centuries apart; but it was compiled and ordered with intelligent care. Most of the heroic poems are concerned with the story of the Völsungs and the Niflungs; and these the compiler of the collection arranged, so far as the diverse structure and scope of the individual lays allowed him, in a narrative sequence, adding explanatory passages in prose at the beginning and end of many of the lay and narrative links in the course of them.

But much of the material thus arranged is of the utmost difficulty. Poems are disordered or defective, or even patchworks of different origin altogether, and there are very many obscurities of detail; while worst of all, the fifth gathering of the Codex Regius disappeared long ago (see p.28), with the loss of all Eddaic poetry for the central part of the legend of Sigurd.

In this situation, there is an essential aid to the understanding of the Northern legend. This is the *Völsunga Saga*, written, probably in Iceland, in the thirteenth century, though the oldest manuscript is much later: a prose tale of the fate of the whole Völsung race from the far ancestry of Sigmund, father of Sigurd, and continuing on to the fall of the Niflungs and the death of Atli (Attila) and beyond. It is founded both on Eddaic lays that survive and other sources now lost; and ‘it is solely from the lays that it has used,’ my father said in a lecture, ‘that it derives its power and the attraction that it has for all those who come to it,’ for he did not hold the author’s artistic capacity in high regard.

This author was faced with wholly divergent traditions (seen in the preserved Eddaic lays) concerning Sigurd and Brynhild: stories that cannot be combined, for they are essentially contradictory. Yet he combined them; and in doing so produced a narrative that is certainly mysterious, but (in its central point) unsatisfying: as it were a puzzle that is presented as completed but in which the looked for design is incomprehensible and at odds with itself.

In the commentary that follows each poem in this book I have noticed many features in which my father departed from the *Völsunga Saga* narrative, more especially in the case of his Lay of the Völsungs, where the Saga is of much greater importance as a source. He seems not to have set down any critical account of the Saga as a whole, or if he did it has not survived; but comments of his on the author’s work in individual passages will be found in the commentary (see pp.208–11, 221, 244–45).

## §3 THE TEXT OF THE POEMS

It is at once obvious that the manuscript of the two lays is a fair copy intended to be final, for my father’s handwriting is clear and uniform throughout, with scarcely any corrections made at the time of writing (and of very few of his manuscripts, however ‘final’ in intention, can that be said). While it cannot be shown to be the case, there is at any rate no indication that the two poems were not written out consecutively.

It is a remarkable fact that no more than a few pages survive of work on the poems preceding the final text, and those pages relate exclusively to the opening (*Upphaf*, the Beginning) of *Völsungakviða en nýja*, to section I ‘Andvari’s Gold’, and to a small part of section II, ‘Signý’. Beyond this point there is no trace of any earlier drafting whatsoever; but the earlier manuscript material is interesting,



The final manuscript of the poems did however itself undergo correction at some later time. By a rough count there are some eighty to ninety emendations scattered through the two texts, from changes of a single word to (but rarely) the substitution of several half-lines; some lines are marked for alteration but without any replacement provided.

The corrections are written rapidly and often indistinctly in pencil, and all are concerned with vocabulary and metre, not with the substance of the narrative. I have the impression that my father read through the text many years later (the fact that a couple of the corrections are in red ball-point pen points to a late date) and quickly emended points that struck him as he went – perhaps with a view to possible publication, though I know of no evidence that he ever actually proposed it.

I have taken up virtually all these late corrections into the text given in this book.

There are two notable differences in the presentation of *Völsungakviða en nýja* and *Guðrúnarkviða en nýja* in the manuscript. One concerns the actual organization of the poem. The Lay of the Völsung following the opening section *Upphaf* (‘Beginning’) is divided into nine sections, to which my father gave titles in Norse without translation, as follows:

- I Andvara-gull [Andvari’s gold]
- II Signý
- III Dauði Sinfjötla [The Death of Sinfjötli]
- IV Fæddr Sigurðr [Sigurd born]
- V Regin
- VI Brynhildr
- VII Guðrún
- VIII Svikin Brynhildr [Brynhild Betrayed]
- IX Deild [Strife]

I have retained these titles in the text, but added translations, as above, to those which are not simply proper names. In the Lay of Guðrún, on the other hand, there is no division into sections.

To sections I, II, V, and VI in the Lay of the Völsungs, but not to the other five, explanatory prose head-notes are added (perhaps in imitation of the prose notes inserted by the compiler of the Codex Regius of the Edda).

The marginal indications of the speakers in both poems are given exactly as they appear in the manuscript, as also are the indications of new ‘moments’ in the narrative.

The second difference in presentation between the two poems concerns the line-divisions. In *Upphaf*, alone of the sections of the Lay of the Völsungs, but throughout the Lay of Guðrún, the stanzas are written in eight short lines: that is to say, the unit of the verse, the half-line or *vísuorð*, is written separately:

(the opening of *Upphaf*). But apart from *Upphaf* the whole of the Lay of the Völsungs is written in long lines (without a metrical space between the halves):

Of old was an age when Ódin walked

(the opening of *Andvara-gull*). At the top of this page, however, my father wrote in pencil: ‘This should all be written in short line form, which looks better – as in *Upphaf*.’ I have therefore set out the text of the Lay of the Völsungs in this way.

## §4 THE SPELLING OF NORSE NAMES

I have thought it best to follow closely my father’s usage in respect of the writing of Norse names in an English context. The most important features, which appear in his manuscript of the poems with great consistency, are these:

The sound *ð* of voiced ‘th’ as in English ‘then’ is replaced by *d*: thus *Guðrún* becomes *Gudrún*, *Hreiðmarr* becomes *Hreidmar*, *Buðli* becomes *Budli*, *Ásgarðr* becomes *Ásgard*.

As two of these examples show, the nominative ending *-r* is omitted: so also *Frey*, *Völsung*, *Brynhild*, *Gunnar* for *Freyr*, *Völsungr*, *Brynhildr*, *Gunnarr*.

The letter *j* is retained, as in *Sinfjötli*, *Gjúki*, where it is pronounced like English ‘y’ in ‘you’ (Norse *Jórk* is ‘York’).

The only case where I have imposed consistency is that of the name of the god who in Norse is *Óðinn*. In his lecture notes my father naturally used the Norse form (which I have retained in the text of his lecture on the ‘Elder Edda’, p.22). In the carefully written manuscript of the ‘New Lays’, on the other hand, he ‘anglicized’ it, changing *ð* to *d*, but (as generally in all such cases) retaining the acute accent indicating a long vowel. But he used two forms, favouring one or the other in different parts of the Lay of the Völsungs: *Ódin* and *Ódinn*. But in section VI, *Brynhildr*, where the name occurs frequently in the form *Ódinn*, he wrote (stanza 8) *Ódinn bound me*, *Ódin’s chosen*. This is because in the Norse genitive *nn* changes to *ns*: *Óðins sonr*, ‘son of Ódin’.

Seeing that in section VIII, stanza 5, where the name is repeated, *Ódin dooms it; Ódinn hearken!*, my father later struck out the second *n* of *Ódinn*, and since it seems to me that inconsistency in the form of the name serves no purpose, I have settled for *Ódin*. In the case of the name that is in Norse *Reginn* my father wrote *Regin* throughout, and I have followed this.

## §5 THE VERSE-FORM OF THE POEMS

The metrical form of these Lays was very evidently a primary element in my father's purpose. As he said in his letters to W.H. Auden, he wrote in 'the old eight-line *fornyrðislag* stanza', and I give here an abbreviated account of its nature.

There are three metres found in the Eddaic poems, *fornyrðislag*, *malahátt*, and *ljóðahátt* (on this last see the note to the Lay of the Völsungs, section V, lines 42–44, pp.211–13); but here we need only consider the first, in which most of the narrative poems of the Edda are composed. The name *fornyrðislag* is believed to mean 'Old Story Metre' or 'Old Lore Metre' – a name which, my father observed, cannot have arisen until after later elaborations had been invented and made familiar; he favoured the view that the older name was *kviðuhátt*, meaning 'the "manner" for poems named *kviða*', since the old poems in *fornyrðislag*, when their names have any metrical import, are usually called ~*kviða*: hence his names *Völsungakviða* and *Guðrúnarkviða*.

The ancient Germanic metre depended, in my father's words, on 'the utilization of the main factors of Germanic speech, *length* and *stress*'; and the same rhythmical structure as is found in Old English verse is found also in *fornyrðislag*. That structure was expounded by my father in a preface to the revised edition (1940) of the translation of *Beowulf* by J.R. Clark-Hall, and reprinted in J.R.R. Tolkien *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* (1983). In that account he defined the nature of the Old English verse-structure in these words.

The Old English line was composed of two opposed word-groups or 'halves'. Each half was an example, or variation, of one of six basic patterns.

The patterns were made of *strong* and *weak* elements, which may be called 'lifts' and 'dips'. The standard lift was a *long stressed* syllable, (usually with a relatively high tone). The standard dip was an *unstressed* syllable, long or short, with a low tone.

The following are examples in modern English of normal forms of the six patterns:

|   |                            |  |
|---|----------------------------|--|
| A | falling-falling            | <i>knights in   armour</i><br>4 I 4 I      |
| B | rising-rising              | <i>the roar   ing sea</i><br>I 4 I 4       |
| C | clashing                   | <i>on high   mountains</i><br>I 4 4 or 3 I |
| D | <i>a</i> falling by stages | <i>bright   archangels</i><br>4 3 2 I      |
|   | <i>b</i> broken fall       | <i>bold   brazenfaced</i><br>4 3 I 2       |
| E | fall and rise              | <i>highcrested   helms</i><br>4 2 I 4 or 3 |

A, B, C have equal feet, each containing a lift and dip. D and E have unequal feet: one consists of a single lift, the other has a subordinate stress (marked `) inserted.

These are the normal patterns of four elements into which Old English words naturally fell, and into which modern English words still fall. They can be found in any passage of prose, ancient or modern. Verse of this kind differs from prose, *not* in re-arranging words to fit a special rhythm,

repeated or varied in successive lines, but in choosing the simpler and more compact word-patterns and clearing away extraneous matter, so that these patterns stand opposed to one another.

The *selected* patterns were all of approximately equal metrical *weight*<sup>\*</sup>: the effect of loudness (combined with length and voice-pitch), as judged by the ear in conjunction with emotional and logical *significance*<sup>†</sup>. The line was thus essentially a *balance* of two equivalent blocks. These blocks might be, and usually were, of different pattern and rhythm. There was in consequence no common tune or rhythm shared by lines in virtue of being ‘in the same metre’. The ear should not listen for any such thing, but should attend to the shape and balance of the halves. Thus *the róaring séa rólling lándward* is not metrical because it contains an ‘iambic’ or a ‘trochaic’ rhythm, but because it is a balance of B + A.

These patterns are found also in *fornyrðislag*, and can be readily identified in my father’s Norse lays as for example in stanza 45 of the Lay of Gudrún (p.268), lines 2–6:

- A rúnes of héaling
- D (a) wórds wéll-gràven
- B on wóod to réad
- E fást bìds us fáre
- C to féast gládlly

In the variations on the ‘basic patterns’ (‘overweighting’, ‘extension’, etc.) described in my father’s account there are indeed differences in Old Norse from Old English, tending to greater brevity; but I will enter only into the most radical and important difference between the verse-forms, namely, that all Norse poetry is ‘strophic’, or ‘stanzaic’, that is, composed in strophes or stanzas. This is in the most marked contrast to Old English, where any such arrangements were altogether avoided; and my father wrote of it (see p.7): ‘In Old English breadth, fullness, reflection, elegiac effect, were aimed at. Old Norse aims at seizing a situation, striking a blow that will be remembered, illuminating a moment with a flash of lightning – and tends to concision, weighty packing of the language in sense and form and gradually to greater regularity of form of verse.’

‘The norm of the strophe (for *fornyrðislag*),’ he said, ‘is four lines (eight half-lines) with a complete pause at the end, and also a pause (not necessarily so marked) at the end of the fourth half-line. But, at least as preserved, the texts in the manuscripts do not work out regularly on this plan, and a great shuffling and lacuna-making has gone on among editors (so that one can never tell to a strophe or two what references refer to in different editions).’

Noting that this variability in the length of the strophes occurs in some of the earlier and least corrupt texts, and that ‘*Völundarkviða*, undoubtedly an ancient poem, is particularly irregular and particularly plagued by editors (who are much more daring and wilful in Old Norse than in Old English),’ he accepted the view that, in the main, this freedom should be seen as an archaic feature. ‘The strict strophe had not fully developed, any more than the strict line limited syllabically’; in other words, the strophic form was a Norse innovation, and developed only gradually.

In my father’s Lays the strophic form is entirely regular, and the half-line tends to brevity and limitation of syllables.

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