

A43

# MEDIEVAL FOLKLORE

An Encyclopedia of  
Myths, Legends, Tales,  
Beliefs, and Customs

*Volume 1: A-K*



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## Eddic Poetry

The mythological and heroic poetry of medieval Scandinavia.

These poems concern themselves with three main topics: mythology, particularly the exploits of the gods and their relationship with other groups such as giants; ethics and codes of behavior; and the heroic North. One can divide the Eddic corpus into three groups. There are 29 main Eddic poems found in the primary manuscript, and a thirtieth, *Baldrs draumar* (Baldr's Dreams), is often added to this central corpus. Most Eddic compilations include other poems as well in what is known as the "Eddic Appendix," such as the *Rigsthula*, *Hyndluljod*, *Hlödskvida*, and *Grottasöngur*. Finally, a group of poems and stanzas taken from the *fornaldarsögur* (legendary sagas) is called the Eddica Minora.

The primary manuscript for the Eddic poetry, containing the main 29 poems, is the *Codex Regius*. Codicological evidence suggests a date of 1270 for the composition of this work. This manuscript, discovered by Bishop Brynjolf Sveinsson in 1643, was originally attributed to Saemund Sigfusson, thus explaining the frequently confusing allusions to both the *Poetic Edda* and Saemund's *Edda* for the Eddic poems. This attribution has been abandoned. The *Poetic Edda*, or *Elder Edda* as it is also known, is distinct from *Snorra Edda*, or the *Prose Edda* as it is known in English. This latter text, written by Snorri Sturluson in the early part of the thirteenth century, includes an elaboration of many of the myths found in the *Poetic Edda*. Indeed, there has been considerable debate concerning the relationship between Snorri's work and possible earlier written Eddic poems.

A general logic governs the placement of the poems in the *Codex Regius* manuscript. Poems in the first section recount stories about the gods, the Aesir. The work is introduced by the *Voluspa* (Sibyl's Prophecy), which chronicles the fate of the gods, detailing the events at the end of the world. Next follow three poems about the god Odin, a poem about the god Frey, and then five poems about the god Thor. The second large section of the manuscript deals with the heroic lays of Sigurd, and these poems generally follow a chronological pattern. They are joined together by short prose interludes.

The word *edda* used to describe these poems is actually borrowed from the title of Snorri's work. The origins of the word are somewhat obscure, and several etymologies have been suggested. Some contend that the word derives from *óðr*, meaning "poetry" and by extension "poetics." Another suggestion is the

word *Oddi*, the name of a farm and literary center where Snorri received some education. And yet a third suggestion is *edda*, a word meaning "great-grandmother." The myths would then be stories of a great-grandmother. A final suggestion is the derivation from the Latin *edere*, "to produce," much like the derivation of *kredda* (creed) from *credere*, "to believe."

There are four main meters of the Eddic poems. The most common of these is *fornyrðislag*, or "old way meter." In this meter each stanza consists of eight half lines (four long lines) of four or five syllables each. The stanzas, in turn, are broken into two equal units of four half lines, the *helmingar* (singular *helmingr*), each of which forms a syntactic unit expressing a complete idea. The first half line of each long line has one or two syllables referred to as the *studdlar*, or supports, followed by a single alliterating syllable that generally falls on the first stressed syllable of the second half line. This syllable is known as the *höfuðstafr*, or main pillar. Alliteration occurs either in consonants with like consonants or any vowel with any other vowel. The stanzaic form of the *Edda* contrasts notably with the stichic forms in early Indo-European and Germanic verse, such as the *Hildebrandslied* (Lay of Hildebrand) or *Beowulf*. The earliest Eddic poems have varying stanza lengths, possibly marking the transition from stichic forms to stanzaic forms. The *ljóðaháttur*, or song meter, is also stanzaic but consists of stanzas of six lines. Each *helming* consists of two half lines, followed by a full line that alliterates with itself. The *galdralag* is a variation on *ljóðaháttur* and is associated with magic. It includes a repetition of the long line in each *helmingr*, often incorporating a variation of that line. The final, and least frequent, of the Eddic meters is *málaháttur*, or speech meter. Generally similar to the *fornyrðislag*, it has a longer half line. While scholars often try to make clear distinctions between Eddic verse and skaldic verse, it is not clear that such a distinction was made by medieval Scandinavians. In general, however, Eddic poems tend to have a more distinct narrative component, do not follow the strict rules of syllable counting that characterize the skaldic forms, and make far less use of kennings—metaphors forged from compounding words (e.g., "whale-road" for the tempestuous sea).

There has been significant debate surrounding the composition and transmission of the Eddic poems. Since they are considered to be of considerable value in the study of pre-Christian Scandinavia, a great deal of effort has been expended on determining the oral roots of the poetry. The Parry-Lord model of oral-formulaic composition had significant influence on the theorizing of these oral origins for the Eddic corpus in the pagan period. Because of the lack of significant variants of many of the Eddic poems, much of this type of investigation has been inconclusive. It appears that, rather than showing the significant variation characteristic of oral epic forms, such as those studied by Albert Lord and Milman Parry, the Eddic poems had a rather stable form and were quite likely learned and performed from memory, with little if any formulaic recomposition.

See also: Burgundian Cycle; *Fornaldarsögur*; Scandinavian Mythology; Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*

References and further reading: Major scholarship on the subject includes R. J. Glendinning and H. Bessason, eds., *Edda: A Collection of Essays* (1983); J. Harris, "Eddic Poetry," in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, ed. C. J. Clover and J. Lindow (1985); A.

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—Timothy R. Tangherlini

## English Tradition: Anglo-Saxon Period

The folkloric culture of the English before the Norman invasion of 1066.

### Historical Context

Anglo-Saxon folk culture has its origins among the Continental Germanic peoples of northern Europe, but its specifically English tradition begins with their migration to Britain. Historians now think this migration may have begun as early as the fourth century, though an older tradition has it that the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes came to this former Roman province in 449. Soon afterward the migration inspired myths of origin that persisted throughout the Anglo-Saxon period in lore and literature. The pagan Anglo-Saxons eventually overran England (from *Engla-land*, "land of the Angles"), wiping away most of Roman Christianity until they were converted by missionaries coming separately from Ireland and from the Continent. As related by the historian Bede writing in 731, the conversion of Anglo-Saxon England was for the most part slow, uneven, halting, and even at times reversed. Gradually, however, churches were consecrated throughout the land, and great monasteries were founded, monasteries that became some of the most important centers of learning in Europe. Consequently, Anglo-Saxon culture became an increasingly diverse mixture of the older lore and customs of the North combined, at least among the educated, with the Latin culture from the South consisting mainly of classical and Christian writings.

This early English culture was disrupted in 793 when the Vikings began raiding, and later invading, throughout the British Isles. Their advance was eventually halted by the military victories of Alfred the Great (849–899), who then labored to restore the high level of learning that England had enjoyed before these invasions. And even though Viking raids resumed in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, the periods of peaceful relations were sufficient for an Anglo-Scandinavian culture to develop in the North. The conversion of the Vikings to Christianity encouraged their assimilation, and by the time of the Norman Conquest (1066) there was little to distinguish between English and Scandinavian elements at the level of folk culture.

### Social Context

Even with persistent warfare, the essential ordering and rhythms of the predominantly rural society remained fairly constant, as indicated by comparison of early settlement and landholding patterns established by archaeological