

Jónas Kristjánsson  
Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi

#### STAGES IN THE COMPOSITION OF EDDIC POETRY

The majority of Eddic poems, as you know, are only preserved in the Codex Regius. This applies particularly to the heroic poems. Some of the mythological poems are also included in the fragment of a sister-manuscript to the Codex Regius preserved in the Arnarnagænan Collection with the number AM 748 I 4to. There are other parallel texts to poems in the Codex Regius in the version of Völuspá in Hauksbók, and in various verses quoted in Snorri's Edda, Völsunga saga and Norna-Gests þátr.

The following poems are usually considered to be Eddic poems, though they are only preserved in other manuscripts than the Codex Regius:

Baldurs draumar (in the above-mentioned fragment AM 748 I 4to).

Rígsþula (in the Codex Wormianus of Snorri's Edda).

Gróttasöngur (in the Codex Regius of Snorri's Edda and in the Utrecht manuscript).

Hyndluljóð and the Shorter Völuspá (in Flateyjarbók).

Hlöðskviða, or the Battle of the Goths and Huns (in Hervarar Saga).

Grógaldur and Fjölsvinnsmál (in various paper manuscripts).

There is a lacuna in the Codex Regius of the Eddic Poems which starts towards the end of Sigdrífumál and continues some way into the poem that is sometimes referred to as The Long Lay of Sigurðr (Sigurðarkviða hin meiri), sometimes as the Fragment of a Sigurðr Lay (Brot af Sigurðarkviðu), sometimes just as the Fragment (Brot), sometimes as the Old Lay of Sigurðr (Sigurðarkviða hin forna) -- and it has been given even more names. It would be desirable to agree a fixed name for this poem, and it would seem most appropriate to call it the Old Lay of Sigurðr (Sigurðarkviða hin forna), since it does appear to be the most archaic of the poems that deal with Sigurðr and the Volsungs -- though I do not actually believe it to be the oldest poem in the world.

It is thought that what is lost from the Codex Regius is a single gathering of eight leaves. On the basis of what is included on the eight leaves following the lacuna, it can be calculated that there must have been lost about 260 stanzas together with perhaps a few passages in prose, or the equivalent of about six heroic poems of average length. Material from the lost poems has been preserved in Völsunga saga and in part in Norna-Gests þátr.

Before going any further, I would like to say a few words about a theory that has been very fashionable in recent years, according to which the Eddic poems are considered comparable to Serbo-Croat folk-poems or songs cultivated down to the present day in Yugoslavia. The American scholars Milman Parry and his pupil Albert B. Lord have studied these poems -- if that is the right word for them -- and Lord has published a well-known book about them called *The Singer of Tales*. Now I admit that Serbo-Croat is actually one of the languages that I myself am unable to read, but to judge from the descriptions, the nature of these compositions is that particular performers know the content of the stories and also a large number of fixed collocations of words or "formulas" which are used to describe particular events, such as battles; their performances then consist of the use of these formulas, linked together by words that vary from performance to performance. After the appearance of Lord's book the question came to be considered whether the Eddic poems had perhaps not been "performed" in the same way in oral tradition. In these poems too one can find various collocations of words or formulas that come again and again, not only within the corpus of Eddic poetry, but also in some cases in various other ancient Germanic poems, for instance "Ár var alda", "jörð ok upphiminn", and so on. Some people have taken this and, applying it to the Eddic poems, have become convinced that they are of the same kind as the Serbo-Croat songs, that is that they did not have any fixed form until they were written down. People knew the content and a number of fixed formulas, but each time a poem was recited or performed it was different. Some studies have been done on these lines, and I am sorry to say that in my opinion the success of the results has been proportionate to the shallowness of the research.

The truth about the origin and preservation of Eddic poems is quite different from the rubbish that successive people have churned out about it in recent years. Let us just look at the first poem in the Codex Regius, *Völuspá*. Even though it contains one or two turns of phrase that are found elsewhere, a poem like this did not come into being all of a sudden, by

improvisation -- and much less can it have been performed in one form one day and with quite different wording the next. It is obvious that this poem was from the beginning carefully thought out as content and polished in form. It was not gradually arranged and shaped as it passed from generation to generation until it received its written form in the Codex Regius. On the contrary, it was corrupted gradually, individual stanzas were forgotten, maybe others added. The original content was not preserved in continually changing form. The opposite is true: the original material has been jumbled in oral tradition in spite of its fixed form. That is what always happens when poems remain any length of time in men's memories -- especially if they are rather obscure, like *Völuspá*, which is moreover the product of a vanished culture, the heathen tradition. Yet there remains enough of its philosophical reflections for us to gain some perception of the beliefs and attitudes of former times, and enough pure poetry to move our souls deeply:

Sér hon upp koma	She sees rise up
öðru sinni	a second time
jörð ór ægi	earth from sea
iðjagræna,	ever green;
falla fossar,	waters fall,
flýgr örn yfir,	eagle flies above
sá er á fjalli	who on the mountain
fiska veiðir.	catches fish.

In what follows I shall be dealing especially with the age of the Eddic poems, and so it was necessary to begin with these introductory remarks. When speaking of the age of a poem, I have in mind primarily the time when the poet first composed it in his mind, recited it in the presence of others, and passed it on to them. But I shall also refer occasionally to the time of the recording of the poems, when it may be considered probable that they were set down in writing. Sometimes these two things may have taken place together, that is a poem may have been written down as it was composed. This is most likely to have been the case with those Eddic poems that are described as "young", and I shall say more about this later.

Correct chronology is the foundation of all historical research. This was well understood by Ari the Wise when he established the basis of the chronology of the early history of Iceland. Determining the age of the Eddic poems is a very difficult task, as is bound to be the case in the circumstances: we are dealing with a distant past, anonymous authors, and few

facts to go on. One may add that determining their age is as important as it is problematical. However we view the poems, their age is always most significant. It is impossible to view them as isolated phenomena, they must always be seen in some way in the light of their environment. If we wish to regard them as sources of knowledge about a past age or about the culture of their time, then their age is all-important -- for instance we need to know whether a poem about heathen gods was composed in heathen times or was a work composed by a Christian with little or no foundation based on reliable sources. If we wish to regard them as literature, then we must always take account of their context -- other literature from the same or an earlier period, the culture of the time, social conditions, the aims of the poet and so on.

I shall give some examples of why this is so. If in *Rígsþula* we find the concepts of a heathen Icelander of human progress and nobility, if in it there are the burgeoning thoughts of the springtime of the Viking Age (ef "þar vakir allur vorhugur víkingaldar") as Sigurður Nordal puts it, then it cannot have been composed in the twelfth century as Andreas Heusler thought, much less in the thirteenth as Jan de Vries and Klaus von See think most likely. Conversely, if in *Drymskviða* there is the influence of ballads which were not current in Iceland before the thirteenth century at the earliest, then the poem cannot have been "composed in heathen times" as Einar Ól. Sveinsson thought -- and Jónas Kristjánsson too, for that matter.

Thus there is a danger, if we do not know the age of the poems with some degree of precision, that our research may turn out to be not just futile, but downright ridiculous, should it happen that the correct date came to be established with certainty -- though indeed there is not much danger of that.

Now I would like to give some account of the opinions of certain scholars on the dates of the poems in the Edda, though I shall have to do so very selectively. A great number of studies have been published on individual poems. In general it may be said that more recent scholars have been extraordinarily eager to make the poems younger, in some cases enormously younger, even those which earlier have been considered to be fully heathen and of immense age, such as for example *Hávamál*. It is of course not possible to deal now with these special studies of individual poems except in a very limited way, so I shall base what I have to say on the two most recent comprehensive surveys of the Eddic poems, both of which were published about two or two and a half decades ago. These are in *Íslenzkar bókmenntir í fornöld* by

Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1962) and *Altnordische Literaturgeschichte* by Jan de Vries -- the second, fully revised edition (1964--7).

Let us take first the mythological poems. There are usually considered to be fourteen of these, only three of which are not included in the *Codex Regius*. These three are *Baldrs draumar* in the *Arnarnagænan* manuscript, and *Hyndluljóð* together with the *Shorter Völuspá*; these two are actually preserved in *Flateyjarbók* as if they were a single poem.

Einar Ól. Sveinsson divides these poems into three groups. First the older mythological poems, under which he includes eight poems, second the later ("ungleg") mythological poems, under which he includes four. Now I would like to invite you to look at the first handout, where it is set out more clearly. Between the older and the later poems he places two poems under the heading "Conflict of faith" ("*Trúdarbrátt*"). That is, he considers that they were composed in the transition period between heathendom and Christianity. Nevertheless it is clear that he considers that these poems, *Lokasenna* and *Völuspá*, belong more closely with the "older" group.

Now let us look at Jan de Vries's dating. He considers only five mythological poems to have been composed in heathen times, as opposed to eight, or rather ten according to Einar Ól. Sveinsson. All the other mythological poems, of which there are nine, he pushes right forward past the middle of the twelfth century. This involves a basic difference of opinion which fundamentally affects our entire perception and evaluation of these poems. It is a question of whether they reveal to us genuine heathen tradition or whether they are some sort of "artificial" heathendom made up by Christians.

The reason why Jan de Vries assumes there to have been a gap of time in the composition of mythological poems is primarily that he bases his deductions on the history of skaldic poetry, most of which is by named poets so that it is comparatively easy to date it with fair precision. Skaldic poets avoid heathen kennings, that is kennings that include the names of gods -- *Óðinn's* storm for battle, battle-*Týr* for warrior and so on -- for the first century or so after the Conversion, but revive them again when Christianity has been firmly established, and from then on such kennings live on in *rímur* for centuries, as everyone knows. In the same way de Vries believed that Christians would at first hardly have brought themselves to compose poems about heathen gods, but that later they may well have done that, for entertainment and historical interest, in the same way as Snorri Sturluson tells mythological stories in prose in his *Edda*. But Einar Ólafur had no need to assume the

existence of such a gap since he did not think there were any mythological poems that were very young.

I am taking the heroic poems to be 23 in number, of which four are not in the Codex Regius: the Battle of the Goths and Huns, Gróttasöngur, Grógaldur and Fjölsvinnsmál. Perhaps you would now look at the second handout. Einar Ólafur divides these poems into two groups, the older heroic poems and the younger ones ("unglegri hetjukvæði"). In the older group he includes eleven poems, in the younger nine or eleven. He gives special treatment to Grípisspá, which he considers to be beyond all question young: "It is impossible for the poem to be older than from the twelfth century" ("Eldra en frá 12. öld er kvæðið fráleitt") he says (p. 457). "It is younger than pretty well all the poems dealt with in this volume ..." ("Það er yngra en flestöllum kvæðum, sem fjallað er um í þessu bindi ...").

Here we find a similar situation to before. De Vries puts only five poems in his oldest group, though these are to be sure all in Einar Ól. Sveinsson's group of older poems. But then come poems from a period in which Einar Ólafur has no heroic poems, and finally eight poems, besides Grípisspá, Grógaldur and Fjölsvinnsmál, younger than from about the middle of the twelfth century, while Einar Ólafur considers scarcely any heroic poem to be as young as that.

There is another interesting thing that arises out of this comparison. Einar Ólafur assumes there to have been continuity in the composition of mythological poetry (unless one takes the late appearance of Hyndluljóð and the Shorter Völuspá as an aftermath), but on the other hand, as you will see from the handout, a gap of approximately half a century in the composition of heroic poetry. Jan de Vries assumes a gap of about 150 years in the composition of mythological poems, from the Conversion down to about the middle of the twelfth century, but considers for his part that heroic poems went on being composed more or less continuously during this period. I shall return to this point in a moment.

I would like to emphasise, though it was impossible to make it clear on the handout, that Einar Ólafur treads very warily in all his statements about the age of the poems. He does not deny, for instance, that the "younger" heroic poems could well be somewhat younger than is indicated on the handout. His dating is usually based on comparison with various skaldic poems from the period, in which parallels of wording are found, and the skaldic poems can generally be dated fairly precisely. But clearly Eddic poets could easily have known court poems of the

preceding generation, and Einar Ólafur is well aware of this. -Some people may think it a pity that he has not given more definite decisions on various problems. But it was his policy in his scholarly writing to tread carefully, not to assert more than he was able to demonstrate. It was his hope that in this way research would gradually progress and solutions be found to many of the problems that still remain unsolved about the early literature of Iceland.

Icelanders who have written about the Eddic poems in recent times have in general put forward similar ideas about their dating to those of Einar Ól. Sveinsson. This applies earlier to Sigurður Nordal in his book *Íslenszk menning* (1943) and later to Jónas Kristjánsson in his *Eddas and Sagas*. Jan de Vries's literary history is a good representative of what has been written in other countries about the age of the Eddic poems over the last few years and decades. Some scholars go even further than he in "rejuvenating" particular poems, and consider for example that Hávamál, Völuspá and Gróttasöngur did not come into existence before the thirteenth century, while de Vries considered them to be from the tenth century, as you can see from the handout. I am not therefore doing a great injustice to many people if I take de Vries as a kind of common denominator of non-Icelandic Eddic scholars of the present day.

Now you may well be asking, have I nothing new to offer regarding the dating of Eddic poems? Do I simply endorse what Einar Ól. Sveinsson has written without further comment?

My first answer would be that Einar Ólafur treads warily in these matters, refuses to assert too much, as I have already said. One way then would be to be more emphatic, to make more definite judgements than he has done. It is also my intention to compress a little his scheme of the mythological poems, but on the other hand to expand rather his scheme of the heroic poems, or to shift the younger poems a shade closer to us in time. I cannot here go into detail about individual poems, but I shall offer a scheme that is extremely simple -- but which does not for that reason necessarily have to be wrong. I divide the Eddic poems into three groups:

1. Mythological poems, composed in heathen times before the introduction of writing.
2. Old heroic poems, also composed before the introduction of writing.
3. Young heroic poems, composed in Christian times after the introduction of writing.

Snorri Sturluson in his *Edda* quotes many mythological poems and puts them into the mouths of the gods themselves. They

can scarcely then have been straight hot off the press -- can they? It is my view that the burden of proof -- or of disproof -- lies on those who consider the mythological poems to be young, some sort of artificial representations, re-creations of the old world by Christians.

Even though I cannot here go into detail about individual poems, I would still like to make up the divine number by mentioning three poems which because of their high quality and renown have been the particular targets of the rejuvenators. These are *Skírnismál*, *Drymskviða* and *Rígsþula*.

*Skírnismál* is one of the finest and best known of the mythological poems of the Edda, and a great deal has been written about it. Best known is Magnus Olsen's study of 1909; this was basically the content of the first lecture that he delivered at the University of Oslo after he succeeded to the post of another great Eddic scholar, Sophus Bugge. Magnus Olsen maintained that *Skírnismál* had been sung or recited at religious ceremonies to symbolise the union of the sun-god Freyr with the earth-goddess Gerðr, a religious drama that formed part of the ritual of fertility-worship. Such procedures are of course well known among many ancient peoples (*hieros gamos*, the divine marriage). In accordance with this theory Olsen of course is assuming that the poem was from heathen times. But various others have maintained, with Jöran Sahlgren in the forefront of the troop, that it is merely a secular love-poem, extremely young and related to the ballads; and they cite as evidence for this the highly developed sensibility which approaches sentimentality.

But Snorri Sturluson knew the poem -- probably even more of it than is preserved in the *Codex Regius* -- and summarises its content and quotes the final stanza, so it must be older than the ballads. It is another matter that most people will now be reluctant to believe that the poem is some sort of dramatic text intended for performance in a religious ritual. On this point Anne Holtsmark writes: "It is a poet's literary interpretation of the "*hieros gamos*" which was part of the Freyr-rites, based on genuine mythological motives to which we find parallels in other religions. The poem must therefore have come into being while that cult was still alive."

In various places in Scandinavia there have been found small gold plates with a man and woman depicted on them looking into each other's eyes and sometimes holding the branch of a tree between them. Magnus Olsen was the first who linked these depictions to Freyr and Gerðr, and this idea is so charming that it is impossible to do other than accept it.



Great zeal has been employed by Hallvard Magerøy both recently and earlier on to make *Drymskviða* as young as possible, and to be sure he has had many predecessors and followers. The principal reasons for the poem being supposed to be late are these:

1. In the poem the gods are treated with more disrespect than a heathen author would permit himself to use.
2. The poem has a high degree of unity and seems to be well preserved; this indicates that it was not transmitted orally over a long period, but makes it much more likely that it was in fact written down as it was composed.
3. The repetitions in the poem are very reminiscent of folk-poems and ballads which do not appear until the late Middle Ages.
4. The poem's metre has various late characteristics.
5. Snorri does not mention the poem in his Edda and does not use the story that it tells. (Peter Hallberg believes that the reason for this is that Snorri was the author of the poem.)

These arguments do not seem to me very significant. The first relates to the disrespect or mockery which is directed at the gods, and I would not make much of that. Ares and Aphrodite get no better treatment in the song of Demodocus in the *Odyssey*, book 8, where Hephaistos, Aphrodite's husband, ties her and her lover up in the very act of adultery and then summons all the gods to witness their behaviour -- "and yet Greek heathendom had many centuries of life left to run when this was composed".

The argument about the poem's good state of preservation can be turned around: the poem has been preserved so well because it had such a high degree of unity and extensive repetitions and formulaic expressions so that it was easy to remember it correctly. But such repetitions are certainly not exclusive to folk-poems and ballads; moreover those poems seem not to have been known in Iceland until very much later, according to the experts on them. At any rate *Drymskviða* cannot be younger than the thirteenth century, since it was written down in the *Codex Regius* about 1280 -- and this was probably not the first time that it was copied down.

There is absolutely no significance in the claim that there are late characteristics to be found in *Drymskviða*'s irregular metre, such as the so-called incomplete lines ("ok fnasaði", "og erindi"), or the too-frequent incidence of rhyme compared with what is usual in the older Eddic poems (e.g. *hvassara* -- *breiðara* -- though in fact there is no rhyme here

to the Icelandic ear!). The "late" characteristics that appear in the metre of poems in Eddic style that are demonstrably young, such as the work of Sturla Þórðarson, are of a different kind.

It proves nothing that Snorri does not quote *Drymskviða* or use the material in it. The reason could be that he could not find in it the explanation for any kennings, and his purpose in narrating mythological stories was primarily to give the background to poetic diction, as everyone knows. And we antiquators of eddic poems claim that there is evidence of echoes of this poem here and there in Snorri's work, as Einar Ólafur has pointed out.

*Rígsþula* is not in the Codex Regius of the Eddic poems; it is only preserved in the Codex Wormianus of Snorri's Edda. This manuscript is some hundred years younger than the Codex Regius, which gives the rejuvenators even greater possibilities than usual. It tells of a god called Rígr who travelled around the world of men; in a prose introduction to the poem we are told that this god was really Heimdallr. He visits three couples: Xi and Edda (great-grandfather and great-grandmother), Afi and Amma (grandfather and grandmother), and Father and Mother. He stayed three nights with each of them, sleeping between the husband and wife each time. So it came about after nine months that a son was born to each of the women. Edda's son was called Thrall and became the ancestor of all slaves. Amma's son was called Karl and was the ancestor of churls or peasants. Mother's son was called Jarl and was the ancestor of earls. Jarl's youngest son was called Konr ungr. He was the outstanding one among his brothers, surpassed his father in runic and other lore and inherited the name of Rígr (which is derived from the Irish language where it meant "king"). Unfortunately the end of the poem is lost, but it is clear that Konr ungr was destined to be the ancestor of kings (*konungar*).

There is great disagreement over the dating of this poem, the differences amounting to as good as four centuries, from ca. 900 to ca. 1300. The rejuvenators have found in it, as usual, both irregularities of metre and late loan-words. More than that, they even find late fashions in hairstyles or haircuts: when it says of Afi that "skör var fyrir enni" ("the lock was over his brow"), this is supposed to relate to the period when the poem is held to have been composed, i.e. the thirteenth century, because then it was customary for men to wear fringes. Presumably this is deduced from the fact that it is never stated in the sagas that the hair fell over the faces of saga-heroes when they were fighting. It is also argued that the ideas in the poem correspond to those of medieval Christians, who must have

been trying to work out how mankind had divided itself into different social classes when in the beginning everyone had been of equal birth as descendants of Adam and Eve. The trouble is that nowhere in Christian writings is there to be found anything quite comparable to what the poem says, and anyway the very idea of such multiple adultery is not particularly Christian.

On the other hand we antiquators of Eddic poems can also find various things in the poem to support a very early dating. At the point where the text breaks off there is a crow telling Konr ungr about how Danr and Danpr have "splendid halls", and it may be presumed that it went on to advise him to wage war against them or to seek himself a wife among them. Now it was stated in Skjöldunga saga, which only survives in the extracts made by Arngrímur Jónsson "the learned" in the seventeenth century: "Rígr was a great ruler. He married Dana, daughter of Danpr at Danpsstaðir. He was the first to have the name of king in his land." This is in all likelihood derived from Rígsþula. Skjöldunga saga was composed around A.D. 1200, so that Rígsþula cannot be younger than the twelfth century.

In the first stanza of Völuspá there is mention of "the greater and lesser sons of Heimdallr", and this phrase seems to mean human beings. If that is correct, the words "greater and lesser" suggest precisely the same idea as is expressed in Rígsþula (taking the poem together with its prose introduction): the various social classes of men are descended from Heimdallr (or Rígr). When one adds to this that Gustav Neckel and others have pointed out various other correspondences between Völuspá and Rígsþula, it seems to me beyond any doubt that Rígsþula must be older than Völuspá, and thus no younger than from the tenth century. This then shows, and indeed there is much other evidence for it besides, that heathen Scandinavians were not so lacking in originality of thought as one is sometimes given to believe by the writings of modern scholars of the Middle Ages, who try to derive all our cultural heritage from southern or western lands and from Christian times.

If one glances over the leaves of the Codex Regius, as I hope people will easily be able to do when a new facsimile edition appears, the manuscript seems all of a piece. In accordance with the unanimous opinions of scholars it was written late in the 13th century -- say around 1280 -- and all in the same fine hand from beginning to end. But on closer inspection it turns out that it is not quite as simple as all that.

One of the most notable studies that has ever been written about the Eddic poems is the book by the Swedish scholar

Gustav Lindblad, *Studier i Codex Regius af äldre Eddan* (1954). Lindblad shows, by comparison with many other manuscripts or sections of manuscripts that are also the work of a single scribe, that there is in the Codex Regius an unusually large degree of inconsistency or variation, both in the formation of individual symbols and in the orthography and word-forms. There can only be one explanation of this, as Lindblad argues: the Codex Regius is derived from many separate manuscripts of individual Eddic poems. The original written copies were made at various times, and some of them seem to have been much older than the Codex Regius. Gradually poems were gathered together in composite manuscripts, in smaller or larger groups, until the collection became more or less complete as we have it in the Codex Regius. There is a clear distinction between mythological and heroic poems with regard to letter-forms and orthography, and at any rate the heroic poems seem to be derived from a single collective manuscript -- which in its turn was derived from various original recordings of individual poems. Taking everything into account, the collection of heroic poems -- that is the latter part of the Codex Regius -- has more archaic characteristics both in letter-formation and orthography than the mythological poems. Thus it is necessary to assume many lost links, and it seems to me from this most probable that the heroic poems, or at any rate some of them, were written down already in the twelfth century.

As I mentioned before, and as can be seen from the handout, Einar Ólafur and other followers of the "Icelandic school" assume a gap in the composition of heroic poems. When composition of such poems began again, they are clearly based on older poems. Sometimes particular incidents are taken from the stories and they are developed in greater detail, sometimes there is an attempt to penetrate the inner feelings of the characters and to understand and explain their motivation.

And so I come to a suggestion that I would like to put forward here for your consideration. Is it conceivable that the younger heroic poems were based on written copies of the older poems? And is it conceivable then that the younger poems were written down as they were composed? The reasons for this occurring to me are in the main twofold:

1. If heroic poems were written down in the twelfth century, and if a group of heroic poems was composed in that same century, then there comes to be a suspiciously short interval between composition and writing down. One cannot always be certain that Jan de Vries and other non-Icelandic scholars were wrong all the time, and the "younger" poems could be considerably

younger than Einar Ól. Sveinsson thought most probable; moreover he is hesitant in his dating as I keep reminding you. Then the two activities, composition and writing down, would come together sometime late in the twelfth century.

2. The other reason is this, that it looks as though the resurgence of interest in the material of these ancient poems was a rather sudden phenomenon, and then there came a rush of new poems on the same subjects, but with a changed point of view. If the ancient heroic poems were collected and recorded on parchment in the twelfth century, that would provide a satisfactory explanation of the rekindling of interest in the stories leading to new compositions, inspired by the ancient ones.

There are other things that support this idea. In the second half of the twelfth century there developed in Iceland a particular interest in antiquities, and some people would trace this to the influence of a contemporary movement in other countries, the "twelfth-century renaissance". This could have led to the two activities, the writing down of ancient heroic poems and the composition of new ones. And by the time this point was reached, Icelanders had begun composing works in prose, as you know, in which a great deal of material was incorporated from earlier poems, the so-called skaldic poems, particularly court poetry. Why should they not have employed this new technique, the art of writing, when they were composing poems that they wished to be preserved and taught to others?

It is a matter of course that not all the poems classified by Einar Ólafur as "younger" heroic poems were composed at the same time in the latter part of the twelfth century. For example, it is unlikely that the First Lay of Helgi Hundingsbani was composed this late. Its relationship to some skaldic poems by well-known poets indicates that it is older. On the other hand, however, the poem does not bear the characteristics of one that has had a long oral history. By the eleventh century Icelanders had learned how to write, and for the sake of comparison it can be mentioned that the memorial poem by Markús Skeggjason for King Eiríkr the Good is thought to have been transported in written form to Denmark in the beginning of the twelfth century.

A little while ago I spoke of dividing the Eddic poems into two groups according to whether they were from heathen or Christian times. It is obvious that the opposition between heathendom and Christianity is of primary importance when one is trying to assign mythological poems to the different periods. Then it is a question of whether the poems are genuine sources for heathendom or whether they are some kind of artificial

re-creations by Christians. But does the introduction of Christianity have no significance for heroic poems? Did they not undergo changes as the result of the change of religion? This is an important question, and I want to end my talk by laying great emphasis on two points that I think scholars need to give more attention to than they have done up to now.

The conversion to Christianity marked a complete revolution in the spiritual life of the Icelanders, and it assuredly had an influence on heroic poetry as on every other aspect of culture. People have pointed out how these poems become gentler, more effort is made to depict the inner life of characters, their feelings and changing emotions. Obviously everything is also avoided that could be identified as heathen, though the links with the older poems and the sympathy with "ancient times" is so strong that it is seldom that there is found any direct Christian didacticism. The gentleness is apparent for instance in *Guðrúnarkviða I*, where *Guðrún* comes close to dying of grief until another woman finds a means to give her sorrow some outlet and she is enabled to weep and relate her tale of grief. There is moral evaluation of people's actions. In the shorter *Sigurðarkviða Brynhildr* is to begin with an innocent maiden, but when she discovers her betrayal she is "filled with malice". *Gunnarr* and *Högni* suffer conflict in their minds before they break their oaths and incite *Guttormr* to kill *Sigurðr*. There seems to me to be no doubt at all what the explanation is of this fundamental change of attitude to the primitive and gruesome material of the ancient heroic poems.

And finally another point, closely related to this: once it is acknowledged that these young poems were composed in Christian times, and doubtless out in Iceland, then it is important to see them in the light of the Icelandic culture of the time. I think it very odd how blind some non-Icelandic scholars have been to this. People overlook the obvious in seeking out far-fetched explanations -- speculating about the influence of more or less imaginary secular poems in Denmark, Germany or even England. But these young poems are first and foremost new Icelandic versions of ancient poems and stories in the Icelandic language. Their affinities are with contemporary Icelandic literature, skaldic poetry -- and maybe, though less directly, with Icelandic sagas and religious writings. And to the extent that influences may be foreign, they will first and foremost be in connection with the new religion, like all other foreign cultural influences that reached Iceland during the period.

THE DATES OF THE MYTHOLOGICAL POEMS

**Einar Ól. Sveinsson**

**Before A D 1000:**

Grímnismál  
Vafþrúðnismál  
Skírnismál  
Þrymskviða  
Baldrs draumar  
Rígsþula  
Hárbarðsljóð  
Hávamál

**Ca A D 1000:**

Lokasenna  
Völuspá

**11th century:**

Alvíssmál  
Hymiskviða

**11th or 12th century:**

Hyndluljóð  
The Shorter Völuspá

**Jan de Vries**

**Before A D 1000:**

Vafþrúðnismál  
Grímnismál  
Hávamál  
Hárbarðsljóð  
Völuspá

**A D 1150 - 13th century:**

Baldrs draumar  
Skírnismál  
Hyndluljóð (and the Shorter  
Völuspá)  
Alvíssmál  
Hymiskviða  
Þrymskviða  
Lokasenna  
Rígsþula

**EINAR ÓL. SVEINSSON**

**Before A D 1000:**

Hlöðskviða  
Hamðismál  
Atlakviða  
Sigurðarkviða forna (Brot)  
Völundarkviða  
Helgakviða Hundingsbana II  
Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar  
Gróttasöngur  
Reginismál  
Fáfnismál  
Sigrðrífumál

**A D 1050 - 1150:**

Helgakviða Hundingsbana I  
Guðrúnarkviða II  
Guðrúnarhvöt  
Guðrúnarkviða I  
Atlamál  
Oddrúnargrátr  
Sigurðarkviða skamma  
Helreið Brynhildar  
Guðrúnarkviða III

**13th century**

Grípisspá

**14th century:**

Grógaldur  
Fjölsvinnsmál

**JAN DE VRIES**

**Before A D 1000:**

Hlöðskviða  
Hamðismál  
Atlakviða  
Völundarkviða  
Gróttasöngur

**A D 1000 - 1150:**

Reginismál  
Fáfnismál  
Sigrðrífumál  
Sigurðarkviða forna (Brot)  
Helgakviða Hundingsbana I  
Helgakviða Hundingsbana II  
Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar

**A D 1150 - 13th century:**

Guðrúnarkviða II  
Guðrúnarkviða I  
Guðrúnarkviða III  
Guðrúnarhvöt  
Oddrúnargrátr  
Helreið Brynhildar  
Sigurðarkviða skamma  
Atlamál  
Grípisspá

**14th century:**

Grógaldur  
Fjölsvinnsmál