

Skaldic Poetry Everywhere?
**(Is there any influence from skaldic poetry on literatures in other
 European languages?)**

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Comparative literature has stated that Old Icelandic (Old Norse) poetry has international parallels as regards its contents and forms (i.e. topic, motifs, versification, poetic language etc.). Mythological and heroic songs can be compared with Indo-European (and, in some cases, other) texts and myths. In such cases we do not reckon with direct influence – the parallels are of a typological character. Of course the skaldic poetry might have had direct international poetic resonance, since the skalds visited large territories (using the modern geographic terms:) from Ireland to Britain and Scotland, from Sweden and Finland to Varangian Russia, and even to Byzantium.

As regards the origins of skaldic poetry, some Celtic influence has been suggested. Krause (1930) stressed the similarities between Germanic and Celtic *kennings*, but his view was not shared by many of his colleagues. On the other hand the comparative aspect of that topic was later enlarged. (However I shall not deal here with this problem; for a general introduction, one should still consult Meissner, 1921 and von See, 1980, 32-52.)

Some ambitious studies have been published which have contrasted Old Norse kennings with Anglo-Saxon, Balto-Finnic and other (even Greek) poetic imagery and metaphors. The 'new' Old Norse versification system (developed by the skalds), was not the only highly complicated metrical system in Medieval Europe. For example, the *cynghanedd* in Medieval Wales and the Irish 'syllabic metrics' show striking parallels in their complexity to the metres used by the skalds. Recently Old Scandinavian—Old Russian contacts have revived what used to be a favourite trend in literary studies. On the other hand, because of the lack of early Baltic literary texts it remains a very complicated problem to suppose any possible Scandinavian—Baltic poetic contacts.

I think that today there is a need for evaluation of the positive and negative results of such studies.

Germanic and Scandinavian *alliterative* poetry has a long history, and a long internal development. The skalds have revised and elaborated it. Besides the Old Norse alliterative songs, Old English poetry follows the same system.

It has been suggested several times that the metrics of the Finnish *Kalevala* can be compared to this, but this assumption is very vague.

The Finnish folk poetry epic *Kalevala* is an anthology compiled by Lönnroth in the mid-nineteenth century, combining texts from different genres. Its metrical standardisation is also his, but its roots are old. According to the common opinion:

'the so-called Kalevala metre and alliteration, its two most distinctive features, are governed by rules that apply, with only minor local variation, in every area where Kalevala poetry was sung. The metre appears to date back to the Proto-Finnic period and survived among the

Estonians, the Votes, the Ingrians, most of the Karelians, and the Finns; it was not used on the eastern periphery of the Baltic-Finnish area, i.e. among the Vepsians and the eastern groups of the Karelians, nor by the Lapps. Where it was used, it served for more than two thousand years as the main prosodic form for epic, lyric and festival poetry, and for incantations, and often for proverbs and riddles.' (Kuusi – Bosley – Branch, 1977, 62).

This means that the Baltic-Finnic metre was independent of Old Germanic (Old Norse) impact. If we want to find some parallels, perhaps we could look to the old Baltic metrics, exemplified by the 'octosyllabic' Latvian folk songs (see Voigt, 1973). Finnish folklorists and linguists have different views about the historical development of the Kalevala-metre. Sometimes they have modified their views, e.g. as regards the exclusion of Baltic parallels and inclusion of Mordvinian parallels. (See e.g. the modifications of Kuusi's, Leino's and Korhonen's views in Siikala and Vakimo 1994, 41-87.) However, for Old Norse contacts their views have not undergone any significant change.

The general form of the Kalevala-metre (and its cognates) is the unrhymed, non-strophic trochaic tetrameter, with the main stress falling on the long syllables. It is different from Old Germanic and Old Norse metre, and we cannot find any Scandinavian influence in it. I find the '2,000 years old' estimate a bit childish and created by wishful thinking – but on the other hand it is true that the Kalevala-metre is older than its first written texts (which date only from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries). Finnish and Estonian non-folk poetry dates back only to about the sixteenth century, and it has some common North European 'Lutheran' background. But it is unimaginable that the skalds of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries wandered among the Baltic Finns with the task of teaching them *dróttkvætt*. It would be nonsense in North European cultural history.

On the other hand, European cultural history might support the thesis that some 'Viking poets' from Varangian Kiev were active at the birth of Old Russian poetry. The famous *Lay of Igor's Campaign* (*Slovo o polku Igoreve*) is usually dated to about 1185, and it was written by a well educated (court) poet. However, there has been no serious attempt to find any definite skaldic influence in it. In his famous monograph on the *Lay*, Robinson (1980, especially 281-284, 310-312) summarizes a 'typological survey' of the epic song, quoting also Old Norse parallels, e.g. from the *Verse Edda* and *Egils saga*. But he does not say anything about the possible influence of skaldic poetry in shaping the first Old Russian poetry. The *Lay of Igor* has quite a few unsolved philological problems, but after all the discussions concerning its authenticity, today it is considered as a reliable old text (although the version which we know today was most probably copied much later, in the eighteenth century). Russian epic poems, called *bylina*, are known from the fourteenth to eighteenth centuries, and there are different opinions about their 'learned' or 'folk' background, and 'historical' versus 'general' epic plots. In their metre and poetic imagery there are no echoes of skaldic poetry. The authors are unknown, which is typical of traditional poetry – in contrast with the works of the skalds. (On various trends in the study of the *bylina* see e.g. Anikin, 1978–1980.)

Not all, but some of the Old Russian epic songs are connected with a curious kind of person named *skomorokh*. The songs attributed to them are usually satiric and farcical. We can find traces of such performances from the fourteenth century onwards, and originally the songs were transmitted orally. The word *skomorokh* meant 'itinerant musician, comedy performer' or even 'witch'. The oldest reference to them is dated to 1008, and the old sources often claim that they wear 'Latin clothes', i.e. that they were different from ordinary Russians. The word *skomorokh* is attested in Old Russian, Church Slavonic, and Old Polish etc., and the original meaning might have been 'dishonest person', 'performer of the merry muse'. The suggested further parallels in foreign languages (Greek, Italian *scaramuccia* 'farce', French *scaramouche*, English *scaramouch* 'the name of the rascal in *commedia dell'arte*', or even Arabic and Turkish *maskara* 'masked player') are not easily to connect with the Russian word. It would be tempting to draw a historical lineage from the 'skalds' in the Varangian court in Kiev to the later 'vagrant poets', who performed humorous farces for the common people in Russia – but there are no historical data to support this development. The *skomorokh* could be of varying social status (from servants of noblemen to comedians in the market, owners of dancing bears, etc.), and their performances were also very different. In spite of some vague references, there is no evidence of their contacts with the possible 'skalds' in Russia (see, with further literature, Belkin, 1975).

In the summaries of Russian poetics there are no serious hints of contacts with the 'skalds'. The excellent Russian scholar M. I. Steblin-Kamenskiy, whose dissertation was about the poetry of the skalds, never proposed any such contacts (see his summary: Steblin-Kamenskiy, 1979).

If we want to sum up the problem of the versification, both from a classificatory and a historical point of view we do not find traces of Old Norse versification beyond its language borders. As Gasparov (1996) has stated, the old Germanic alliterative verse was created between 500 BC and 700 AD, and therefore there is no possibility of any contemporary borrowing of it among Baltic Finns, Old Russians etc. Roper (2001) has contrasted the Germanic alliterative verse with the Kalevala metre – only to find no links between them.

The *kenning* is perhaps the best-known characteristic feature of the skaldic poetry. The word means 'poetic metaphor' and it uses a combination of verbal substitution, determining and appellative words. Kennings appear in the Verse Edda, and can be traced even further back. In mythology, magic, charms and riddles *kenning*-like words and phrases occur. We can assume that from the earliest times Old Norse poetry used this kind of semantic construction. Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál* describes the actual poetic refinement in its many varieties. It is a well-known fact that in Anglo-Saxon poetry the use of kennings is similar to that in Old Norse, but simpler (see e.g. Merve Scholtz 1927.) Here we might see direct connections.

On the *theophoric* onomastics in Old Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Iceland even today the best introduction is the 'History of Religion' volume in the series *Nordisk Kultur* (Lid, 1942, 28-79). On the continuation of Germanic and Old English Charms, taking into consideration their metrical forms, see Roper, 2005, 34-36.

Finnish scholars have always, though to various degrees, dealt with the possible Scandinavian influence on Finnish folk poetry (and mythology). Recently

Professor Anna-Leena Siikala's monograph (in Finnish 1992, with an updated English version published in 2002) has connected the 'Kalevala poetry' both with shamanism and with the early Scandinavian world. Referring to previous studies she finds such traces in the world view, mythic images, in the capacity of the *tietäjä*, especially as regards 'the power of the word' and in incantations. According to Siikala the *tietäjä* ('man of knowledge, a person, who "knows"') was an institution, combining the functions of a shaman, healer and poet. According to the Finnish Germanist, Koivulehto (1984) important Finnish words of this tradition, like *loitsia* 'to utter incantations', *lumota* 'to bewitch', and *palvoa* 'to worship, venerate' are Germanic loan words in Finnish, and some of them were already adopted in the Proto-Finnic period. Siikala agrees with some other Finnish scholars, who date the correspondences between the Ancient Scandinavian and Finnish-Karelian tradition to the Viking Age or toward the end of the period of the reconstructed Scandinavian proto-language. (Siikala, 2002, 336.) About 600 A.D. a new wave of such contacts arrived in Western Finland. Speaking about the very rich Finnish tradition of incantations, Siikala also accepts the views of her professor, Matti Kuusi. According to Kuusi (1963, 214) '... the Finns and Estonians acquired their incantations only at a late date from the German peoples: either through cultural contacts with the Proto-Germanic tribes or – as Oskar Loorits assumes – during the Viking Age.'

When presenting Finnish texts or magic actions Siikala often refers to Old Norse parallels: from the *Verse Edda*, from *sagas*, or from Saxo. However, she does not mention the skaldic poetry explicitly. This may be because she dates the Scandinavian—Finnish contacts to the time before skaldic poetry evolved. She pays special attention to the genre of *galdr* (Siikala, 2002, 274-277). If I am not misinterpreting her views, she is of the opinion the German—Finnish contacts of the *galdr* and riddle texts are earlier than the age of the skalds.

If Finnish (and Estonian) scholars want to give a historical perspective to their folk narrative songs, soon or later they should look into Old Norse poetry, because it is the only early poetry in the Nordic area. All the Finnish (Estonian, etc.) texts are at least many centuries younger. The historical stratification of Old Norse poetry is based upon the possible dating of existing texts and variants. The similarly historical stratification of Baltic-Finnic texts is imaginative: the scholars involved in it try to devise their own legitimate systems. When Siikala (or Kuusi) within one sentence speak about Proto-Germanic, ancient Scandinavian, and Viking age loans, it means that there is no way of finding an absolute chronology for the Finnish texts involved.

That is the reason why I have been unable to find any skaldic influence on the metaphors in traditional Baltic-Finnic poetry.

We can find metaphors (and *kennings*) everywhere. Turning the pages of the handbook of literary similes from the Roman antiquity to the end of the European Early Middle Ages (Grinda, 2002), we see thousands of metaphoric expressions. We can follow their progress from author to author, especially in the Latin sources. The companion does not have many references to Old Norse, but it can still be used for searching for parallels to Old Norse kennings. But the parallels are of a typological and not of a genetic character. Spalding's gigantic dictionary of German figurative usage (1959-1994) would also serve as a good comparative source of later metaphors.

The linguistic system of the kennings constructed by Fijdestøl (1974) does not refer to comparative or poetic-historic correspondences. In skaldic poetry a highly elevated system of metaphors and similes exists as a result of indigenous poetic development. Their background can be traced to old mythology and early poetry. But the 'skaldic development' was not an import into Northern Europe. We also know of periphrases in the poetry of other peoples, including Russian, Finnish and other texts. But they are very different, and very simple in comparison with the skaldic poetry.

Finally, I shall give an example that may be helpful. The central event in the *Kalevala* is the raid for the *sampo*, the miraculous mill, which grinds wealth. The Finnish word *sampo* has at least a dozen scholarly etymologies, running from 'frog' to 'pillar of the world'. There is no agreement between the experts about the 'original' meaning of the word or about how it was understood before the mid-nineteenth century, when the basic *sampo*-runes were collected.

An elaborated poetic parallelism is characteristic both of the *Kalevala*, and of the folklore texts that lie behind it. For the *sampo* the parallel expression is *kirjokansi*. It is a compound word: the first element means 'multi-coloured, decorated', and the second means 'lid, cover'.

In the most famous text of Finnish *sampo* rune variants (sung by Arhippa Perttunen to Elias Lönnrot in Latvajärvi village in 1834) about the forging of a 'new' *sampo* the following lines are repeated:

<i>Siit on jauho uusi sampo</i>	<i>The new sampo was grinding</i>
<i>kirjokansi kiikutteli:</i>	<i>the bright-covered was rocking:</i>
<i>jauho purnon puhtehessa</i>	<i>it ground a binful at dusk</i>
<i>jauho purnon syötäviä</i>	<i>ground a binful for eating</i>
<i>jauho purnon myötäviä</i>	<i>ground a binful for selling</i>
<i>kolmannen pieltäviä.</i>	<i>a third for storing away.</i>

(Bosley's English translation, in: Kuusi – Bosley – Branch, 1977, 114.)

Kirjokansi is translated here as 'bright-covered', which is a good poetic solution, however it loses the *kenning*. The word *kirjokansi* is a *kenning*, describing the *sampo*, in a compound word which is in fact not completely understandable. It has a reference, and we are not fully aware of what. All those features are well-known among the kennings. (By the way, the three kinds of products from the *sampo* can be labelled as *heiti* words.)

We can find in the *Kalevala*, or in the *Lay of Igor's Campaign* similar cases of 'kennings'. But they are isolated, and represent only an early form of poetic metaphors. They were not borrowed from the skalds.

We can continue the list of literatures, where we do not find 'skaldic poetry'. E.g. Byzantium was often visited by the Vikings – but the literature does not have skaldic traces. As far as we know today, skaldic poetry did not exist everywhere. It appears only as part of Old Norse literature. But as has already been stated (see e.g. Frank, 1985, 182), it can be contrasted with old literature from all over the world, including even Ruanda.

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