The Poetic Edda

Translated by Carolyne Larrington

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THE collection of Norse–Icelandic mythological and heroic poetry known as the *Poetic Edda* contains the great narratives of the creation of the world and the coming of Ragnarok, the Doom of the Gods. The mythological poems explore the wisdom of the gods and giants and narrate the adventures of the god Thor against the hostile giants and the gods' rivalries amongst themselves. The heroic poems trace the exploits of the hero Helgi and his valkyrie bride, the tragic tale of Sigurd and Brynhild's doomed love, and the terrible drama of Gudrun, daughter of Giuki, Sigurd's widow, and her children. Most of the poems exist in a single manuscript written in Iceland around 1270, but many of them pre-date the conversion of Scandinavia to Christianity and allow us to glimpse the pagan beliefs of the North.

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The Poetic Edda

Translated with an Introduction and Notes by
CAROLYNE LARRINGTON

REVISED EDITION

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of
Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries

First published as a World's Classics paperback 1996
Reissued as an Oxford World's Classics paperback 1999, 2008
Revised edition 2014

Impression: 1

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2013956086

ISBN 978–0–19–967534–0

Printed in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My first debt of gratitude is owed to the late Ursula Dronke, an inspirational teacher and scholar who first taught me Old Norse and introduced me to the poetry of the *Edda*; her own edition of the *Poetic Edda* is inspirational. Every scholar of the *Edda* owes a great debt to Anthony Faulkes, whose model translation of the *Snorra Edda* has been constantly at my elbow. Margaret Clunies Ross, Britt-Mari Näsström, Matthew Driscoll, Andrew Wawn, Paul Acker, Judy Quinn, and Beatrice La Farge all contributed in one way or another to the interpretations in the original volume.

In the almost twenty years since the first edition of this translation was published, eddic scholarship has blossomed. Klaus von See, Beatrice La Farge, Katja Schulz, and their colleagues at the Johann-Wolfgang-Goethe University in Frankfurt-am-Main are bringing to completion the multi-volume *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, a series which has shed new light on the history and complexity of eddic poetry, and which has been invaluable in my work on this new edition. Special thanks must go to Beatrice La Farge for sharing still unpublished material with me and to Peter Robinson who kindly supplied me with a PDF of his *Svipdagsmál* edition. Hannah Burrows (and the General Editors of the Skaldic Poetry of the Middle Ages) generously gave permission to use Hannah's edition of *The Waking of Angantyr*. All the scholars mentioned above have of course continued to shape my thinking about eddic poetry; to them should be added a lively and inspiring younger generation of Norse scholars: David Clark, Brittany Schorn, Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, Hannah Burrows, Tom Birkett, and Michael Hart. Judith Jesch and Heather O'Donoghue have, as ever, offered encouragement. The Stofnun Árna Magnússonar in Iceland welcomed me to work on the final stages of this revision; and I owe colleagues and friends there, in particular its director Guðrún Nordal, a longstanding debt of thanks. And grateful thanks go to Ragnheiður Mósesdóttir and Matthew Driscoll for their hospitality in Reykjavik.

With Judy Quinn in particular, co-founder of the Eddic Network, I have shared eddic conversation for many years, and I owe more than I can express to her readiness to talk about eddic interests, and to her friendship.

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THE POETIC EDDA

INTRODUCTION

The old, one-eyed god Odin hangs nine days and nights on the windswept ash-tree Yggdrasill, sacrificing himself to himself; the red-bearded Thor swings his powerful hammer against the giant enemy; the ravening wolf Fenrir leaps forward to seize the Father of the Gods in his slavering jaws; the terrible passion of Brynhild for the dragon-slayer hero Sigurd culminates in her implacable demand for his murder—all these famous scenes from Old Norse myth and legend are vividly staged in the *Poetic Edda*. From the creation of the world out of the yawning void of Ginnungagap to the destruction of the gods in the mighty conflagration of Ragnarok, the poetry of the *Edda* gives some of the best evidence for the religious beliefs and the heroic ethics of the pagan North before its conversion to Christianity around the year 1000. Its stories are the interpretative key to modern depictions of northern myth and legend, in painting, sculpture, literature, film, computer games, and the operas of Richard Wagner, to list only a few of the *Edda*'s modern reflexes. These stories also formed the bedrock from which the complex and highly sophisticated court poetry of medieval Scandinavia sprang, composed in a poetic style which employs mythological and legendary material in its rhetoric of allusion.

The *Poetic Edda* is distinct from the famous Icelandic sagas, such as *Njals saga*, since these are written in prose and tell the stories of historical persons; however, some of its heroic themes are played out in works such as *Laxdæla saga* and *Gisla saga*. In an earlier form, the *Poetic Edda* is a major source for Snorri Sturluson's great mythographic treatise, the *Prose* or *Younger Edda*. As a body of heroic and mythological poetry, the *Poetic Edda* is comparable in scope to such great masterpieces of world literature as the Finnish *Kalevala*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Hesiod's *Theogony*, or the *Mahabharata*; yet the *Edda*'s generic range, incorporating as it does comedy, satire, didactic verse, tragedy, high drama, and profoundly moving lament, surpasses all these. Despite this, the poetry is not difficult to understand: its language is neither obscure nor complex, but often strikingly simple and direct. Since the rediscovery of the *Poetic Edda* in the late seventeenth century, its themes have captured the imaginations of

many artists: Thomas Gray, William Morris, W. H. Auden in Britain, Richard Wagner, August Strindberg, and Carl Larsson in Europe; the great Argentinian author, Jorge Luis Borges, was also inspired by eddic poetry. Fantasy writers, such as J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, and Alan Garner, have incorporated its themes and motifs into the worlds about which they write; the wolves and winter of Lewis's Narnia, Tolkien's dwarfs and dragons, and even the Weirdstone of Brisingamen owe their genesis to the poems in this collection.

The Codex Regius, the manuscript in which the *Poetic Edda* is preserved, is an unprepossessing-looking codex the size of a fat paperback, bound in brown with brownish vellum pages; it is in the care of the Arnamagnæan Institute in Reykjavik, and was, until recently, on display in the manuscript exhibition in the Culture House in Reykjavik. Most of the mythological and heroic poems it contains survive only in this single manuscript, abbreviated in what follows as manuscript R. In the 1270s, somewhere in Iceland, an unknown writer copied these poems, preserving them as a major source of information about Old Norse myth and legend, and as a majestic body of poetry. Six of the mythological poems are found wholly or in part in two other manuscripts, one of which is AM 748 4to (hereafter A). A good number of other poems in the eddic style are recorded elsewhere, very often inserted into prose narratives dealing with the exploits of legendary heroes. One of these poems, the *Waking of Angantyr*, has been added to this volume. During the *Poetic Edda*'s history, poems in eddic metre contained in other manuscripts have made their appearance in the canon. The mythological poems *Baldr's Dreams*, the *List of Rig*, the *Song of Hyndla*, and the broadly heroic *Song of Grotti*, are included here. Also added to this revised volume are two poems which may be characterized as neo-eddic: *Groa's Chant* and the *Sayings of Fjolsvinn*. These two poems are probably fourteenth century in origin; they imitate the style of earlier eddic verse and indicate the continuing importance of composition in the eddic style well after the introduction of Christian doctrine and Latin learning to Iceland. The *Waking of Angantyr*, an eddic poem preserved in *Hervarar saga ok Heidreks* (the *Saga of Hervor and Heidrek*), one which has fascinated poets and audiences from the eighteenth century onwards, and a second later version of the *Seeress's Prophecy* conclude the book.

Although the majority of the poems were recorded in the late

thirteenth century, it is thought that most of the mythological verse and a few of the heroic poems pre-date the conversion of Scandinavia to Christianity in the late tenth century. No satisfactory method has yet been found to date the poems relative to one another, nor has it proved possible to localize them to Norway or Iceland. It has been argued that the description of the end of the world (Ragnarok) in the *Seeress's Prophecy* is reminiscent of volcanic eruption and hence may be Icelandic in origin, while the absence of wolves or bears in Iceland may point to a Norwegian homeland for poems in which these are mentioned, such as the *Sayings of the High One*, but even if Icelanders did not encounter wolves every day, they knew quite well what they were. In general, the mythological poems are thought to pre-date most of the heroic poems, though some of the latter, the *Lay of Hamdir* and the *Poem of Atli* in particular, are believed to be among the earliest eddic poems.

Why the name 'Edda'? Snorri Sturluson, an Icelandic author and historian who lived between 1179 and 1241, wrote a treatise on Norse poetry which he called an *edda*, a word whose etymology is uncertain but which clearly means 'poetics' where it occurs in fourteenth-century Icelandic. When Bishop Brynjolf Sveinsson presented a manuscript which had come into his possession to the Danish king in 1662—hence the name Codex Regius—he was well aware of its importance, for he had believed that the mythological poems which Snorri quoted from extensively in his *Edda* had been utterly lost. Thus Bishop Brynjolf connected his collection with the name 'Edda' found in Snorri, and assumed that the poems constituted part of that 'great body of human wisdom which Sæmund the Wise collected', as he wrote to a friend at the time. The famous Icelandic scholar Sæmund the Wise (1056–1133) had studied at Paris and was a byword for learning. Thus the contents of the Codex Regius came to be known, erroneously, as the *Sæmundar Edda*, or the *Elder Edda*, while Snorri's treatise (written before the Codex Regius was compiled) is known as the *Snorra Edda*, the *Prose Edda*, or the *Younger Edda*. The Codex Regius remained in Copenhagen until the principal Icelandic manuscripts began to be returned to Iceland in the early 1970s to be preserved in the Arnamagnæan Institute. Too precious to be risked in an aircraft at that time, the manuscript travelled back on a ship with a military escort, to be welcomed by crowds and public acclaim at the Reykjavik docks.

Snorri's Edda *and other related works*

In order to explain the many mythological and heroic allusions in Norse poetry Snorri set out, in a more or less systematic way, the main myths and heroic legends of the Scandinavians. His selection was no doubt affected by his primary purpose of clarifying poetic allusions but he was also concerned to provide an explanation for the Norse gods that fell in line with Christian orthodoxy. His *Prologue* thus explains the gods as refugees from Troy, able to dominate the inhabitants of Scandinavia through their superior wisdom, and if he knew the story of Odin's self-sacrifice from *Sayings of the High One*, with its disturbing parallels to the Crucifixion, he omitted it from his account.

It is probable, as Anthony Faulkes suggests, that the pagan religion was never systematically understood by those who practised it. Different areas of Scandinavia worshipped different gods at different times in the pre-Christian era; the localized nature of cults and rituals produced neither dogma nor sacred texts, as far as we know. Rather pre-Christian religion was 'a disorganized body of conflicting traditions that was probably never reduced in heathen times to a consistent orthodoxy such as Snorri attempts to present'.[1] Nevertheless, Snorri's *Edda* is the only near-contemporary account of Norse myth and legend beyond the *Poetic Edda*, and, as such, frequent reference will be made to it in this volume to throw light upon the allusions and obscurities in our poems. Two other texts will be referred to frequently in the Notes. One is *Ynglinga saga*, one of the constituent sagas in Snorri's great history of the kings of Norway, *Heimskringla* (*Circle of the World*). *Ynglinga saga* is the first saga in *Heimskringla* and thus contains much legendary and semi-mythological material. The other text is *Volsunga saga*, probably composed in the mid-thirteenth century, thus at much the same time as Snorri was writing and the Codex Regius was being compiled. *Volsunga saga* tells the full story of Sigurd the Dragon-slayer, and that of his ancestors and descendants. In part it is based on eddic poems, but here and there it has new information, and is invaluable for filling in the great gap in the *Poetic Edda* caused by some missing leaves between the *Lay of Sigrdrifa* and the *Fragment of a Poem about Sigurd*. Details of these, and other relevant texts, are given in the Select Bibliography.

[1] Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. A. Faulkes (London, 988), p. xxvii.

The Old Norse cosmos

In explaining the mythological background of the eddic poetry the modern scholar faces the same difficulties which Snorri Sturluson had to try to overcome in his *Edda*. A body of myths, often contradictory, incomplete, or obscure, has to be synthesized into a logical system. Just as Snorri could not help but be influenced by his Christian beliefs in his account—to the extent of providing an analogue to Noah's Flood in his version of the early history of the world—so we cannot now read the *Poetic Edda* without using Snorri to clarify and explain. In what follows, I offer a synthesis of Snorri, eddic poetry, and certain skaldic verse which makes use of mythological motifs. The picture given is misleading in its coherence and clarity, yet essential for the understanding of the poems.

In the beginning there was only a chaos of unformed matter. In some poems the world is formed out of the body of Ymir, the primeval being, who is dismembered by the gods; in others the gods raise the earth out of the sea. The gods are descended from the giants: Odin and his mysterious brothers, Vili and Ve, are the sons of Bor, grandsons of Buri, who, according to Snorri, was licked out of the primeval ice by the cow Audhumla. The sun and moon are placed in the sky and time begins. The gods construct the home of the gods (Asgard) and a world for men (Midgard), and then they create the dwarfs who live in the earth and work in metal, followed by humankind. The first man and woman are created from driftwood found on the shore. Hereafter, unlike in Greek myth for example, humanity plays little part in the gods' adventures. Now divine history begins. The main tribe of gods, the Æsir, is visited by a female figure, Gullveig, probably a type of the goddess Freyia, who practises *seid*, a disreputable kind of shape-changing magic. The Æsir burn Gullveig three times but she is always reborn, and goes about among humans teaching them her magic. Possibly as a result of their mistreatment of Gullveig, the Æsir are challenged by another tribe, the Vanir, who demand a share of the sacrifices made to the gods and war breaks out. The Vanir seem to be undefeatable, and so peace is negotiated and hostages are exchanged: the fertility deities, Freyr, Freyia, and their father, the sea-god Niord, come to live among the Æsir permanently. To the Vanir are sent Hænir and Mimir. Hænir annoys the Vanir by refusing to participate in discussion and by constantly asking Mimir

for his opinion, so the Vanir cut off Mimir's head, preserve it, and send it with Hænir back to the Æsir (*Ynglinga saga*, ch. 4).

In the centre of the universe is Yggdrasill, the World-Ash whose roots go far down below the earth. At their tips are the worlds of the dead, the hall of Hel, and the domain of the frost-giants. Beneath the tree are sacred wells which impart wisdom; these are presided over by the fates and can be reached by the rainbow bridge, Bifrost. Circling the world is the Ocean in which lurks the Midgard-serpent, a monstrous serpent which will attack the gods at the end of the world (Ragnarok). The gods possess many palaces (catalogued in *Grimnir's Sayings*); an important building in Asgard is Valhall (Valhalla) where Odin assembles dead heroes in preparation for the final battle at Ragnarok.

Gods and goddesses

The Æsir are: Odin, the chief of the gods, deity of war, poetry, trickery, and wisdom. In the *Poetic Edda* Odin is to be found as a wanderer, disguised as a one-eyed old man obsessively seeking out wisdom, challenging it in others, or verifying the inescapable events of Ragnarok. Odin appears occasionally in the heroic poetry as a patron of human heroes, watching their progress and sizing them up for a place in Valhalla. Odin's red-bearded son Thor is patron of farmers and sailors. Armed with his mighty hammer, Miollnir, he fights against the giants; though strong, he is sometimes foolish. Tyr is the god of justice; he is one-handed because he placed his hand in the jaws of the wolf Fenrir, as a pledge of good faith when the gods were trying to bind the monster with a deceptively weak-looking magic fetter. Scenting treachery, Fenrir only agreed on condition that one of the gods place his hand in his mouth, and when the magic bonds tightened on Fenrir, Tyr's hand was snapped off.[2] Loki is a strangely ambivalent figure, son of a giant and foster-brother of Odin. His loyalties lie sometimes with the gods, sometimes with the giants. In certain myths he does his best to get the gods out of trouble—trouble he often got them into in the first place—but in the story of the death of Baldr and the events which follow, his sympathies are clearly aligned with the giants and at Ragnarok he will fight on their side. Loki is

[2] Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. A. Faulkes (London, 1987), 28.

capable of shape-changing and fathered monsters on the giantess Angrboda. These are Fenrir the wolf, the Midgard-serpent, and Hel, goddess of death, who, according to Snorri, is half corpse-blue, half human pink.

Baldr, son of Odin and Frigg, is the most beautiful and most beloved of the gods. Through the machinations of Loki he is killed by his blind brother, Hod, with a mistletoe dart, and goes down to Hel. He will return after Ragnarok. Vali is born to avenge Baldr, while Vidar, another son of Odin, exists to avenge his father at Ragnarok by killing Fenrir. Other Æsir include Bragi, god of poetry, and Heimdall, watchman of the gods, who will blow his mighty Giallar-horn at the coming of Ragnarok, and whose hearing is lodged in the well of Mimir under Yggdrasill. Ull is patron of hunting, and shoots with a bow. More obscure figures, Vili and Ve, brothers of Odin whom Frigg takes as husbands when Odin is away, and Lodur, a god who seems to play some part in the creation of humanity, as well as Hænir, whose adventures among the Vanir are mentioned above, scarcely figure in the extant stories.

The goddesses (Asynior) are less prominent in the Norse myths than in some other European mythologies. Frigg is the chief female deity of the Æsir, married to Odin, and mainly figured as the suffering mother of Baldr. Gefion is a patroness of human kings; she created the Danish island of Sjælland by ploughing out Swedish land, leaving the lake which is now Lake Mälar in central Sweden whose outline matches the shape of Sjælland. Snorri lists many other goddesses, some of whom are simply personifications of abstract qualities, such as Var, goddess of pledges, who is invoked in a marriage ceremony in *Thrym's Poem*. Nanna is the virtuous wife of Baldr. Golden-haired Sif is married to Thor. Idunn possesses the apples of youthfulness which keep the gods from ageing.

The Vanir are Niord, a sea-god, and his children, Freyr and Freyia. Both these last are associated with fertility. Certain giant women are connected with the gods: Skadi, daughter of the giant Thiazi, comes to Asgard seeking compensation for her father's death. She agrees to make peace if she can conclude a marriage with one of the Æsir. Skadi hopes to marry Baldr, but she is tricked into marrying Niord. The marriage is not a success, and the two separate. Gerd, daughter of the giant Gymir, is wooed by Freyr's servant Skirnir on Freyr's behalf in the poem *Skirnir's Journey*. Although it is not clear in that poem that

a marriage is contracted, Snorri tells us in his history of the kings of Norway, *Heimskringla*, that the couple had a child, Fiolnir. Freyia is married to Od, an obscure figure who may be a doublet of Odin. She is said to have many other lovers, including her own brother, Freyr.

Giants and other beings

The giants are the oldest inhabitants of the universe and thus possess much ancient wisdom which the gods covet. They live in the mountains to the east and are imagined both as hostile and bestial, particularly the frost-giants, and conversely as civil and cultivated, like the giant Ægir who feasts the gods in his hall. Giantesses especially may be hideous and haglike, little distinguished from troll-women, or radiantly lovely, like Freyr's beloved, Gerd. The gods are intermittently threatened by the giants, who use cunning to try to obtain various treasures or women from the gods. The gods in return often raid Giant-land to recover their stolen women and possessions; sometimes they win giant women or such valuable cultural property as the mead of poetry, a story to which Odin alludes in *Sayings of the High One*.

Other beings who inhabit the mythic world are elves, who are very little mentioned; they have been interpreted as the spirits of dead male ancestors, the counterparts of the *disir*. These may be female ancestors or fertility spirits, and are often inimical to humans. Dwarfs are solely masculine and share some qualities with the giants. They work at smithing and produce ingenious treasures for the gods. Norns are figures of fate who may be present at a child's birth, prophesying his future, as in the *First Poem of Helgi Hundingsbani*. As determiners of fate, the norns are sometimes blamed when events go against human heroes or other mortal beings. Trolls and troll-women, monstrous, wicked, and often stupid creatures of folklore, live in the rocks. Valkyries have a double identity. In some poems they are envisaged as divine figures, women who serve mead to the dead warriors in Valhall, and who fulfil the will of Odin in overseeing battle and making sure that victory is awarded to the right man. Elsewhere some valkyries are clearly human in origin. When they fall in love with a hero they ensure victory for him, and eventually marry him. Tensions between the valkyrie bride's family or her defeated suitor and the chosen hero mean that their union is shortlived, despite the strength of their love. Shield-maidens are human girls who, scorning

domesticity and female tasks, take up the warrior life; as such they overlap with valkyries. Swan-maidens apparently share some shield-maiden characteristics; they have swan cloaks which enable them to transform themselves into birds, as in Tchaikovsky's ballet *Swan Lake*. Swan-maidens are common in Northern European folklore and they appear fleetingly in the *Poem of Volund*.

Mythic history

Our main eddic source for the history of the gods is the poem the *Seeress's Prophecy* (*Voluspa*), a systematized and allusive account of the events which concern the gods. After the war between the Æsir and the Vanir the wall of Asgard is broken, and a wandering master-builder offers to repair it in a very short space of time, in exchange for the sun, the moon, and Freyia. If he takes any longer, he will forfeit his reward. The gods are confident that the task is impossible, but the smith has an unnaturally clever stallion to assist him and by the first day of winter it is clear that he will fulfil the contract. Loki is blamed for advising in favour of the bargain and so he changes himself into a mare and entices the stallion away. The smith loses his temper, revealing his giant nature; Thor strikes him down with his hammer, breaking the promises the gods had made to him. Within the text this breach of faith on the part of the gods seems to be the first step in a moral decline. The binding of Fenrir, with the attendant broken promise which causes Tyr to forfeit his hand, the death of Baldr, and the binding of Loki with the guts of his own son portend the destruction of the gods at Ragnarok (literally: the Doom of the Gods, though the word *rök* 'doom' is sometimes confused with *røkkr* 'twilight', most notably by Snorri, hence the alternative term 'Twilight of the Gods' or 'Götterdämmerung'). When the end comes, summer will disappear, winter will be vicious and constant. Then Yggdrasill will tremble, the fire- and frost-giants, with Loki at their head, will attack the gods. The first generation of gods will be destroyed and the earth collapse into the sea. However, the earth will rise again, and the younger generation of gods, and humans who have survived the catastrophe by hiding in Yggdrasill, will populate the world anew. Whether a new Golden Age returns, or whether the new world is much like the old, with a balance of good and evil, depends on how one reads the final verses of the *Seeress's Prophecy*.

Within the framework provided by the creation and Ragnarok, those adventures of the gods retold in the mythological poems occur. An exact chronology cannot be determined for them, but since Loki will free himself from his bonds at the onset of the catastrophe, those poems in which he actively assists the gods, such as *Thrym's Poem*, or *Loki's Quarrel*, in which he provokes them apparently beyond endurance, can be ordered in respect to one another in mythic time. Odin journeys through the worlds for varying purposes: he gathers and imparts human knowledge in *Sayings of the High One*, he contends in wisdom and confirms his apprehension of Ragnarok in *Vafthrudnir's Sayings*, and acts to overthrow King Geirrod in *Grimnir's Sayings*. Skirnir's wooing of Gerd for his master Freyr precedes the god's fight with the giant Beli, in which, lacking his sword, he kills his opponent with a deer-antler. Tyr and Thor bring Hymir's kettle back from Giant-land before Ægir's feast, during which Loki assails his fellow deities. The confrontation between Harbard (the disguised Odin) and Thor at the ferry, in which Harbard trounces his son in argument, and the failed attempt of the dwarf Alviss (All-wise) to marry Thor's daughter complete the mythological section of the Codex Regius.

Heroes

Forming a transition between the mythic and heroic poems is the story of Volund, the abused smith who takes a hideous revenge on his oppressor. Volund is known in Anglo-Saxon England as Wayland the smith; the Old English poem *Deor* alludes to some of the incidents recounted in the *Poem of Volund* and scenes from the tale are also illustrated on the eighth-century whalebone box known as the Franks Casket, preserved in the British Museum and in the Bargello in Florence.

The heroic poems of the *Edda* must originally have consisted of several different cycles about the individual heroes Helgi, Sigurd, Gunnar, and Hamdir. However, before the Codex Regius was compiled, much of the heroic poetry had already been loosely joined together in the story of the Volsungs: *Volsunga saga*, a prose version of these events containing some stanzas of eddic poetry, was probably compiled around 1250. Both in this text and in the Codex Regius sequence, Helgi remains a separate figure, scarcely integrated into the Volsung clan. He is a hero whose fate is determined by his

involvement with Sigrun, a valkyrie who helps him to victory over his enemies, then marries him. Her choice of a husband embroils Helgi in family conflict and he has to fight off Sigrun's suitor to win her. Helgi dies as a result of his alliance with the valkyrie. Two different versions of the story of Helgi, slayer of Hunding, appear in the *Poetic Edda*: in the first, the poem concludes with Helgi's winning Sigrun's hand; in the second, Helgi is killed after the marriage by Sigrun's brother in revenge for Helgi's slaying of their father. In a variant of this pattern, equally embroiled in inter-generational feud, Helgi Hiorvardsson avenges the death of his maternal grandfather on King Hrodmar, a thwarted suitor of Helgi's mother. Helgi falls in battle against Hrodmar's son, having first bequeathed his valkyrie bride Svava to his brother. The name 'Helgi' means 'sacred' and at the end of *A Second Poem of Helgi Hundingsbani* the compiler tells us that Helgi and his lover were reborn as another couple, Helgi and Kara, whose story has not survived. There is little evidence for belief in reincarnation in what we know of Norse religion, but it seems clear that the role of Helgi, lover of the valkyrie, can be filled by different heroes whose history offers a variation on the basic narrative pattern.

The poems which follow the three Helgi poems trace the history of Sigurd, son of Sigmund, slayer of the dragon Fafnir, and possessor of the treasure-hoard which was later to become known as the Rhinegold. After various adventures, including betrothing himself to a valkyrie, Sigrdrifa, Sigurd arrives at the court of the Giukungs, where he marries Gudrun. Sigurd assists Gudrun's brother Gunnar to win the hand of Brynhild, another valkyrie, who at some stage has become identified with Sigurd's earlier fiancée. Brynhild has sworn only to marry the man who knows no fear; this is Sigurd, but he is now already bound to Gudrun. Sigurd magically exchanges appearances with Gunnar and rides through a wall of flame to Brynhild's side. The two sleep together for three nights, with a drawn sword between them to safeguard Brynhild's honour. Brynhild marries Gunnar, believing him to be the man who crossed the flame-wall. At some point (presumably in the poems contained in the missing leaves of the manuscript) Brynhild discovers the truth and incites Gunnar and his brother Hogni to kill Sigurd, claiming that he had in fact been her lover, despite the oaths he had sworn to Gunnar. After his death she commits suicide. Neither the compiler of the Codex Regius

nor the author of *Volsunga saga* entirely succeeds in rationalizing the Sigurd material. In the *Edda* Sigurd becomes involved with one valkyrie, Sigrdrifa, whom he meets on the mountain Hindarfiall and who is never mentioned again; in *Volsunga saga* the author replaces Sigrdrifa with Brynhild, only to have Sigurd encounter her a second time at her foster-father's house. Thus Sigurd betroths himself twice to Brynhild before he meets Gudrun. The complications can only be resolved through the introduction of a magic potion, which causes Sigurd to forget his prior commitments to Brynhild entirely until he has won her for Gunnar.

Gudrun provides the link to the next instalment of the saga. Atli, originally the fourth-century leader Attila the Hun, is imagined to have been Brynhild's brother. After Sigurd's death Gudrun is unwillingly married to Atli, and so the new cycle begins. When he lures her brothers to his court and kills them for the treasure they had inherited from Sigurd, Gudrun murders him and her own sons by him in revenge. In the late poem *Oddrun's Lament*, yet another sibling is grafted onto the Brynhild–Atli family: Oddrun, who becomes Gunnar's lover after Brynhild's death. Atli's discovery of the affair here motivates Gunnar's murder: a motive found only in this poem and in *A Short Poem about Sigurd*, probably dependent on *Oddrun's Lament*. Gudrun contracts a third marriage, bringing to it her daughter by Sigurd, Svanhild, and producing further sons, Hamdir and Sorli. Svanhild is sent in marriage to the tyrant Iormunrekk. He has her trampled to death by horses when he believes her to be unfaithful to him with his son, Randver. In the last poems of the *Poetic Edda*, Gudrun dispatches her remaining sons on a doomed quest for revenge on Iormunrekk.

The figures in the Volsung poems belong partly in history, like Attila the Hun and Gunnar, king of the Burgundians, and partly in legend. There is probably influence from southern German texts, particularly in the poems' setting, but the story of Sigurd, Gudrun, Brynhild, and Gunnar is quite distinct from the plot of the Middle High German epic, the *Nibelungenlied*, which uses the same characters. Here Gudrun metamorphoses into the monstrous Kriemhilt, bent on killing her brothers in revenge for Siegfried (Sigurd), and Etzel (Atli) is the well-meaning dupe of his terrifying wife. Richard Wagner made use of *Volsunga saga*, written down around 1300, as the main source for his Ring Cycle, though he employs the *Poetic Edda*,