

## THE SPIRIT POND INSCRIPTION STONE RHYME AND REASON

SUZANNE CARLSON

### PART ONE—RHYME

Year 1971

Walter Elliott was born with salt in his blood. His father was a sea captain as was his father before him. Walter once attempted to sail across the Atlantic alone on a dare, but in Nova Scotia a broken rudder lost him his bet. One morning in May 1971, Walter launched the little rubber boat that he always kept in his car "just in case," and paddled across Spirit Pond. The pond meets the sea at the end of the Morse River, flowing in from Popham Beach at the mouth of the Kennebec in Phippsburg, Maine. Walter just likes looking for things. As he sat looking on the rocky edge of the pond, he spotted a stone with strange marks on it. Two more scratched stones poked out of the eroded bank. Walter cleaned them up and packed them in a bag. Later that day he took them to the Bath Maritime Museum. Walter wanted to know what they said. After twenty years of fame and infamy, the stones rest in the Maine State Museum and Walter still wants to know what they say.

On that first day in Bath, the stones were recognized as being inscribed with the craggy letters of Old Norse runes. The first had a rough map engraved on one side and a short inscription with some rough drawings on the other. The second stone had twelve letters lightly scratched on one side, and the third stone had a deep carefully carved inscription of ten lines on one side and six lines on the other.

Our search for the meaning of the Spirit Pond inscription takes us back a thousand years.

Before the written word reached the Viking world, tales of those heroic times were told in verse and committed to memory. In Iceland poetry was a national sport, played with great passion by farmer and scholar alike, and eventually woven into the Sagas by nostalgic scribes.

Year 948

Egill-Skalla-grimsson was a big man, strong, with a quick temper, ready sword and passion for poetry. He was a typical Viking, a well-traveled soldier of fortune who lived out his life resting on his fame as both a man of metal and a skald in 11th century Iceland. Egill put his actions and deepest feelings into verse. After killing the brother of King Eirik Bloodaxe, after being ship-

wrecked on the English coast and brought before the king in York, and after hearing his blood-revenge death sentence pronounced, he ransomed his head (and life) by composing a poem in praise of King Eirik. Such was the strength of the skaldic art in Viking times; the verses of Egill's *Head Ransom* are still sung in Iceland.

...

From the opening stanza (my translation):

Vestr fórk of ver,	Bearing Viðris' breast
en ek Viðris ber	I bore from the west
munstrandar mar	Sea Steeds bequest
svá's mitt of far	My song shall attest

This verse illustrates the use of *kennings*, rich and complex metaphors typical of medieval Norse skaldic forms. In this case:

Viðris = Odin; Viðris' breast = poetry (Odin exchanged his eye for the gift of poetry.)  
Sea Steeds = ships, and a kenning for poetry.

...

The rough and ready verse of early times was recited and retained until the newly literate scribes of the 12th and 13th centuries consigned them to writing. Sæmundr the Wise gathered the ancient mythic-heroic lays into the work which survives as the *Poetic Edda*. Snorri Sturlusson, ambitious chieftain, ruthless politician, and careful historian, drew from Sæmundr in compiling, for use by aspiring bards, the textbook known as the *Prose Edda* or *Snorra Edda*. The *Poetic Edda* and *Prose Edda*, with the poems interspersed throughout the prose sagas, form the base of our knowledge of Norse poetry.

However, the Medieval vellums are not the only records we have of Norse verse. The Swedish Rök Stone is an eloquent testimony in runes to the fame of Theodoric, early King of the Ostrogoths.

...

Reð Pioðoríkr	Theodoric the bold
hinn þurmoði,	king of sea-warriors
stillir flutna,	ruled over
strandu Hraðmararr.	Reed sea shores
Sitir nu garur	Now sits he armed
a guta sinum,	on his Gothic horse
skialdi umb fatlaðr	shield strapped
skati Mæringa	prince of Maerings.

(Translation: Peter Foote)

...

Even this simple sentiment from the Ryda Stone, also in Sweden, is set in verse.

...

*Her mun standa*      Here shall stand  
*Steinn nær brautu*      The stone near the road

Other bits of early rhyme have been detected on other early runestones, and one 11th century runic inscription unearthed in 1810 in Hønen, Norway, provides a haunting clue to the poet's world and ours. (All the following translations are mine.)

...

*Ut ok vitt ok þurfa*  
*perru ok áts*  
*vinlandi á isa*  
*i óbygð at kómu*  
*aúð má illt vega*  
*at deyi ár*

Wide and far they fared  
needing sustenance  
over ice and waste land  
to Vinland they came  
Wealth weighs little  
for those who die early

...

The noted Norse scholar Sophus Bugge made a careful analysis of the inscription in 1894 and never doubted its authenticity or the validity of the reference to Vinland.

Could it be that the long message carved into the Spirit Pond Stone is couched in an obscure poetic meter which has evaded investigators?

My suspicion began some years ago when I wondered if the 16 lines of Spirit Pond runes might relate to the classical division of Old Norse verse into 8 line stanzas. From this innocent query, further study and an attempt to master the complexities of Norse grammar, I was led to the bookstores of Reykjavik and Snorri Sturlusson's *Prose Edda*.

The three major sections of the *Prose Edda* or *Snorri Edda* consist of:

1) The *Gylfaginning* (*The Beguiling of Gylfi*), a prose treatise on mythology where this mythical King of the Swedes confronts Odin in the god's three guises as the High One, the Equally High One and the Third One. In answering Gylfi's questions, the three aspects of Odin's wisdom unveil the story of the creation of the world, the lives of the Gods, their abodes, their retainers (man and beast) and Ragnarök where the Gods are doomed and the world begins anew. This section has been widely translated into English and forms the primary resource for our study of Norse mythology.

2) The *Skaldskaparmál* (*Poetic Diction*) where Snorri draws from the poetic corpus to illustrate those complex metaphors called *kennings*, of which we have already had a brief example. Although several Victorian translations exist, the most available in the United States is

Arthur G. Brodeur's 1916 edition published by the American-Scandinavian Foundation.

Here is an example:

*Skaldskaparmál* #46:

So spake Eysteinn Valdasson

<i>Sva bra viðr at syjor</i>	Earth's spell binding
<i>seiðr rendr framm breiðr</i>	serpent
<i>Still draws the wide</i>	
<i>seas</i>	
<i>jarðar ut bordi</i>	Ull's father's clenched
	fist falls
<i>Ullz mags hnefar skullu</i>	the fragile boat's rim
	fails

*Syjor seiðr* = sea's enchantment, sea's fish. This double meaning refers to the Midgard Serpent which lies in the Ocean and encircles the world.

Ull's magr = Ull's next of kin (male) = Thor, who was actually Ull's stepfather.

As the tale is told in the *Gylfaginning*: Thor went out fishing with the giant Hymir, where, using an Ox head as bait, he lured and caught the Midgard Serpent. A fierce struggle ensued and Thor crashed his fists on the gunwale. The struggle continued, nearly destroying the boat, but Thor managed to drag the beast back up onto the gunwale. The jealous Hymir hacked off the line and the serpent sank back into the sea, where he still lies.

3) The *Háttatál* (*Tally of Meters*) in which Snorri explains the structure of some ninety different metrical forms, rhyming schemes and types of alliteration, accompanied by an example of each composed by Snorri himself. Because of its complex and highly technical nature, the *Háttatál* has defied translation. But where Valkyries fear to tread:

*Háttatál* #71

<i>slod kann sneiða</i>	new track traveled
<i>seima geíma</i>	trailing sailing
<i>hnigfak Haka</i>	mark Haka's men
<i>hleypa greypa</i>	mowing rowing
<i>hann er of hlunni</i>	ships slide seaward
<i>hesta flesta</i>	storing pouring
<i>laetr leyfðr skati</i>	sea mates see fate
<i>langa gaṅga</i>	spying flying

These are two examples of the 40 or so English renditions that I sheepishly showed scholars at Reykavik's Arni Magnússon Manuscript Institute. To my astonishment, my efforts were enthusiastically received. I was assured that I was on the right track, encouraged to finish the job and consider publication.

On first exposure, the complexity of Norse metric form seems overwhelming, the vocabulary of terms daunting, but Snorri is a good teacher and leads his pupil step by step.

A. The first essential poetic rule in Norse, as well as Old English, is to use alliteration of the first letters in a word. The Norse metric line is divided into two "half lines" (*visiorð*) and classical alliteration requires that two alliterating letters in the first half line alliterate with one letter in the second half line. At the very least, one letter in the first half line must alliterate with one in the second. Although additional alliteration is a poetic bonus, composers prided themselves in devising as many pairs or triplets of alliterations as possible in a line.

#### Háttatál #77

<i>snyðja laetr i solrod</i>	Swift sailing ships to Manar
<i>snekkjur áá Manar</i>	sniff sunrise with surprise

B. The use of rhyme (*henda*) is expansive and encompasses many different arrangements, the main forms being:

(1) Full rhyme (*Adal henda*) where full syllables rhyme with each other.

#### Háttatál #78

<i>bratt skekr byrr rekr</i>	surf wails sail fails
<i>blavegg raaskegg</i>	winds quake cliffs shake
<i>Jarl laetr almaetr</i>	mast falls fate calls
<i>usvift hunskrift</i>	fame dies Jarl cries

(2) Half rhyme includes *Oddhenda* where rhyming syllables have different vowels and *Skothenda* where rhyming syllables have different consonants.

#### Skáldskaparmál #42:

##### Oliv Cut-nose and Crop-ears

<i>Estiz allra landa um</i>	while he is sought
<i>gerð ok sonr jarðar</i>	Earth's son will seek
	the mighty monster
	girding middle earth

(*Sought—seek* and *gird—earth* are the half rhymes.)

(3) End rhyme (*Runhenda*) as it is used in traditional English verse.

#### Háttatál #83

<i>Nadrs gnapa ogn alla</i>	deserted dragon's bed
<i>eyðer baugvalla</i>	drives all into dread
<i>hlunnz of haastalla</i>	slips oceanward the sled
<i>hestar svanfjalla</i>	to swan's watery stead

(*Dragon's [Midgard Serpent's] bed* and *swan's stead* are kennings for the sea.)

Stress, the number of "beats," and the rhyme vary according to strict rules and, of course, the exceptions that prove the rule. Another stanza from the Egill's *Hovudlausn* can be analyzed in the following way, in which stresses are marked above the lines, alliterating words are shown bold and rhyming syllables in italics:

/ / / / /  
Fan verse into **flame**

/ / / / / /  
Kings **fame** to pro *claim*

/ / / / /  
Sounds mighty will **soar**

/ / / /  
Sing praises *galore*

...

Year 1993

Hallfreidr Eiriksson is curator of folklore at the Arni Magnússon Institute in Reykjavík, Iceland. He has tromped Iceland's lava fields and immigrant Icelanders' wheat fields in Manitoba collecting the folklore of his native land. But most of all he is devoted to poetry. As he guides his guests through the old leather bound or new paper back books of the Arni Magnússon collection, he is quick to point out the virtues or flaws of each author as a poet.

The Arni Magnússon Institute was created to receive the priceless collection of old manuscripts that had been preserved in exile in Copenhagen since the 17th century. In 1974 Hallfreidr Eiriksson was part of the Icelandic delegation that welcomed the National Treasure's return to Reykjavík with great rejoicing and recitations of poetry.

The irreplaceable medieval vellums and early paper manuscripts are kept in a subterranean vault, but the Institute maintains a tiny exhibit of original works and prides itself on its comprehensive reference library of Norse literature in many languages. On these shelves I found many clues to the meaning of the Spirit Pond inscription.

Although there is substantial agreement on the transliteration of most of the letters, the transcription into comparable Latin letters has posed difficulties for all investigators. Based on careful study of the stone itself and Malcolm Pearson's fine photographs, I submit my transliteration with a proposed transposition into normalized Old Norse and adjusted word divisions.

With this background as a frame of reference, we can turn our attention to the inscription on Spirit Pond Stone #3.

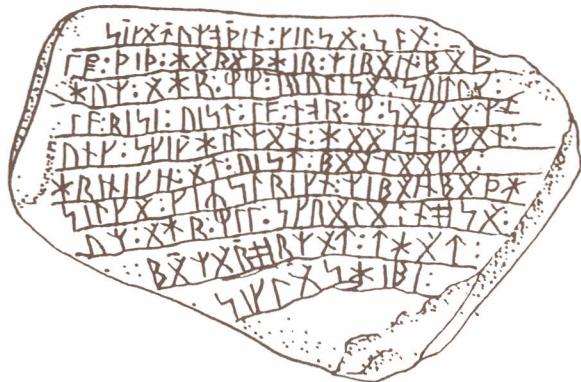


Fig. 3. Side 1; 10 lines.

**SIKATUMODIN:** KILSA: SLJA:  
sé gat um Oðin gel sá sjá

**17 PIP:** HALAÐHIR: MIBAINBAÐ  
sjautan ded haela peir mé(r) baen baðhum

**HUM:** AHR: 10/10: (IUU?) LISA SVITLG:  
ahr tuttugu... lesa sveit l(a)g

**12: RISI:** VIST: 12: NOR: 10: SAJAMLJ  
tólf risi vest tolf nor tio saga (u)m

**UNK:** SKIKHILMAN: HAAKON: FAN:  
ljung skeg(g)heilman(n) Haakon fan(n)

**HRINIKIN:** AT: VIST: BAA: LAAGA  
hringin(n) at vest paa laaga

**SILKA:** KIYSLRIKN: MIBAINBAÐ  
selja giyssl rek(i)n mé(r) baen baðhum

**HUM:** AHR 10/1/1 SKUALALJOISA:  
ahr tolfskval á ljoisa

**BAMAROIJUMAT:** THAT  
pa mar oi úmat ðá at

**SIKLASHIPI**  
sigla shipi

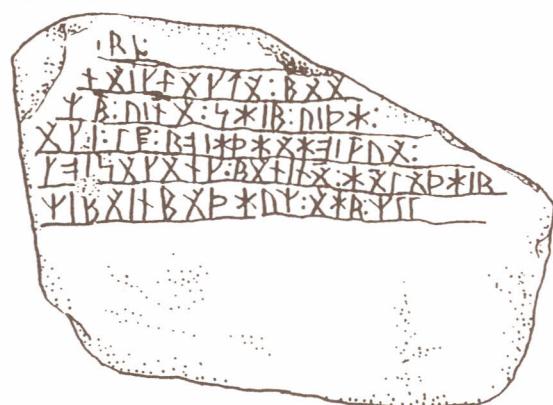


Fig. 2. Side 2; 6 lines.

RI:

ri

**NAIKJAKTA:BAA**  
ná eggja akta pá

**MB: VINA: SHIP: VIDH:**  
umb vin(n)a ship viðh

**AKI: 17 ROIHÐHAHOIKUA:**  
aegi sjautján rauðhahög(g)va

**GOISAGANG BANINA HALADIR**  
gósa gang banina hæla ðeir

**MIBAINBAÐHUM: AHR M/11**  
mé(r) baen baðhum ahr M/1/1

For a word by word, line by line discussion of the word division, word formation, grammatical forms, and rationale for the translation, I refer you to Part 2: **Reason, the Linguistic Analysis.**

Patience. There is work to do before we can begin a translation.

After my early flash of insight, I discovered that Norse Poets didn't bother to arrange their poems in tidy metric lines as we do. The verse follows the dictates of the page, stone or ornamental design, often embedded without distinction in the prose text. A better approach was needed.

After searching for alliterating letters, checking for possible rhymes, counting and recounting syllables, and saying the words over and over, a new form began to emerge.

Whether written or not, it is far easier to analyse lines separated and put in metrical order.

Again, stresses are marked above the lines; alliterating syllables are shown in bold type and rhyming syllables in italics. The spelling is further normalized to Classical Old Norse.

1-A	/ / / / / / / /	sé gat um Oðin: gel sá
1-B	/ / / / / / / /	sjá: sautjan ded: haela peir:
Refrain:	/ / / / / / / /	mér baen baðum: ahr tuttugu:
2-A	/ / / / / / / /	lesa: sveit l(a)g tolfs: risi: vest:
2-B	/ / / / / / / /	tolfs: nor: tiu: saga (u)m jung:
3-A	/ / / / / / / /	skeggheilmann: Haakon: fann:
3-B	/ / / / / / / /	hringinn: at: vest: paa: laaga:
4-A	/ / / / / / / /	selja: giyssl rekinn:

Refrain:      / / / / / /  
mér baen baðum: ahr tolfs  
4-A cont.      / / / /  
skval á: lj oisa:  
4-B      / / / / / / / /  
pa mar: oi úmat: þá at: sigla shipi  
5-A      / / / / / /  
ná eggja akta: pa umb: vinna: ship  
5-B      / / / / / /  
við: ægi: sjautján: rauða:  
6-A      / / / / / /  
höggva: gosa gang: banina  
6-B      / / / / / /  
hæla peir mer baen baðum ahr M tvau

Try to read this out loud as best you can. The Norse sounds are not unlike English although heavier with a much wider range of vowel sounds, but you should be able to sense the beat and alliteration. Each line as numbered refers to a *visiorð* or half line. Of the skaldic meters, the most common is called *Drottkvætt Háttá* (Court poems) where each line contains 6 stressed syllables (nearly all syllables are stressed in Norse). Variations abound and it is not uncommon to find half lines with 5, 7 or 8 stressed syllables.

#### Stressed Syllables:

half line 1-A 7 st. syl.      half line 4-A 9 st. syl.  
half line 1-B 7 st. syl.      half line 4-B 9 st. syl.  
half line 2-A 8 st. syl.      half line 5-A 8 st. syl.  
half line 2-B 8 st. syl.      half line 5-B 7 st. syl.  
half line 3-A 6 st. syl.      half line 6-A 8 st. syl.  
half line 3-B 6 st. syl.      half line 6-B 7 st. syl.

With the exception of the interspersed refrain of 8 stressed syllables and the 3rd line of 6/6 stressed syllables, all of the lines are 8/8, 8/7, 7/8 or 9/9 stressed syllables which qualifies for the form of *Drottvætt* called *Hrynhendaa Háttá* which is based on 8/8 stressed syllable rhythm in imitation of Latin verse.

The next critical qualifier is the existence of alliteration. Consonants must alliterate with the same letter, but vowels can alliterate (called “assonance” in English) with any other vowel. There must be at least one set of alliterating words shared by the 1st (A) and 2nd (B) half line in each line. Only lines 2 and 6 deviate from the ideal of 2 alliterations in the 1st half line sharing alliteration with the 2nd half line, but the total complies with skalding requirements.

#### Alliteration:

half line 1-A sé-sá  
half line 1-B sjá  
half line 2-A tólv  
half line 2-B tólv-tiu

half line 3-A	heil-Haakon
half line 3-B	hringinn
half line 4-A	selja-skval
half line 4-B	sigla-shipi
	mar-mat
half line 5-A	eggja-umb
half line 5-B	ægi
	vinna-viðh
half line 6-A	höggva
half line 6-B	hæla
	gósa-gang

#### Rhyme:

Rhyme was not an essential ingredient, although more and more intricate forms of internal rhyme appeared during the 11th and 12th centuries, culminating with end rhyme, which has been the mark of English poetry for centuries.

The Spirit Pond Inscription is meager in its use of rhyme.

half line 1-A	sé-sá
half line 1-B	sjá
refrain	baen-baðum
half line 2-A	lesa-risa
half line 2-B	none
half line 3-A	heil-Haakon
	mann-fann
half line 3-B	paa-laaga
half line 4-A	giysl-ljoisa
half line 4-B	mar-mat
half line 5-A	none
half line 5-B	none
half line 6-A	gang-banina
half line 6-B	none

The existence of 6-line stanzas is not unknown; they are occasionally interspersed with 4-line stanzas (4 Norse lines contain 8 half lines, which in English are considered full lines).

The use of refrains for emphasis is also common and longer poems are defined both by the number of stanzas and the number of refrains. The refrains in this inscription seem a little desperate, as though the author was pressed and needed to insert his message right away.

Here too, the alliteration exists but in a more arbitrary way than the rigorous patterns devised by famous skalds. The internal rhyme is almost incidental. There is a sense of urgency in the meter; one sees a homespun poet, untrained, faced with relaying events quickly in the most noble tradition of his heritage.

Is there any echo of meaning that can speak to us?

Some of the words are clear, concise and easily translated; others are more tentative, some obscure. The author's age, nationality, dialect, place in life and skaldic training can only be based on speculation. The date of his work, or hers, is even more obscure, making the trail harder to follow, whether we are investigating a twentieth century hoax or an authentic medieval artifact. The rationale for the following translation is presented in Part 2: **Reason, the Linguistic Analysis.**

- 1-A sé gat Oðin: gel sá  
see, pay heed to (this) Odin cries  
1-B sjá sjautján ded: haela þeir:  
to see seventeen dead: praise them

Refrain:

mér baen baðum: ahr: tuttigu:  
(through me) we pray a prayer year twenty

- 2-A lesa: sveit lag: tólf: risi: vest:  
picked (the) company companions twelve  
began west  
2-B tólv: nor: tiu: saga um ljumg:  
twelve north ten, they tell of young  
3-A skeggheilmann: Haakon: fann:  
bearded (scruffy) holy (doomed) man  
(that) Haakon found  
3-B hringinn: at: vest: paa: laaga:  
surrounded in the west on the water  
4-A selja: giyslrekinn:  
they sold as hostage the man adrift

Refrain:

mér baen baðum: ahr tólf  
(through me) we pray a prayer, year twelve

- 4-A skvaljá: ljoisa:  
(a gale ) breaks forth (the wind) blows up  
suddenly  
4-B pá mar: ó úmat: þa at: sigla shipi  
on the sea Oh! fainthearted those that sail  
the ship  
5-A ná eggja akta: pa umb: vinna: ship:  
grasp urging heed too win the ship  
5-B viðh: Ægi: sjautján: rauða:  
against Ægir seventeen red  
6-A höggva: gósa gang: banina  
cut gushing the course of that which  
causes death  
6-B hæla ðeir  
praise them

Refrain:

mér baen baðum: ahr M tvau  
(through me) we pray a prayer, year M—two

The words sound awkward in the glaring line-up of direct transcription. The poetic beat crumbles amid the English words. The crispness that inflection gives a phrase needs the help of pronouns, prepositions and conjunctions to make it comprehensible. The word order resembles Japanese Haiku poetry in the importance of juxtapositioning. It lives apart from the rigid word order of English.

- see pay heed to (this); Odin cries  
to see seventeen dead praise them  
(through me) we pray our prayer year  
twenty  
the company picked twelve companions,  
twelve began west  
ten north, they tell of young  
bearded (scruffy) holy (doomed) man-(that)  
Haakon found  
surrounded in the west on the water  
the man adrift was handed over as a hostage  
(through me) we pray our prayer year twelve  
(a gale) breaks forth (wind) blows up  
on the sea, Oh! fainthearted those that sail the ship  
from Ægir, seventeen made red  
gushing cut the course that caused death  
praise them  
(through me) we pray our prayer year  
M—two

The narrative is not clear to follow, and numerous other interpretations are possible, even probable. Certainly, the "translation" is my own subjective reading of the original.

Yet I can hear the surge of the waves crashing in the sudden storm, the fainthearted sailors trying to wrench their ship from the foamy arms of Ægir, angry god of the sea. The gushing foam around the broken rigging and gunwales and the 17 sailors smashed by the wind, bloody and dead. We wonder about the skeggheilmann, the one that Haakon found. Was he lost in this storm, only to be sold as hostage or was he delivered up to Ægir? Small wonder Odin cried and our prayers are sought.

Nothing in the language, style or carving, anomalous usage, give any sure indication of the age or origin of its author. Some aspects suggest a late 14th–15th century date, others, an earlier Icelandic or Greenlandic source. The vernacular flavor and the voice of one author echoes throughout the whole piece. None of the numbers bear significant relationship to each other and are open to interpretation.

The problem of the anomalous letters, notably the "stung" A, X otherwise present only on the Kensington and Narragansett stones and unknown in Scandinavia, and the uncharacteristic use of numbers remain to be satisfactorily addressed.

If this inscription is a 20th century hoax, I am anxious to meet the perpetrator and learn from his, or her, impressive knowledge of Old Norse. I find it difficult to accept that the structure and word usage I've gleaned from these lines is the result of mere chance or statistical coincidence, or an overactive imagination on my part. Corroborating evidence and more studies are needed before the mystery of the Spirit Pond Rune Stones is solved.

**Postscript:** Jonas Kristjánsson was born in the north of Iceland. As a boy he had ice skates made of sheep bones with holes bored through the front and pegs set in the

back to hold the binding thongs in place. I know this because he told me so during a casual conversation in front of a sled, ski and skate exhibit of Viking Artifacts in the National Museum in Copenhagen in February 1992. We also talked about Norse poetry and he suggested that I contact him in Reykjavik where he could arrange for me to see some of the old vellums. Jónas Kristjánsson is the director of the Arni Magnússon Institute and the foremost Icelandic authority on the Eddas and Sagas. I am deeply indebted to him for his kind welcome, the gracious hospitality of the entire staff at the Institute, his thoughtful consideration and gentle encouragement of my pursuit of rendering Old Norse Verse into English form.

Part 2 of this essay, "Reason: The Linguistic Analysis" and a complete bibliography of the author's sources will appear in the next issue of the *NEARA Journal*.

