

# Old Norse literature

- Grapheme notes: DH is the voiced dental fricative, TH is the unvoiced, OE is the O with umlaut eg Ð, Þ, Ö ## First Lecture
- Different lenses of approach
- Short test at the end
- Next week – Judy Quinn -> Where do heroes come from?
  - 3 eda poems ### Viking Expeditions
- circa 900 to 1066
- Runic inscriptions but no written sources from this time
- All from the western branch
- Iceland discovery expedition – important - 12.-13. century, literature written
- What enabled vikings to spread?
  - Drakarr - War Ship
  - Knarr - Colonisation ship ### Ísland
- Discovery - Snaeland, Gardarshólm, Ísland >- Names, only Ísland stuck
- Settlement - Ingold Arnarson circa 870 - Mythic coloniser
- 20-40k people arrived over 60 years from mostly Norway and some from the British isles
- Source for these are the Book of Icelanders and Book of Settlement by Ari the Learned
- Settlers could take as much land as they could walk around in a day
- Somewhat cooperative way of settling
- There were some Irish monks
- Landníama – landtaking
- Laws mainly based on Norwegian ones and adapted them ##### Societal structure
- Free farmers – Bóndi - They could be free outside of the Norwegian kingdom because the king started collecting taxes circa 9th century
- Leaders – Höfðingi - Local, bigger farmers
- Slaves - From the British isles, many celts
- Later more hierarchy evolved

- Godi – Chieftans
- Priests, Clergy
- 5 Families consolidated power in the 13th century and Iceland fell under Norwegian rule which ended the free Icelandic state period ##### Establishment of the Althing
- Local assemblies – Þings
- Iceland - Same system
- 930 - One central assembly = Alþing, at the assembly plains = Þingvellir
- Law based on Norwegian model
- Problems taken to Alþing if they could not be resolved by local Things
- No records ##### Adoption of Christianity
- In the year 1000 officially, but reality is fuzzier
- This meant one law for the all of Iceland, christian of course
- It was not banned to be pagan but not in public only at home
- Writing came with it
- They wrote down even the pagan/folk texts because it was so removed from the world
- Christian texts too but Sagas and myth, this is unique in all of europe
- They wrote in Old Norse and not Latin, there was very little Latin
- Language evolution – Added two letters to the latin alphabet: Þ, Ð - which they took from their runic alphabet
- Many gods - Christ, Thor etc., no contradiction
- Education of the people - priests got educated in Norway
- Schools started popping up, even lay people could attend, which was not the case in most places in europe
- That is one of the reasons for folk literature being so available to us #### Genres of Old Norse Literature
- 12.    ■    14. century
- Old Norse language
- Poetry
  - Skaldic poems – Known authorship
    - Complicated metres, thus the structure is very hard to change – Could theoretically preserve the form from before it was written down
    - Started at the court of Norwegian kings, 9th century
    - Oral form, written down many centuries later (12th onward)
    - Helps with reconstructing pronunciation and helps date the poems
  - The Poetic Edda – Mythological and heroic songs
    - Codex Regius

- Simpler poetic meters
  - If not for this, the mythology would be lost ##### Pagan religion
- Two families of gods:
  - Aesir: Odin, Thor, Baldr - some speculate that the Germanic people introduced these
  - Vanir: Frey, Freyja, Njörð - some speculate that this is the older layer connected to fertility and Germanic people adopted them
- Younger Edda - Prosaic - Snorri Sturluson
  - Skald handbook with mythological content
  - beginning of 13th century
  - Wanted to preserve Skaldic poetry because it was dying out
  - Skald importance was waning
  - Kennings - forms to fit the metre
  - Snorri was educated and read a lot of mainland literature and he retells the Edda in that style
  - He explained the gods rationally which the older Edda did not, it did not even question why the gods did what they did
- Yggdrasil ##### Mythological lays
- Heroic poetry epics
- Only comprehensive sources of the pagan mythology
- Titles:
  - Völuspá - The seeress's Prophecy
  - Hávamál - Sayings of the High One (Ódin)
  - Vafþrúðnismál - Vafthrudnir's Sayings
  - Grímnismál - Grimms Sayings
- 10 in total
- Prophecies could be invented in the 13th century due to Christianisation but some claim they could be actual old pagan prophecies – That's why different approaches are important so you can make up your mind
- Lot of contention on how accurate the Edda is
- Preserved also in England: Beowulf, Widsith etc.; Germany: Song of Hildebrand, Song of the Nibelungs
- READ: first 3 Helgi poems ##### Sagas
- Prosaic genre
- Specific for Iceland and Norway
- Genres:
  - King/Royal – konungasögur
    - Preserve royal deeds
    - Inspired by Hagiographies - Saint stories
  - Family – íslendingasögur
    - Describes lives of first Icelanders, taking place in that period (870-930), written down also centuries later

- For sure changed a lot
- Places and names on Iceland
- Sagas about discovering America (Vineland)
- Again, it is contested whether it is simply art or real attestations but most likely there is some truth
- Legendary – fornaldarsögur
  - Take place out of Iceland
  - Take place before the settlement
  - Written down later than the Kingly and Familial stories
  - Supernatural stuff
- Chivalric – riddarasögur
  - Translated European stories and Indigenous Icelandic sagas
  - Translated
    - Fixed form
    - Quite good translations
    - Some are word for word with mainland versions
    - Shows what the translator had to change for comprehensibility
  - Indigenous
    - Don't pretend to be historical
    - Quite funny with interesting stories
- Contemporary + Bishops – samtíðasögur
  - Written in the time of writing (circa 13th century)
  - Describe Iceland at that time
  - Last days of the Icelandic free state
  - Describe how the democratic system fell