

# 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, Njörd - 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

## Second lecture – Judy Quinn

- Why they were still relevant
- Pre christian mythology – death in battle
- Prose inbetween poetry might be newer eg. reincarnation at end of 3rd poem of Helgi
- Edda written down during transition to Norwegian rule – Might be influenced by that
- Law-speaker – person who memorized all laws - only official
- 999 - adoption of christianity
- 1118-19 - law written down
- Laws copied and changed across iceland – different versions
  - The real law was what the bishops had
  - Law-speaker is not mentioned anymore and were replaced by them
  - 2 Bishops
    - Longest version of the law was the real one
  - 2 equally long laws – Skálholt Bishops is the real one
- Homeostasis – Preliterary culture is transformed during literacy – what was deemed irrelevant is discarded
  - Thus the poetry had to have meant something
- Snorri Sturluson – Lawmaker, Law-speaker
  - Wrote about the mythology and poetry on iceland
  - During civil war
  - Was murdered by a servant of the Norwegian king
  - Only copies from a century later were written down
    - Different versions

## Warrior-gods relationship

- Æsir vs. Jötnar – 2 families of gods
  - Ragna rök – destinies of the powers
- Æsir recruit human warriors to Valhöll to defeat the Jötnar
- Valkyrja – She-chooser of the slain
  - Chooses best warrior on Valhöll to marry (Helgi says sure)
  - Chosen by Valkyrja means you die unless she marries you
  - Both human and divine
  - Did not disappear with adoption in Christianity at least in literature – Cultural paganism
    - Possibly parallels with angels
- Metre
  - Alliteration only per line – Fornirðislag
  - Long Short lines
- Codex Regius – pretty rough shape
  - Not commissioned by a very wealthy person
  - first third is about gods
  - rest is about the human world
  - Author tried to tie the poems together with the prose

## Helgi

- Senna – insult exchange

- Make up large portions of the poems
- Never directly Helgi but his men
- Almost never resolves – ends in a real fight
  - Only middle senna is resolved
  - Giantess turns to stone
- 3 poems with parallel plots
- About what makes a great leader
  - Mythological resolution of this – divinely touched are usually the better leaders
- Helgi and Valkyrie apparently reincarnated over and over
  - Compiler says that reincarnation was in the ancient times but in their time he calls it a delusion

## Third lecture – Madita Knöpfle – Narratology

- Pre modern literary practices x theory

### Historical situatedness

- Literature – Bókmenntir
  - Written and spoken
  - Also means history to some extent
  - Before the 19th century it meant scholarship – Connected with nationbuilding
  - Skáldskapr – old word that might be more similar to the concept of literature
- Premodern
  - Manuscripts till 19th century on Iceland
  - Single copies
  - Public or social readings - No time for reading as a leisure
    - Texts composed differently to be better for reading aloud
  - Read orally or aloud
  - No concept of author – texts altered
- Sagnaskemtun – saga entertainment
- Different versions of sagas
- Until 18th century – only church could print – handwritten secular texts
- Radio replaced evening wakes – oral homely readings
- First Icelandic novel – 1850 – Piltur og Stúlka

### Theory

- Classical narratologies
  - Text-centered grammar of narrative
  - Assumed all texts had a sort of grammar of story
  - Developed on modern novels
  - Diachronic narr.
- Post-classical narratologies
  - Context-Oriented tool
  - Post-structuralist (Feminist, postcolonial..)
  - 2000s
  - Synchronic narr.
  - Rhetorics
  - Each time has its own approach
- They do not exclude each other
- (Wolf Schmid - Narratology – 2010)
- Monika Fludernik – Diachronization of narratology
  - Evolution of scene shifts in 50 historical English texts
  - Middle ages – for listeners

- Shift from rhetorical device to a cue or reference to saga tradition

## Analysis

- “Nú er þar máls at taka” – “Now let us speak of”
  - Many translations depending on interpretation of the device
  - Personal v. impersonal translations – ie. “Now the tale is to be taken up”
- Aphodos – Sideplot to main story transition
  - Nunc ad cetera, unde incepimus, regrediamur – Adam of Bremen I:17
- Nú er þar máls at taka
  - Homily book
    - 1200s
    - shift of topic
    - sermon
  - Njáls saga
    - 1400s
    - Returns story to a character that was introduced in the beginning but the plot went on without her
  - Huldarsaga
    - 1800s
    - Newly composed saga based on a mentioned lost saga
    - Might have been used as a stylistic device to sound closer to mediaval sagas
  - Piltur og stúlka
    - 1850
    - Tie different parts of the story
    - Phrases from sagas used in a text that was designed to be read quietly
    - Ends in a sagic way as well
  - Kristinhald undir Jökli
    - 1968
    - Generic cue
    - Characters in novel compared to characters made up in old stories

## Did vikings have a soul?

- Saul (Saiwalo), Líkamr (Lichunhamo) – From christianity
- Hamr – Protobaltofinnic - Skin, Gestalt, Chemise
  - Original conception of what a being is
  - Used in literature during:
    - Overcoming obstacles – Flying
    - Fighting – Increasing strength – Berserker - Not of one shape – Eigi Einhamr  
-> They hamask
    - Magic – Shapeshifters - No specified hamr
  - Hamför – Journey of hamr
  - Hamslauss – Person out of their mind
  - Hamstolin – Shapeless/Mindless
  - Hamingja – Happiness (in Icelandic)
- Change towards a body-soul distinction?
  - Originally no distinction in hamr probably
    - í trollz hami (In a trollish shape) – Seeress’s prophecy
      - Both mental and real shape
    - í arnar ham – Eagleish shape/property – Vaftrúðnismál -> But in Snorra Edda – it is interpreted as someone being physically eagle-like
  - Hamr as a state of mind connected to body state
    - berserk’s fury – hamrammr
      - Connected to animal shapes
      - Ber - serkir – bear + skirts

- Úlf - heðnar – wolf + skins
  - Berserkers change their mental shape to get strenght
  - Archæological evidence - depiction of animal-headed fighters, fighter fighting bears
  - Cult of furious warriors already in germanic areas on continental europe
  - Possibly furries?
  - Hamrammr could mean werewolf in some contexts
- Hamr as a physical meaning but still some mental aspects
  - Völsunga saga
    - Sigmund
    - Úlfhamir – wolf skins
    - Wolf nature comes over people
- Hamr as physical only
  - heimskringla - Snorri Sturluson
    - Óðin skipti hömum – Odin could change his shape
  - Christianised thinking
  - Later sagas
    - vargs hamnum - wolf's hamr
    - fiaðrhamr - flying contraption
- Hamr as mental only
  - Egils saga – sem hamstoli væri – (and was) as one possessed – “as if hamr was stolen”
  - Bærings saga – hamstoli – lost his mind – hamr was stolen
  - Hamr = Inner shape
- => Concept of identity changes
- It was a tradition not influenced by greek ideas of the soul
  - If you change your mind you change your body
- The eyes sometimes remain the same

## Trolls in Scandinavian Mythology and beyond – Simek

- Many words for anthropologic beings
- Hierarchy of giants in sagas
- Jötnar - primeval giants – cosmological beings
- Risir = big and daft
- Þursar - somewhat magical giants - evil
- Trolls are big but not too big – isolated and harmful
- Trolls have many aspects – deathly, playful, troll women, nice troll girls, names of trolls
- Troll used as devil in cursing somebody ie. troll take you x devil take you
- escape from death – ór trölla hendum
- Trolls are in many stories, sagas, poems and books
- Troll games
  - Throwing bones
  - Catching balls
  - Hornskinnleikr
  - Hráskinnleikr
  - Playing footsie
- What are trolls really
  - Giantish
  - Mythological + folk + evil creatures
  - No canon
- Modern reception of trolls
  - 2 Strains
    - 1. Tolkien
    - Vage concept mixed up with giants

- Trick turns them into stone - Alvíssmál – dwarf turns into stone - only instance
  - Way less sources in the 30s - 50s
  - Changed concept of what trolls are in modern times
  - Very christian concept of trolls
  - Trolls spread into fantasy
  - No humour :( – in sagas they are a sarcastic commentary on humans
  - Torturers of women
  - 20th century – commercialization
    - Commerce-trolls
    - Childrens book trolls
      - They are actually Tomtar (Gnomes etc.)
- 2. Tove Jansson
  - 1954
  - Translated and illustrated The Hobbit
- Real trolls are if not outright evil but they are big
- 2010 - Troll films
  - Troll Hunter
  - The last Norwegian troll
  - Thale – male fantasy
  - Merlin (Ser.)
  - Graans
- Advertising (Of course)