

## Poetry in Scandinavia and the North

Dear Viking Answer Lady:

I want to learn more about sagas like Kalevala and Viking poetry and stuff. Can you help me?

(signed) I Want to Grow Up To Be Ragnar

Gentle Reader:

You are suffering from a misapprehension that is, alas, all too common. Kalevala is NOT a "saga." By definition, a saga is a prose form. Kalevala is poetry, set in unrhymed, non-strophic trochaic tetrameter, which is now referred to by scholars as "Kalevala meter". Outside of Finland, this type of verse is most familiar from Longfellow's *Hiawatha*. Furthermore, the Kalevala is a modern construction, put together by Elias Lönnrot in 1849. Lönnrot collected poems from the countryside which are called runos, and which represented a pure oral tradition of folklore. The runos themselves have been preserved from ancient times, making Kalevala reflect some ancient beliefs. However, Lönnrot was not above editing to achieve consistency in his story line, and hence a valid understanding of ancient Finnish belief cannot be had by reading Kalevala alone.

The 22,795 lines of Lönnrot's Kalevala are only a tiny fraction of the preserved runos saved by collectors. Another 1,270,000 lines of runos have been published in the 33 volume *Suomen Kansan Vanhat Runot* ("Ancient Poems of the Finnish People") (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society. 1908-1948). Half that many again are still unpublished in the Finnish Literature Society archives, and other folklore collections in Estonia and Petrozavodsk contain yet more.

Runos were undoubtedly used in spells, magical operations, and to accompany ritual. They were also used as entertainment at festivals, in competitions of memory and performance, and as work songs in the fields. Men tended to sing runos preserving heroic poetry, while women favored lyric, legends and ballads.

Kalevala Runo XXVI:1-14

Competitions were often held to see which contestant could recite the most runos. Some champions had tens of thousands of lines memorized!

Ahti oli saarella asuva

Kaukoniemen kainalossa

Oli pellon kynännässä,

vainon vakoannassa.

Korvalta ylen korea,

kovin tarkka kuulennalta.

Kuulevi jumun kylältä

järyn järvien takoa,

jalan iskun iljeneltä,

reen kapinan kankahalta.

Juhtui juoni mielehensä,

tuuma aivohon osasi:

häitä Pohjola pitävi,

salajoukko juominkia!

(Ahti dwelt upon an island,

By the bay near Kauko's headland,

And his fields he tilled industrious,

And the fields he trenched with ploughing,

And his ears were of the finest,

And his hearing of the keenest.

Heard he shouting in the village,

From the lake came sounds of hammering,

On the ice the sound of footsteps,

On the heath a sledge was rattling.

Therefore in his mind he fancied,

In his brain the notion entered,

That at Pohjola was wedding,

And a drinking-bout in secret.)

## Sámi Shaman's Drum

The Finns are NOT the same people as the Vikings, the Norwegians, the Swedes, the Icelanders or the Danes. The Finns are Finno-Ugric peoples. The Scandinavians are derived from Germanic and ultimately Indo-European stock. When you encounter the word "Finn" in a saga or other Viking reference, it almost invariably is referring to the Sámi (formerly called Lapps) who were feared and respected as great magicians, and who practiced a shamanistic form of ecstatic religion. The Sámi are yet another people, distinct from both the Finns and the Scandinavians. The Sámi did apparently borrow somewhat from Norse religious belief. They have a Thunderer god much like Thor, and in memory of him or to invoke his powers, they use a short handled hammer to beat their magical drums (which are hide over a frame, much like an oval-shaped boudrhan).

There is little evidence to show that the Vikings borrowed from the Sámi in turn, although some scholars see parallels in seiðr to some Sámi traditions. The Finns likewise borrowed from the Scandinavians: their language attests to the importation of concepts as well as words, such as: plough, spear, sword, gold, iron, trade, power, king, to govern, to judge... all words in Finnish which are derived from purely Nordic roots. Some borrowings are bound to have gone the other way, but there is much less evidence to document it.

## Norse Poetry

Norse poetry, although also derived from an oral tradition, in turn is very different from the Finnish runo. The primary feature which distinguishes Norse poetry is probably the alliteration used. Alliteration means words which begin with the same sound, as in song ... sword, board ... brand or eagle ... Æsir. Another important feature of Norse poetry is the use of kennings. A kenning is a riddling reference to one item or concept which does not name it directly, but rather suggests it by the elliptical way in which the subject is spoken of, which causes the listener or reader to visualize the intended concept. A simple kenning is found in the name Beowulf or "bee-wolf": the wolf is a kenning for "thief" hence the phrase becomes "bee-thief" which the Norse listener would understand to be a bear, which steals honey from bees.

The skald was a historian, storyteller, poet and singer of songs. The skald was highly respected in Viking society for his skills.

Norse poetry comes in two "flavors": eddaic and skaldic. Eddaic verse is anonymous and is composed in relatively simple language and meters. The themes are mythical or drawn from heroic legends. Stanzas vary in number of lines within the same poem. Skaldic poems are usually attributed to named poets and many of them

are praise poems made for a specific jarl or king. Skaldic meters follow strict rules and can be very complex in structure, and the language used is often convoluted, kenning-rich, and a challenge for those unversed in the poetic tradition to understand without footnotes.

Examples of Meters

Fornyrðislag or "meter of ancient words"

(composed both with and without a fixed number of syllables per line, usually 4 syllables, more or less)

Children learned about the Gods of Asgard, mighty heroes, and the history and culture of their people from skalds.

From Voluspa:

Ár var alda  
þar er Ymir bygði  
vara sandr né sær  
né svalar unnir,  
jord fannsk æva  
né upphiminn,  
gap var ginnunga  
en gras hvergi.

(Early ages

there that Ymir settled,  
was not sand nor sea  
nor sea-waves chilling,  
earth was never  
nor up-heaven,

Ginnung-Gap was then  
but grass nowhere.)

Malahattr or "meter of speeches"

(like fornyrðislag but has a regular number of syllables per line, usually five syllables in each line)

Some skalds may have used musical accompaniment when performing their poetry.

From Haraldskvaeði

Hlaðnir oru holða  
ok hvitra skjalda  
vigra vestroenna  
ok valskra sverða;  
grenjuðu berserkir,  
guðr var þeim á sinnum  
emjuðu ulfheðnar  
ok isorn dúðu.

(Full they were of fighters  
and flashing shield-boards,  
western war-lances  
and wound-blades Frankish;  
cried then the bersarks,  
carnage they had thoughts of,  
wailed then the wolf-coated

and weapons brandished.)

Kviðuháttir or "meter of discourse"

(a variant of fornyrðislag in which syllables are closely counted and the lines alternate, starting with one line with three syllables, the next line with four)

From Glælognskviða by Þórarinn Praise-tongue the Icelander:

Bið Áleif

at unni þér

(hann's goðs maðr)

grundar sinnar;

hann of getr

af goði sjolfum

ár ok frið

ollum monnum,

(Pray Olaf

he unto you

(he's God's man)

grants his country;

he now gets

from god truly

bounty, peace,

bless'd for mankind.)

Ljóðaháttir "meter of chants"

(This form may have been developed as a special form for magical or cult poetry, uses repetition and parallelism of expression. A variant is called *galdralag* "magic spell meter" -- see below. The meter is made up of pairs of lines, each with two stressed syllables and bound by alliteration, followed by a third line called "the full line" which has its own alliteration and either 2 or 3 stressed syllables. Normally two segments of three lines make up a stanza.)

Captivated by the skald's tale, the long winter nights pass more easily for the listeners because of the skald's skills.

From *Havamal*:

Byrði betri  
berrat maðr brautu at  
en sé mannvit mikit;  
vegnest verra  
vegra hann velli at  
en sé ofdrykkja ols.

(Burden better  
bears none abroad with him  
than a cool discretion;  
with worser food  
will fare you never  
than a big load of beer.)

*Galdralag* "magic spell meter"

(uses a fourth line which echoes and varies the third line of the stanza)

From the Eggjum grave stone, Sogn, Noway ca. 700 C.E.:

Hverr of kom Heráss á

hí á land gotna?

Fiskr ór fjanda vim svimandi,

fogl á fjanda lið galandi.

(As whom came War-god

hither to the land of men?

A fish from the torrent of enemies swimming,

A bird against troop of enemies screaming.)

Dróttkvætt "noble warrior's meter"

(Uses a three-stress line, normally of six syllables, always ending in a long stressed syllable followed by an unstressed one. The lines are linked in pairs by alliteration, two initial sounds in the first line matched by the start of the first stressed syllable in the second line. There is also a system of internal rhyme: in each line the last stressed syllable must contain vowel and consonant that chime with those in an earlier syllable. In the first line a half-rhyme should be found -- also called skothending or "glancing hit" -- and in the second line the rhyme should be full -- also called aðalhending or "full hit". Each stanza contains eight lines, and there is usually a marked syntactic division at the end of line four to make the whole into two balancing halves.)

From the Karlevi stone in Oland, ca. 1000 C.E.:

Folginn liggr hinns fylgðu

flestr vissi þat mestar

daeðir dolga Þruðar

draugr í þeimsi haugi;

munat reið-Viðurr ráða

rógstarkr í Danmarku

Endils jarmungrundar

øgrandari landi.

(Tree of Thrud of hostilities,

the man whom the greatest virtues accompanies

-- most men knew that --

lies buried in this mound;

a more upright chariot-Vidur

of wondrous-wide ground of Endil

will not rule, strife strong,

land in Denmark.)

#### Kennings Explained

In the dróttkvætt poem above, there are two fairly complex kennings. The first, "Tree of Thrud of hostilities" may be unravelled like so: -- Thrud was Thor's daughter, but here the name is used to mean simply "goddess", giving us "goddess of hostilities" which is a kenning for valkyrie. The "tree of the valkyrie" is a warrior. This makes the first part of the poem to mean:

A warrior

the man whom the greatest virtues accompanies

-- most men knew that --

lies buried in this mound;

The second kenning, "chariot-Vidur of wondrous-wide ground of Endil" is similarly deciphered. Endil is the name of a legendary sea-king. "The sea-king's ground" therefore is the ocean. This gives us "Chariot-Vidur of the ocean," which can also be read as "Vidur of the chariot of the ocean." "Chariot of the ocean" is a ship, giving us "Vidur of the ship." Vidur is one of the heiti or alternate names of Óðinn, and here is used to mean "god." The "god of a ship" is its captain. This makes the second part of the poem to mean:

a more upright captain  
will not rule, strife strong,  
land in Denmark.

Hrynhendr hátttr "flowing meter"

(derived from dróttkvætt, and uses all the dróttkvætt rules with the addition of requiring that the basic unit be extended from a three-stress, six-syllable line to a four-stress, eight-syllable line.)

From a praise poem to King Magnus of Norway composed by Arnór Thórdarson the Icelander ca. 1045:

Ungan frá k þik, eyðir, þrøngva  
ulfa gráðar, þeira ráði;  
skyldir stökk með skæðan þokka  
skeiðarbrands fyr þér ór landi.

(Boyish you were, bane of, staying,  
barest wolf-greed, men unruly;  
helmsman ran with hostile thinking,  
high-ship-front's, from you and country.)

Learning to Write Poetry in the Norse Style

The most important step in learning to write poetry in the Norse style is to read Norse poetry!! You cannot get the "feel" of the poetry right in your own work unless you have steeped yourself in the type of poetry you wish to emulate. Some excellent sources of Norse poetry are The Poetic Edda and Hollander's The Skalds. Don't just read the poetry silently... take the time to read some verses out loud and listen carefully to the rhythm and feel. In addition to reading the poetry itself, take the time to read some of the sagas. While the sagas are prose literature, they often quote famous poets' work, plus the saga itself will help you acquire some of the

background, worldview, and language used in Norse poetry. Many of the sagas have been translated into English, and best of all, many are available in inexpensive Penguin editions.

Once you have thoroughly grounded yourself in the Norse literature, the next step is to actually sit down and write your own poetry in the Norse style. At first, don't worry too much about rigidly adhering to one of the meters discussed above (unless or course you are already an accomplished poet and understand the mechanics of conforming to a metrical form). For your first poem or two, try to use alliteration and kennings to give your poetry the "flavor" of Viking poetry. The truest test of whether or not your poetry has achieved the proper tone is to read the poem aloud. Norse poetry was an oral art form, and meant to be spoken and listened to. Does the poem sound right?

Once you have mastered the use of alliteration and kennings, you are ready to try your hand at using an actual Norse metrical form. Fornyrðislag is perhaps the best verse form to begin with. Read examples from the Poetic Edda, then try writing your own poem in this meter. Keep practicing, and keep listening to the sound of your poems.

Soon, you will be composing Norse-style poetry that a Viking would be glad to listen to!

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## Rhythm and Meter in English Poetry

English poetry employs five basic rhythms of varying stressed (/) and unstressed (x) syllables. The meters are iambs, trochees, spondees, anapests and dactyls. In this document the stressed syllables are marked in boldface type rather than the traditional "/" and "x." Each unit of rhythm is called a "foot" of poetry.

The meters with two-syllable feet are

IAMBIC (x /) : That time of year thou mayst in me behold

TROCHAIC (/ x): Tell me not in mournful numbers

SPONDAIC (/ /): Break, break, break/ On thy cold gray stones, O Sea!

Meters with three-syllable feet are

ANAPESTIC (x x /): And the sound of a voice that is still

DACTYLIC (/ x x): This is the forest primeval, the murmuring pines and the hemlock (a trochee replaces the final dactyl)

Each line of a poem contains a certain number of feet of iambs, trochees, spondees, dactyls or anapests. A line of one foot is a monometer, 2 feet is a dimeter, and so on--trimeter (3), tetrameter (4), pentameter (5), hexameter (6), heptameter (7), and octameter (8). The number of syllables in a line varies therefore according to the meter. A good example of trochaic monometer, for example, is this poem entitled "Fleas":

Adam

Had'em.

Here are some more serious examples of the various meters.

iambic pentameter (5 iambs, 10 syllables)

That time | of year | thou mayst | in me | behold

trochaic tetrameter (4 trochees, 8 syllables)

Tell me | not in | mournful | numbers

anapestic trimeter (3 anapests, 9 syllables)

And the sound | of a voice | that is still

dactylic hexameter (6 dactyls, 17 syllables; a trochee replaces the last dactyl)

This is the | forest pri | meval, the | murmuring | pine and the | hemlocks

[Harry Rusche]