

Norse Poetry Overview

General Concepts & Building Blocks

Culture & Usage

- There are two distinct usages in Norse Poetry, “Eddic” and Skaldic.
- Most surviving poems come to us through either the *Poetic Edda* or sagas.
- Eddic poetry is impersonal, usually anonymous, and is often monologue or dialogue-heavy. There are definitely examples of third person narration, but it is less common.
- Most Eddic poems are various stories of myth and legend. Some of them were clearly used to preserve theological or poetic information within the framework of the story. There are a few Eddic praise-poems which favor dialogue and create a situation where virtues are spoken of by characters in the poem.
- Skaldic poetry is attributed to a particular poet, usually composed for a specific reason or person. The skald is generally speaking directly to listener.
- Most Skaldic poems are either praise-poems or *lausavísur*, “occasional verse,” where a poet makes up a poem on the spot to prove a point. Praise poems will often recount deeds. Sometimes other stories are told in tribute to a gift (e.g. if a skald was given a shield depicting a few mythological tales, the skald will tell the tales in verse.)
- Skaldic poems make much more extensive use of kennings (see below) and other more complex poetic devices. Some surviving poems are very obscure, almost a word game.
- Much of what we know about Skaldic poetry was preserved in a work entitled *Edda* by the 13th Century poet and politician Snorri Sturluson.

Alliteration

- All Norse poetry depends on alliteration in some way. It is also called “initial rhyme.”
- Alliteration is the same initial vowel or consonant sound at the beginning of the word.
 - **Examples:** brave brother, fierce fire, hot hate, silver singer, asked and answered
- A vowel alliterates with any other vowel as well as itself. “Y” (and Norse “j”) is considered a vowel even when it’s used as a consonant.
 - **Examples:** evil age, Odin’s only eye, over ice, easy year, angry jarl
- Consonant pairs only look at the first letter, with the exception of the s
 - **Examples:** broad beam, pleasing prayer, towering tree
- S with an unvoiced sound (*sp*, *sk*, and *st*) only alliterates with that same sound, not other s sounds. All other s pairs alliterate with any other.
 - **Examples:** strong staves, spent spinning, skilled skald, soft sleep
- Always alliterate with your ear, not your eye. In English, the same letter sometimes has different sounds, and some letters sound very different in certain circumstances. Also, letter pairs like “th,” “ch,” and “sh” sometimes have completely different sounds.
 - **Examples:** certainly slain, crushed keep, fearsome phrase, one will, sure sharp

Stress and Rhythm

- Middle- and Modern-English poetry tends to fall into a set pattern of stresses (iambic, usually.) There is some debate on how Old Norse Poetry is stressed, but it is clear that it does not need to fall into a constant pattern, and some sources suggest that it is required to be dynamic – one should try to vary the stress pattern even within the same line.

- All Norse meters use half-lines in some way. The most common Eddic form is each half-line being composed of four beats, two stressed and two unstressed. Stressed beats are always syntactically important.
- For Eddic meters, unstressed beats may be more than one syllable – there may be rules for this or there may not, it's unclear. Stressed beats are always one syllable unless they are “resolved.”
- “Resolution” or “resolved stress” is a rule put forth by Snorri that describes how a “short syllable” (a short vowel followed by only one consonant) can be combined with another short syllable to become a long syllable, and therefore bear stress. This is a concept that doesn't translate to English as we do not use long vowels, but I wanted to mention it in case you look at the sources.
- Eduard Sievers outlined the various rhythms that are below, but some scholars disagree with his findings. Regardless, I will describe the common patterns, also known as “Seivers Types.”
- These are the commonly-used stress patterns, a stressed beat is indicated by a /, an unstressed beat is indicated by an x, and a secondary stress is indicated with a ` . In these examples, I indicate a stressed beat with boldface, secondary stresses with italics:

- A. / x / x **send** them word **swiftly**
- B. x / x / a **wea**pon when **tried**
- C. x // x his **hair** **bristled**
- D. (a) / / ` x **so this** *may* too
- (b) // x ` **sharp spears** we *hurled*
- E. / x x / **fierce** is this **fire!**

Kennings

- Kennings are metaphors – there are two basic types, *Heiti* and kennings.
- A *Heiti* is a fairly simple descriptive word for a thing.
 - **Examples:** battle – *clamor*, night – *lightless*, sky- *arch*, sun – *all-bright*
- A kenning is a phrase-based metaphor, Snorri lists three types: simple, double, and extended
- A simple kenning has just one element
 - **Examples:** gold - *arm-fire*, battle – *spear clash*, blood – *sword dew*, ship – *wave-steed*, sword - *battle fire*, shield – *wall of the ship*, ocean – *land of the ship*, king – *gold giver*
- A double kenning adds a *Heiti* or simple kenning to that single element:
 - **Examples:** Gold - *all-bright of the arm*, sword – *fire of the spear clash*, shield - *wall of the wave-steed*
- An extended Kenning adds two or more elements to a kenning.
 - **Examples:** warrior - *holder of the wall of the wave-steed*, King – *giver of the all-bright of the arm*, blood – *dew of the fire of the spear clash*
- There are a few standard rules that apply across kennings. A common one is any name of a god will stand for a man, a goddess for a woman.
 - **Examples:** *gold-ring Gerð* – Woman, *spear-Tyr* – Warrior (spear-man,) *Odin of the ship* (sailor/captain.)
- Eddic Poetry generally only uses *Heiti* or simple kennings, double or extended kennings are rare. Skaldic poetry uses all of the above, and occasionally can get very obtuse.
- Allegory is the name given to using the same type of kenning throughout the poem. It is more common in Skaldic than Eddic poetry.
 - **Examples:** referring to men as *trees*, arms as *branches*, an army as a *forest*, etc.

Eddic Meters

Fornyrðislag (“Old Story Meter”)

- Most common Eddic poetry form and almost certainly the oldest. Most of the poems in the *Poetic Edda* are in this meter.
- The meter was occasionally used in Skaldic poetry as well, particularly for *lausavísur*.
- Very similar to Old English Poetry, but lines are end-stopped (each line completes a thought – no run-on sentences.)
- Each line is divided into two half-lines
- Each half-line has two stressed and two unstressed beats, with 4-5 syllables being typical. It uses the common stress patterns above.
- The first stressed beat of the second half-line (i.e. the third stressed beat in the line) alliterates with the first, second, or both stressed beats in the first half-line.
- Four line stanzas are typical, but not exclusive.
- There is a later variant called “*Málahátt*” (“Meter of Speeches”) which uses longer half-lines with more unstressed syllables, 5-7 being typical. It is moderately rare, *málahátt* stanzas are found mixed in with *fornyrðislag* or *ljóðahátt*, but there is only one surviving poem that uses it as its sole meter (*The Greenlandish Lay of Atli*.)

Examples:

<i>Darraðarljóð</i> 4. We w ind we w ind the w eb of s pears As y oung w ar-king has w aged before F orth we shall f are where f ray lies t hick And f riend and f oe f ix s word ‘gainst sword	<i>Hávamál</i> (in <i>málahátt</i>): 81. At e ve praise the d ay when a shes, a f ire M aidens at w ed-lock a w eapon when t ried I ce when it is c rossed to a le that is d runk
Harald Sigurðarson’s <i>Penultimate Lausavísur</i> F orward we s tride to f ight b ravely Our c hests b ared ‘gainst the b lue-steel s words Their h elmets s hine I h ave not m ine B elow in the s hips l ie our armor	In Old Norse: F ram g öngum v ér í f ylkingu b rynjulausir undir bl ár e ggjar. H jálmar s kína. H efkat eg m ína. Nú l iggr s krúð vort að s kipum n iðri.

Ljóðahátt (“Meter of Chants”)

- The other dominant meter of the *Poetic Edda*, comprising about 1/3 of the poems.
- Made up of paired lines, odds and evens
- Odd lines are divided into half-lines, are typically 4-5 syllables long, and are in *fornyrðislag* format (i.e. the third stressed syllable alliterates with either or both first and second.)
- Even lines are called “full lines,” are of no set length, have 2-3 stressed syllables with 2 alliterating. The full lines don’t follow the common patterns, but generally ends in a stress.
- The line pair completes a single thought, with the full line supplementing or finishing the material in the half-lines.
- Used for “gnomic” poetry, usually instructional verse or a question and answer session – never for impersonal narration. Repetition is common, particularly in questions.
- Four line stanzas are typical, but not universal.
- There is a variant called “*Galdralag*,” (“Meter of Spells”) which uses the same format, but repeats one or both of the “full lines” in a stanza with some variation. It was probably used for emphasis and there is no example where it appears as the sole verse form in a poem.

Examples:

<p>Thor in <i>Alvismál</i>: 19. Tell me Alvis for all men's fate I deem that, dwarf, you know How the wind is called which widest fares In all the world so wide? (Only line 3 varies for most of Thor's verses.)</p>	<p>In Old Norse: 19. "Segðu mér þat, Alviss, - öll of rök fira vörumk, dvergr, at vítir -: hvé sá vindr heitir, er víðast ferr, heimi hverjum í?"</p>
<p>Odin in <i>Grímnismál</i> (in <i>Galdralag</i>): 45. My head lifts up to the lofty gods Help will come from on high Gone is my message to many a god That sits on Aegir's seats, That drinks within Aegir's doors.</p>	

Skaldic Meters

Kviðuháttir ("Meter of Discourse")

- Essentially a Skaldic refinement of Fornyrðislag
- Made up of half-lines of counted syllables, 3 syllables for the first, 4 for the second
- Both half-lines have two stressed syllables. The second falls into the common patterns.
- The first stressed syllable of the second half-line alliterates with one or both of the stressed syllables in the first half-line, just like *fornyrðislag*.
- Run on sentences are acceptable. Occasionally prior sentences will end in the first part of a half-line. A thought can even continue through a stanza to the next.
- Four line stanzas are typical, but there are exceptions.
- There are not a lot of surviving poems in this meter – I'm aware of five, two of which were by Egil Skalagrímson. Egil's examples are particularly personal – one was regarding the death of his son, the other was a tribute to a close friend. I tend to look on it as more familiar and intimate than Dróttkvætt, but this is speculation.

Examples:

<p>Thjóðólf of Hvin's <i>Ynglingatal</i> 8. Long ago the arm-bearing Swedes reddened their soil with blood Of their liege. Lifeless was sprawled Domaldi, dew of wounds from His folk's hands, harvest-eager, spilled as gift to gods above.</p>	<p>Egil Skalagrímson's <i>Sonatorrek</i> 8. If my suit with sword could press I would end, the ale-smith's days: Could I strike the storm's kinsman Aegir's might would meet my steel</p>
	<p><i>Sonatorrek</i> in Old Norse 8. Veizt ef søk sverði rækak, vas olsmið allra tíma, hroða vábræðr, ef víða mættak, fórk ægis andvígr mani.</p>

Dróttkvætt ("Noble Warrior's Meter")

- The primary Skaldic meter. The vast majority of surviving Skaldic poems are in this verse form.
- Made up of six-syllable lines. These lines are actually half-lines, but at that length they get cumbersome, so what in other forms is referred to as a "line," here I will refer to as a "quarter stanza."

- Each line will have 3 stressed and 3 unstressed syllables. Each line ends in a trochee (stress then unstress,) but are otherwise in no set stress pattern.
- The first stressed syllable of the even lines (i.e. the second line in a quarter-stanza) is referred to as the “main staff,” and will alliterate with two of the three stressed syllables in the prior line.
- In Old Norse, there is an internal rhyme in both the odd and even lines. This can be very difficult to do in English, and it is acceptable to not rhyme in Old Norse as well (it is called “formless.”) Here are the rules:
 - Odd lines have a “half rhyme,” the last stressed syllable will have the same terminal consonant sound as one of the other syllables. Unlike alliteration, the other rhyme does **not** need to fall on a stressed syllable.
 - Even lines have a “full rhyme,” the last stressed syllable will have both the same vowel sound and ending consonant as one of the other syllables.
- Eight line stanzas are typical. There are exceptions, particularly with refrains.
- Lines aren’t necessarily end-stopped – the “sentence” structure tends to be consistent throughout the poem, but can be full, half, quarter, or even an eighth of a stanza. My examples are end-stopped on the quarter-stanza (comparable to a line of another form.)
- Longer poems, called *Drápa* (translation uncertain,) will have a refrain of usually a quarter-stanza that breaks up sections of the poem. Shorter poems, called *Flokkr* (a “flock” of verses,) will occasionally have a refrain as well.
- Variants abound within the form, many of them involving the rhymes. It is often thick with kennings, and occasionally imbed sentences in other sentences. There is a variant which involves 8 syllable lines, but it is fairly rare in surviving poems

Examples

<p><u>Bragi Boddason's <i>Ragnarsdrápa</i></u> 10. Nor did Heðin hinder – Högni's wrath did grow then Sating there on sea-shore Snarling grey wolves' hunger Then did threaten battle Thewful hosts of Högni Recked not to enrich with Rings of peace she offered</p>	<p><u>Harald Sigurðarson's <i>gamanvísur</i>:</u> 4. On Sicilian seas we Sailed in stately fashion – Shield-walled moved the shapely Ships, full-manned with warriors: Scarce would cowards care to Come, I think, where we did; Yet the gold-ring-Gerð from Garðar lets me dangle.</p>
<p><u>Harald's Last <i>Lausavísur</i></u> With your shield find shelter Shining lady told me Here I cannot hide in Hollow of my ship's wall Well this gold-ring goddess Gave me these words also: Hold you head up proud and High when blades are clashing</p>	<p>In Old Norse Krjúpum yér fyr yopna, valteigs, brakan eigi, svo bauð Hildr, að hjaldri, haldorð, í bug skjaldar. Hátt það mig, þar er mættust, menskorð bera forðum, hlakkar ís og hausar, hjálmstofn í gny málma.</p>

Bibliography & Resources

Note: I marked out with a * all books that are currently out of print, however many of them are available through used book sales such as on Amazon. Those entries marked with a ° are available in their entirety online.

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Other Resources

Here is my East Kingdom Wiki page – I have this handout and other articles there:

https://wiki.eastkingdom.org/index.php?title=Grim_the_Skald

Here is Dr. Jackson Crawford's Old Norse channel, he is a professor of Old Norse Studies at University of Boulder, Colorado, and he puts up videos on Old Norse Culture and Language:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCXCxNFxw6iq-Mh4uljYvufg>

Author's Note on the Examples: All sample verses are derived from the above translations, but most are heavily edited to fit into the verse form (i.e. I sacrificed accuracy of translation for accuracy of the verse form, where a translator would almost certainly make the opposite choice.) I used a mix of the translations, occasionally supplementing them with additional versions, but primarily the ones listed. My Skaldic examples were primarily derived from Hollander's *The Skalds*, a book which I would recommend highly. In some cases, I only had to change Hollander's translations in very minor ways.

Author's Note on Terminology: What I refer to as "half-lines," is occasionally called "lines" by some of the sources above (and so they consider them "line pairs" and speak of "odd and even lines.") I prefer the terminology above, myself, but I wanted you to be aware of this in case you did your own research. The information out there is sadly contradictory enough without adding this difference.

Pronunciation Notes: There are more rules than this in Old Norse pronunciation, but here's a quick rundown. The first syllable of any word always carries stress – the exceptions to this are too few to note. There are two *th* sounds in Old Norse, one unvoiced (sounds like "thing") and one voiced (like "there.") Sometimes the latter sound is normalized as *d*, I chose to render them all using the character *ð*. I also left in the accent marks – this does **not** indicate stress, but rather a longer vowel sound.

The final "r" in the Old Norse, at least when there is no vowel before it, is unvoiced. It's a tricky thing to get right, but I'd recommend not pronouncing it at all rather than having something sound like, for example, "Maah – lah – haaht – er." It would honestly be more like "Maah – lah – haaht." The terminal "r" is never its own syllable in Old Norse.