

The Skald in the Probable Works of Snorri Sturluson

An East Coast Thing Workshop by Eirik Westcoat

Summary of Key Points (Not all of them will be discussed in the presentation)

1. The authorship issue:
 1. Snorri's authorship of *Edda*, especially *Háttatal*, has been generally accepted for some time. For instance, stanzas of *Háttatal*, which are cited in later works, are attributed to Snorri.
 2. *Heimskringla* also seems likely, based on a reference about his nephew copying "saga books" of his, combined with his level of political experience. Snorri is later treated as an authority on Norwegian kings. I contend that its style of euhemerism and poetry usage is of a piece with *Edda*.
 3. There is no direct evidence for attributing *Egils saga*, but there is a good case through vocabulary analysis. But as will be seen, it promotes the figure of the skald, although in a different way from the first two works.
2. Snorri's euhemerism is quite serious. He genuinely wants his audience to "believe" in Óðinn and company again as the source of poetry, and make the stories about them just as acceptable as the stories of ancient Troy and Rome were. He probably resorts to the euhemerism because it's the only option available in a medieval Christian context.
3. In *Edda*, Óðinn and Bragi may be looked to as divine exemplars for the skald. However, Óðinn is not an example of a skald in *Edda* — he functions as an exemplary lord. It is Bragi who could be the exemplary skald, but this seems underdeveloped.
4. Bragi inn gamli Boddason is positioned as the earliest skald and an authority on what a skald is.
5. Poetry is equated with words for praise, fame, and reputation, in both *Skáldskaparmál* and *Háttatal*.
6. The Mead Myth may be read as a guide to poetic craft, and thus the skald emulates either the dwarves or Óðinn in composing. (cf. my 2014 ECT Workshop.)
7. Skalds serve as eyewitness for the deeds of kings. Of course, we already knew this from the Prologue to *Heimskringla* and the numerous verse citations of the text. However, the prose text also repeatedly points this out, and skalds taking part in the action a number of times as a further confirmation of this.
8. Odin has manifestations in the post-mythological era of *Heimskringla*, serving to indicate his continuing influence and relevance, even though he's been treated as a historical personage.
9. Poetic speech is a higher form of discourse that carries more persuasive power than ordinary speech. Even those who are not court skalds avail themselves of this at times.

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10. Sigvatr Þórðarson and Eyvindr Finnsson have the largest roles in *Heimskringla* across multiple sagas. Several other skalds also feature prominently in many situations.
11. Skalds take on several important roles in *Heimskringla*:
 1. Eyewitness to the king's deeds and praise for them.
 2. Peacemaking.
 3. Rousing the troops to war.
 4. Interceding with a king on behalf of others.
 5. Adviser to and messenger for the king.
 6. Gentle reminders (or on occasion, stern reproach) regarding traditional duties.
12. Ólvir hnúfa in *Egils saga* takes on many of the roles seen in *Heimskringla*.
13. The story of Egill's precocious verse suggests that poetic skill was acquired in a process perhaps like first-language acquisition — unconsciously and in childhood. Naturally, youngsters would differ in talent. Such would easily explain a belief that poetic talent was simply a gift from the gods — adults would remember themselves as always having the talent from youth. This in turn would explain the silence of the sources on how the craft was taught.
14. Egill's magic is never far from his poetry, and serves as a way to enhance the perceived power of poets.
15. Einarr skálaglamm's interactions with Egill appear to be more those of peer relations, a young skald to an older skald, rather than a pupil/teacher relationship. That does not preclude Einarr learning stanzas about Egill's adventures. We might suspect that this was one avenue by which skaldic verses got handed down from generation to generation.
16. The material in all three works serves to encourage kings to employ skalds by portraying the skalds as powerful, with examples of their benefits as allies and their danger as foes.

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