

1981

The Names of Gods and Goddesses in Snorri Sturluson's Edda

Hilda Radzin
St. John's University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/los>

Repository Citation

Radzin, Hilda (1981) "The Names of Gods and Goddesses in Snorri Sturluson's Edda," *Literary Onomastics Studies*: Vol. 8 , Article 7.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/los/vol8/iss1/7>

This Conference Paper is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in Literary Onomastics Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact kmyers@brockport.edu.

THE NAMES OF GODS AND GODDESSES
IN SNORRI STURLUSON'S EDDA

Hilda Radzin

St. John's University

In Snorri Sturluson's time (1179 - 1241), the Icelandic writers could look back on a long history of the influence of Christian ideas on the heathen thoughts concerning the nature of the world. After the Icelanders were converted to Christianity in the year A.D. 1000, much of their ancient poetry and prose presenting their traditions of heathendom survived the religious change.

The Icelandic poetry preserved in manuscripts can be divided into the Eddic and the Skaldic poetry. The Eddic poems have mostly free alliteration. Most of the Eddic poetry is preserved in a manuscript now called *Elder Edda* or *Poetic Edda*.¹ This manuscript was written in Iceland c. A.D. 1270. Its poems are several centuries older, mostly of heathen times. These poems may be divided into mythological and the heroic poems. The mythological poems contain stories about heathen gods, words of wisdom, and descriptions of the world.

Skaldic poetry was often made in praise of the chieftains of Norway and other Scandinavian lands. The Skaldic verse forms were first devised in Norway in the ninth century. They differ from the

Eddic forms. The syllables were counted. Complicated systems of alliteration and internal rhyme were used. Skaldic poetry flourished throughout the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Toward the end of the twelfth century, the Skaldic poetry gradually decreased. There was a growing fashion for Europeanized verse forms.

In the thirteenth century, Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241) made an attempt to infuse new interest in the art of Skaldic poetry. This is reflected in Snorri's *Prose Edda*² which was the first of his works, written c. 1220. The older poems of the *Poetic Edda* were Snorri's sources for a large part of his *Edda*, consisting of three parts: (1) *Gylfaginning*, a survey of Norse mythology; (2) *Skáldskaparmál*, an analysis of the diction of the skalds and their allusions to ancient gods and heroes; (3) *Háttatal*, examples by Snorri himself of the Skaldic poetry. The *Prose Edda* was written as a handbook of prosody and poetic diction from which young skalds could learn their art, and as a manual on Scandinavian mythology. One can understand such a combination considering one of the characteristics of the Skaldic poetry -- its use of Kennings. Kennings are metaphorical paraphrases in which a person or an object is not named. It is described by a function, or by references to an associated story. Many kennings include mythological knowledge.

The first part of the *Prose Edda*, called *Gylfaginning* ("The Tricking of Gylfi"), is devoted to Old Norse mythology. It opens

with *Formáli* ("Foreword"). It presents Snorri's interpretation, of the origins of the belief in heathen gods. Many medieval thinkers explained it as the work of the devil. Snorri presents more sophisticated thoughts. After the Flood, most of Noah's descendants forgot the revelations of God. But their observations of the earth and the sky, the growth and the harvest, inspired them to deify the earth and the heavenly bodies. Through wickedness men lost knowledge of God. However, God still gave them intellectual ability. So they knew all earthly matters. Men were aware of the living nature of the earth. Perhaps it was the confrontation of heathen myth with Christian thoughts that formed Snorri's apology for a wisdom given to heathen men, though they had lost the knowledge of God. Snorri supplements these thoughts by an ancient theory, Euhemerism. According to this theory, ancient gods were merely human beings. They were deified mortals, either heroes who had been deified after their death, or Pontiff-chieftains who had presented themselves as gods. These deified mortals found some people naive enough to believe in their pretended divinity.

The first part of the Prose Edda, *Gylfaginning*, relates how a Swedish King, named Gylfi, set out on his journey to Asgard, the terrestrial instead of the celestial dwelling of gods Aesir. According to Snorri, the designation of gods (sing. *Ass*, pl. *Aesir*) is thought to be derived from the place-name "Asia." Snorri declares that the Norse gods, Þórr ("Thor") and Óðinn ("Odin"), were deified mortals.

They were kings in Asia. They descended from Priam of Troy and from a wise woman, named Sibil ("Sibyl"). Later Óðinn and his relatives wandered to Sweden. There he and his sons became rulers. They were revered for their magical powers. In Asgard Gylfi questioned these magicians concerning their might, the origin of the world and its end. The magicians told Gylfi long stories about gods and tricked him into repeating them to all mankind in such a way that men identified these magicians with the gods. At the end Gylfi is freed from the enchantment. These stories are the traditional Scandinavian myths.

In Skáldskaparmál Snorri explains peculiar poetic usages:

Þrén er grein skáldskaparmáls . . .

svá at nefna hvern hlut, sem heitir;

önnur grein er sú, er heitir fornöfn;

en þri málsgrein er sú, er kölluð er

kenning . . .³

(The types of scaldic metaphor are three. . .

(first), calling everything by its name; the

second type is that which is called 'substitution;'

the third type of metaphor is that which is

called kenning . . .

Snorri uses here the word *forngfn* ("substitution") as he elsewhere uses the word *heitf*. It is a word or name which may appear frequently in scaldic poetry. *Heitf* are contained in *þulur*, lists of synonyms or near-synonyms for people, as well as gods and goddesses. To the god Óðinn about 150 names are given. According to Snorri, Óðinn had so many names because he was worshipped by many peoples (p. 10). The name "Óðinn" contains a clue to the essence of his nature; it is related to an adjective meaning "frenzied, mad." Other names for Óðinn emphasize one or another aspect of his character. Óðinn is Herjann (war-god) and wields a spear and is accompanied by ravens, wolves and eagles. Óðinn is Yggr (the terrifier). His foes he strikes with panic, or with a kind of paralysis. But Óðinn's favours are capricious: sooner or later he deserts his worshipper, leaving him to be slain. For this reason Óðinn is the god of death.

Þórr ("thunder") was Óðinn's eldest son, and the strongest of gods. He was a sky-god, more particularly a storm-god, wielding a hammer which symbolised a thunderbolt. He appears as a great fighter, of huge size and strength. He is the god whose power does most to guard men from forces of evil.

Freyr is a god of fertility, and especially of agriculture. Freyr rules over the rain and the shining sun, and also fruit of the earth.

Freyja is the fairest of goddesses. She is the sister of Freyr. She was a deity of fertility. Her name and Freyr's are related to Old Norse word *frygǫ* ("bloom"). She was especially the goddess of love.

Goddesses have many names and have probably absorbed other goddesses whose cult has been forgotten. *Hlóðyn* in some scaldic poems is a name for Porr's mother, *Jónð*, but originally she was probably a distinct goddess.

Kennings are used widely by Snorri. Gods are often designated by their relationship to other gods. Óðinn is the father of Magni, Porr is the son of his father, Óðinn (*Óðins-burn*).

Some of the kennings require a knowledge of myth. Porr was the chief enemy of giants, and so he was *mellu mogfellandi* ("destroyer of the kinsman of the giantess").

At the end of the first chapter of *Skáldskaparmál*, Snorri tells the young scalds that they, the Christian poets, should not believe in heathen gods, nor in the truth of the ancient heathen myths. Yet the young scalds should increase their store of figures with traditional metaphors contained in the heathen myths.

Hilda Radzin
St. John's University

NOTES

¹"Edda Saǧmundar," in *Codex Regius*, MS. No. 2365 quarto in the Old Royal Collection in the Royal Library of Copenhagen (Copenhagen, 1937).

²Manuscripts of the Prose *Edda* are numerous; the most important is *Codex Regius* 2367 quarto (early 14th century). The best editions are by Finnur Jónson, Copenhagen, 1925 and 1931.

³*Edda Snorra Stutlusonar*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (1931), p. 86. All translations from the Old Icelandic language have been made by the author of this article, and further references to this work appear in the text.