

IRISH POETRY AND NORSE *DRÓTTKVÆTT*

Gary Holland and John Lindow

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA AT BERKELEY

The question of Irish influence on Old Norse literature has been discussed for rather more than 100 years. No conclusive or universally accepted results have been reached. General similarities abound—the longer narrative works in both traditions consist of a mixture of prose and verse, and some of the shorter verse forms exhibit comparable metrical structures. Undoubtedly there was contact between Norse speakers and Irish speakers beginning with the Viking Age in Ireland, in Iceland, on the Orkneys, the Shetlands, and the Hebrides; in fact, a number of recent studies assert that the distribution of blood groups and factors among modern Icelanders is more similar to that among the modern Irish than to that among the population of western Norway (for a recent survey of these issues see Gísli Sigurðsson 1988, 35–40). This physical contact has led scholars to argue that the cultural and literary similarities between Norse and Irish came about because of Norse imitation of, or borrowing from, the culturally superior Southerners, who by this period not only preserved in one form or another much of their native traditions, but had also absorbed a strong Latin influence extending even to verse forms, a central interest of Brendan O Hehir. Our negative results do nothing to undermine the broad outlines of the Norse-Irish symbiosis, and we hope that they would appeal to Brendan's sceptical spirit.

The specific issue dealt with in this paper is the influence of Old Irish meters on Norse *dróttkvætt* (research summary in Gísli Sigurðsson 1988, 103–17), a verse form consisting of strophes of eight six-syllable lines with a major syntactic break after the fourth line, and characterized further by a more or less rigid pattern of alliteration, perfect and imperfect internal rhymes (assonance and consonance), and a trochaic cadence. A striking stylistic feature is the use of kennings. Described in this manner, Norse

dróttkvætt bears a strong resemblance to the classical Old Irish meter *rinnard*, at least in terms of the basic line, and if the Norse eight-line stanza is viewed as consisting of two more elementary four-line units (the *helmings*), then also in terms of the basic strophic units. Thus, after the Germanist Anton Edzardi's initial exposition of the similarities between the two poetic traditions and his simple assertion that the Norse verse form must have been borrowed from the Irish (1878),¹ scholars have typically been content to cite his paper and accept its basic premise; an early Celticist supporter was Whitley Stokes (1885, 273).

The immediate question arises: why have scholars found it necessary to seek a foreign origin for *dróttkvætt*? The basic assumption seems to have been that *dróttkvætt*, with its rigid metrical structure, its convoluted diction, and its extremely free word order, is somehow isolated within the Germanic poetic tradition and cannot be accounted for as a natural development within this tradition. The typical Germanic verse forms, then, are those represented by *Beowulf*, the Old Saxon *Heliand*, and the Norse Eddic poems — a relatively freely structured, definitely *not* syllable-counting, rhymeless alliterative verse with word order patterns similar to those of prose. Within Norse poetic tradition, *dróttkvætt* has been perceived as atypical *vis-à-vis* the simpler Eddic meters. The Eddic poems are about the gods, about traditional Germanic heroes, or consist in collections of proverbs or bits of practical wisdom, while skaldic verse has as its subject matter contemporary events and characters: praise poems, genealogies, and occasional commemorative verses are the most common types. Furthermore, Eddic poetry was perceived as a popular or folk genre, while skaldic verse is typically court poetry, composed by poets who were ordinarily in the service of a chieftain. According to our late medieval sources, none of which was recorded before the thirteenth century, but which make legitimate claim to far greater antiquity, the early skalds made up a kind of professional class, functioning as quasi-historians within the inner circle of the chieftain's *comitatus*. The similarities with the Irish bards require no comment.

The weight of published scholarly opinion seems to be on the side of those who favor an Irish origin for, or at least a decisive formative influence on, Norse *dróttkvætt*. In addition to Edzardi and Stokes, Andreas Heusler also supported the theory of Irish origin (1956, 285ff.). After these early scholars, the issue lay dormant until 1954, when Gabriel Turville-Petre took it up again, arguing vigorously for the close similarities between the two poetic traditions. In 1957 Jan de Vries published a lengthy restatement and critique of Turville-Petre's ideas in order to bring them to a wider audience (Turville-Petre's article was originally written in Icelandic; an English translation appeared in 1972). In a later work, however, Turville-Petre

¹ Edzardi thanks the famous Leipzig Celticist Ernst Windisch for "*gütige Mitteilungen*" on Irish metrical matters (1878, 581); presumably, Edzardi had Windisch's support for his thesis.

seems more aware of the differences between Norse and Irish verse forms, and concludes in a more cautious manner:

Thus it seems that the strict rules governing the syllabic count and the cadence are the only significant features shared in common by Irish and scaldic poetry. These rules are foreign to the traditional Germanic system, and it is hard to believe that they developed among the two northwesterly nations independently (1976, xxvii).

This conclusion is virtually identical to that reached by de Vries. After Turville-Petre, there has been another attempt to argue for a strong form of the Irish influence hypothesis by Bridget Mackenzie (1981), who finds numerous instances of rhymes between lines in Norse court verse, comparing Irish *aicill* rhyme, in which the final syllable of a line rhymes with a word in the next line.

Another recent paper on this subject is by Kristján Árnason (1981), who also supports the hypothesis of Irish influence. He, however, believes that rhythm, not alliteration or assonance, is the central structural feature of the skaldic line. He argues that one basic form of the *dróttkvætt* line contains three heavy stressed syllables and the fact that there are usually six syllables is more or less accidental. Kristján Árnason thinks, following Watkins (1963) and Carney (1971), that strict syllable-counting meters develop from earlier accentual meters, and he further calls attention to the similar stress patterns of Old Irish and Old Norse and maintains that this area of resemblance could well have helped in the importation of the Irish model. Even if all of Kristján Árnason's arguments are correct, however, they could equally well be used to support an inner-Norse development of the *dróttkvætt* line, and in fact such disparate figures as Eduard Sievers (1893, 99) and Aage Kabell (1978, 248ff.) have argued that this meter represents a natural development within the North Germanic tradition.

We drew attention above to the apparent correspondence between the *dróttkvætt* helming and the four-line strophe of classical Irish verse, which scholars from Edzardi (1878, 576, 583) on have used to support the hypothesis of Irish influence on skaldic poetry. Since West Germanic verse is stichic and the earliest Norse poetry of the so-called Eddic type is stanzaic only in a very irregular way, some have seen the Irish strophe as the model for the Norse strophe, transmitted via skaldic poetry to the Eddic poetry. This hypothesis must, however, be rejected, precisely because the Norse strophe consists of two helmings, that is, eight lines. Turville-Petre suggested (1954/1972) that the helming was the basic unit of composition, and this suggestion is not without merit, given the strong caesura between helmings. That so much of the extant skaldic poetry is retained in helmings only, however, has to do with its use as source material (only the helming needed for authority would be cited) and therefore attaches rather to the written transmission and reception of the corpus than to its oral composition. An argument against the idea of a four-line compositional unit may be the

pulur, alliterative list-poems (in *fornyrðislag* meter) of names and synonymous nouns which editors have no difficulty in arranging in eight-line stanzas. Finally, if the skaldic strophe was the model for the Eddic strophe, the regular use of eight lines in Eddic strophes would suggest that the basic compositional unit of skaldic poetry was also an eight-line stanza. Thus this apparent point of correspondence between skaldic and Irish verse must be abandoned.

The similarities between the Irish and Norse lines have provided the strongest evidence for the hypothesis of Irish influence on skaldic poetry. Universally regarded as a development from the Germanic accentual line, the skaldic syllabic line is virtually unique within Germanic poetry. According to the earlier view, Irish poetry underwent a similar development, thought by some to be the result of the influence of medieval Latin verse, and perhaps this development might be regarded as an Irish-Norse parallel. If, however, Calvert Watkins (1963) is correct in his derivation of the Irish syllabic meters from what Roman Jakobson termed the "Common Indo-European Gnomie-Epic line", as seems most likely, then the notion of influence is unnecessary. (An argument analogous to that advanced by Watkins for Celtic could, we believe, doubtless be constructed for Germanic.)

Nevertheless, the possibility of Irish influence on the Norse *dróttkvætt* line cannot be ruled out at this point (Gísli Sigurðsson 1988, p. 117). Within the Irish poetic tradition, however, *rinnard* appears to be a fairly uncommon meter, as can be inferred from its name ('end foot high'), although a number of sub-variants exists (Murphy 1961, 64). The most common syllable-counting meters have seven syllables (*deibide* with all its variants, the seven-syllable *rannaigeacht* types, etc.), and the next most common, eight syllables (Murphy 1961, *passim*). If an Irish syllabic line provided the model for the *dróttkvætt* line, why did the skalds avoid the common line of seven or eight syllables and choose instead the relatively rare line of six syllables? No explanation has yet been provided.

This is particularly striking since both the Norse and the Irish were notorious metrical innovators — 102 metrical and dictional (sub)types were catalogued by Snorri Sturluson, while Murphy (1961), following the earlier tradition, catalogues more than 80 separate Irish metrical (sub)types. Here the imprecise nature of the parallels becomes apparent: *rinnard* is formally equivalent to the *dróttkvætt* line in the number of syllables and form of the cadence (on which, however, see below), but not in the use of alliteration and rhyme. The skaldic *hálfnept*, with its monosyllabic verse ends, recalls several Irish meters, and sometimes it is found with seven, not six, syllables, thus recalling *rannaigeacht mór*. But the overwhelming majority of the meters are different in the two traditions, and the parallel is simply that poets counted syllables and were concerned with the cadence.

Here again the similarity is only incidental. In Irish the cadence may take one of several forms, ranging from stressed monosyllables to tetrasyllables, and the *deibide* meters present a kind of alternating cadence. In contrast, the skaldic meters almost universally demand a trochaic cadence. The only important exception to this rule is a meter in which long monosyllables constitute the cadence. That this cadence is a development of the *dróttkvætt* trochee, however, is proved by the common names of the meter, *hálfhnept* 'half-chopped' or *stýfð* 'cut off'.

Furthermore, the Old Irish lines in *rinnard* (6-2) apparently can end with a trochee defined solely by stress and consequently appear indifferent to the quantity of the penult syllable. Norse trochees, in contrast, are defined both by stress and by syllable weight. Clearly these trochees signal line ends and alert the hearer to start listening for the next alliterations.

Indeed, the alliterations in Norse are structural in that they serve to bind pairs of lines and hence differ from the Irish alliterations, which appear to be optional and which can function to link chains of lines. Classical Bardic poetry uses alliteration in several ingenious ways, but not in the way the skalds use it. Similarly, the morphophonemic system governing the classes of alliterating consonants in Irish is wholly lacking in Norse. Nor is rhyme used identically in the two traditions. *Dróttkvætt* requires an alternation between half and full rhyme in consecutive lines, a prosodic feature found only rarely and ornamentally in Irish.

A further differentiating characteristic of skaldic verse is its dense use of kennings. Although kennings appear occasionally in Irish verse, within Indo-European tradition they are more frequent in Indo-Iranian than in Irish, and in fact kenning-like constructions appear in many of the world's literatures.

Furthermore, kennings fill a different function in Irish verse than in skaldic verse. In Celtic poetry they appear to be primarily decorative, and to be similar to riddles. In skaldic verse, too, they are riddles and clearly ornamental. Yet they are so all-pervasive and omnipresent that it seems more appropriate to understand them as playing a structural role in the verse: that is, the requirements of the verse form with its internal assonance (*aðalhending*) and consonance (*skothenning*) are relatively difficult to meet. The possibility of substitution of one lexical item or phrase for another provided by kennings immensely simplifies the poet's task. For example, if one wishes to replace a word like 'battle' with, say, 'the storm of the valkyrie', then what determines the choice among the equivalent alternative storm words and valkyrie names is the alliteration pattern, the particular assonance, and the particular consonance of the lines in which the kenning will appear. Viewed in this way, kennings in skaldic verse are the *semantic* equivalent of oral formulas. Within a *dróttkvætt* stanza each two-line unit has a different alliteration system and a different assonance and consonance. Thus, in a strict sense, the metrical structure of each *dróttkvætt* stanza is

different. Although the *pulur* are quite lengthy, during the entire period of composition of skaldic poetry fewer than 100 nouns are replaced by kennings — these are, of course, the most important items from the point of view of the culture: man, prince, woman, battle, ship, gold, silver, horse, etc. (This figure was obtained by simply counting the classificatory headings in Meissner 1921; Holland intends to return to this subject in a separate essay.)

When verse forms are borrowed, they typically are borrowed because of their appropriateness to, or association with, a specific genre. That is, verse forms appear to be linked to certain types of content. One can point to the standard example of the Latin poets' imitation of the Greek meters. Here, the simple fact is that there is no poetry in Irish that is at all similar to *dróttkvætt*.² This fact emerges clearly from a reading of the poems contained in Murphy 1956, and from a perusal of the verse samples in Murphy 1961; presumably these sources represent a random sample. The similarities between *dróttkvætt* and *rinnard* are all on an abstract, formal level when the Norse verse is considered in terms of its content and context.

The assumption that a verse form was borrowed from Irish into Norse entails the further assumption of a high degree of bilingualism on the part of at least some Norse skalds. These skalds must also have had some competence in Irish poetics. If this is the case, then one might legitimately expect this bilingualism (and bi-poeticism) to have left some traces in Old Norse in the form of loan words. In fact, there are (according to the data in de Vries 1962, xxi) some two dozen Irish loan words in Norse. None is particularly common, and only five are attested in skaldic verse. These are:

ingjan 'girl' (< OIr *ingen*).

It is attested only once, in an occasional verse attributed to King Magnus barefoot, describing his love for an Irish girl.

kapall 'horse' (< *capall* < Latin *caballus*).

Besides a handful of saga and ecclesiastical attestations and continued existence in Modern Icelandic (where it means 'mare'), the term is attested once in skaldic poetry, in the kenning *ýtir brimis kapla* 'man of the horses of the sea', in *Plácitúsdrápa* (49), a twelfth-century life of St. Eustace in verse.

korki 'oats [?]' (< OIr *corca*).

2 Sophus Bugge argues for a special relationship between *Ynglingatal* and the memorial verses of two Irish poets from the end of the Viking Age (Cinaed hua Artacain, d. 975, and Flann Mainstrech, d. 1056), on the basis of which he concludes that hypothetical earlier Irish memorial poetry provided the model for the composition of *Ynglingatal* (1894, 148–51); Louis Duvau follows him in this (1896, 116–17). However, *Ynglingatal* is isolated in Norse tradition, and, most significantly, it is in *kviðuhátt*, basically a syllable-counting Eddic meter, not in *dróttkvætt*, and therefore it lacks the full range of skaldic features.

Attested only in a *pula* for *sáðs heiti* 'synonyms for grain' found in two minor manuscripts of *Snorra Edda* (*pul.* IV. ddd. 1.; Finnur Jónsson 1912-15, B2, 680), the word is lacking in the extant skaldic corpus.

lung 'longship' (< OIr *long* < Latin [navis] *longa*).

The term is well attested in skaldic poetry (indeed, *Plácítúsdrápa* 49 also appears to use it—an attestation of *lung* not catalogued in Finnur Jónsson (1931, s.v.)—but the manuscript is defective at this point). According to Snorri, it was used by Bragi the Old, regarded by tradition as the first skald. It is not difficult to imagine that longships were a common topic of conversation throughout northern Europe and that the term could have been appropriated from an Irishman by a Norse poet lacking any interest in Irish verse.

tarfr 'steer' (< OIr *tarb*).

The term is attested in a *pula* in the *Snorra Edda* manuscripts for *œxna heiti* 'bovine synonyms' (*pul.* IV. ð. 1; Finnur Jónsson 1912-15, B1, 669) and in a verse in *Eyrbyggja saga* (Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, eds., pp. 173-74). There it appears as a *heiti* for the bull Glæsir, the killer of the farmer Þoroddr. The verse is spoken by the old blind woman who recognized the bull's supernatural evil and bade the farmer kill him. Although the term has been retained in modern Icelandic and Faroese, its usage in this verse hardly puts Irish loans in a good light.

By way of contrast, Old Norse has 150 secure loans, 90 unsure ones, from Old English, and 75 sure loans, 18 unsure, from Old French (de Vries 1962, xxvii, xxxii). Furthermore, Irish has 140 secure loans and 9 unsure ones from Old Norse, numbers which suggest that Norse was the more prestigious language in the bilingual community and that the burden of bilingualism fell primarily on the Irish. This makes it less likely that Norse poets would borrow Irish verse forms.

Finally, a comparison of Norse poetic terms with the Irish terms listed by Murphy shows no apparent influence and very little in the way of overlap between their basic notions.

In conclusion, there is no clear evidence for the influence of Celtic verse forms on Norse *dróttkvætt*. The development of strict syllable-counting lines from earlier accentual verse must be regarded as independent but parallel developments in these two traditions. After all, they inherited the same Indo-European patrimony.

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