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EDDA

THE word ‘Edda’ is found as the name of a book in two medieval manuscripts. Uppsala University Library DG 11, written about 1300, has the heading ‘Bók þessi heitir Edda’.¹ The words that follow in this manuscript (‘hana hefir saman setta Snorri Sturlu sonr’) indicate that the scribe meant the name to apply to the work he was copying rather than to the manuscript. AM 757 4to, written about 1400, contains parts of *Skáldskaparmál* and other material, but neither *Gylfaginning* nor *Háttatal*. In this manuscript one of the extracts from *Skáldskaparmál* is introduced with the words ‘svá segir í bók þeirri sem Edda heitir at . . .’² What follows was not derived from the Uppsala manuscript. A few lines later 757 refers to the contents of the prologue to *Snorra Edda* with the words ‘svá sem skrifat finnz í fyrsta capitula greindrar bókar’, and again the reference is not to the text of the Uppsala manuscript.

The name ‘Edda’ also appears in sixteenth- to seventeenth-century marginalia in the Codex Regius of *Snorra Edda* (Gks 2367 4to), and a seventeenth-century hand has added the heading ‘Bókin Edda er þetta’ in Utrecht University Library MS no. 1374 (the text in this manuscript was written about the end of the sixteenth century, but is thought to have been copied directly from a thirteenth-century manuscript).³ The earliest mention of the name of the work outside manuscripts that contain it seems to be that in the late sixteenth-century *Oddverjaannáll*, which has under the report of Snorri Sturluson’s death in 1241 the words ‘hann samsetti Eddu og margar aðrar fræðibækur íslenzkar sögur’.⁴ In the seventeenth century the work is commonly referred to by this name, though the title ‘Skálda’

¹ *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, Hafniæ 1848-87, II 250. The spelling of Icelandic quotations in this article is normalised.

² *Ibid.* II 532.

³ *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, København 1931, pp. iv and vi.

⁴ *Oddaannálar og Oddverjaannáll*, ed. Eiríkur Þormóðsson and Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, Reykjavík 2003, p. 146.

is sometimes found; but this is most often applied to *Skáldskaparmál* or the Grammatical Treatises on their own.⁵

The word ‘Edda’ is found in two other contexts in medieval Icelandic; in both cases it appears in the text in manuscripts that contain *Snorra Edda. Rígsþula* is preserved only in AM 242 fol. (Codex Wormianus), written in the middle of the fourteenth century, though the poem itself may be much older. In this poem Edda is the name of the woman on whom Rígr begot the race of thralls.⁶ Since the poem goes on to tell how Rígr begot free men on Amma (‘grandmother’) and noblemen on Móðir (‘mother’), it would seem that the poet took Edda to mean ‘great-grandmother’ (and Ái, the name of her husband, to mean ‘great-grandfather’). Secondly, *edda* appears in some manuscripts of *Skáldskaparmál* among the *heiti* for woman.⁷ The Utrecht manuscript, AM 748 I 4to (written in the early fourteenth century), and AM 757 4to read ‘heitir ok móðir, amma, þriðja edda’. AM 748 II 4to (written about 1400) does not have the first four words, the Codex Regius does not have the first three, and the sentence is entirely lacking in the Uppsala manuscript and Codex Wormianus (the quotation in Guðmundur Andrésson’s dictionary, ‘Móðir heitir eiða, amma önnur, edda en þriðja’, is unreliable;⁸ it is possible that he took it from a part of Codex Wormianus that is now lost, but the words are not in Magnús Ólafsson’s Edda, which reproduces a lot of the material from that manuscript). In the account of the descriptions of man in *Skáldskaparmál*, it is stated that one may describe a man as someone’s ‘føður eða afa; ái er hinn þriði’ (thus the Codex Regius and the Utrecht manuscript; AM 748 I and II both have ‘heitir’ instead of ‘er’; 757 omits the last three words, and in Codex Wormianus and the Uppsala manuscript *ái* begins the list of *heiti* for son).⁹ Thus it is likely (in spite of the unsatisfactory preservation of these passages) that the compiler of this

⁵ See *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar* 1848–87, III iv; *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar* 1931, p. iv; *Ole Worm’s Correspondence with Icelanders*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, Bibliotheca Arnarnagæana VII, Copenhagen 1948, pp. 10/3 and 42/25–6; Jón Ólafsson of Grunnavík in British Library MS Egerton 642, fol. 13.

⁶ *Edda*, ed. G. Neckel and H. Kuhn, I, Heidelberg 1962, p. 280.

⁷ *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar* 1931, p. 190.

⁸ *Lexicon Islandicum*, ed. P. H. Resen, Havnæ 1683, p. 57. Resen prints *eina* for *eiða*, but the manuscript copy of the dictionary (Junius 120 in the Bodleian Library, Oxford) has *eida*.

⁹ *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar* 1931, p. 188; *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar, Codex Wormianus*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, København og Kristiania 1924, p. 104. Ái appears also in the *þula* of *heiti* for man in *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar* 1931, p. 199.

part of *Skáldskaparmál* understood *ái* and *edda* to be words for great-grandfather and great-grandmother, though it may be that he only knew the words from *Rígsþula* and there is no independent confirmation of the meaning of either word in other sources. None of the texts that have the word *edda* as a *heiti* for woman indicates any connection with the name of the book, and this may mean that the name was only applied to it later, or that there was not felt to be any etymological connection between the two usages. Edda is used as a personal name in *Bósa saga* (probably written in the fourteenth century) without there being any association either with the name of the book or with the words in *Skáldskaparmál* and *Rígsþula*.¹⁰

In medieval Iceland, therefore, Edda could be used as a personal name in stories of legendary times, and also as a common noun meaning great-grandmother, though neither usage seems to have had very wide currency. By the end of the thirteenth century it had also come to be used as the name of Snorri Sturluson's treatise on poetics. Then in poems from the fourteenth century and later phrases such as 'reglur eddu', 'eddu list' are used, and appear quite frequently.¹¹ In the first phrase *edda* could still mean Snorri's treatise, but in the second it must mean 'poetry' or 'poetics' in general. It is clear that for these writers, *edda* meant 'ars poetica', and when it was used as the name of Snorri's book must have been understood to relate principally to *Skáldskaparmál* and *Háttatal*, which are accounts of poetic diction and metre, rather than to the mythology of *Gylfaginning*.¹²

¹⁰ *Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda*, ed. C. C. Rafn, Kaupmannahöfn 1829–30, III 208.

¹¹ Arngrímur ábóti Brandsson, *Guðmundar kvæði* (1345), verse 2: 'Rædda ek lítt við reglur eddu' (*Den norsk-islandske Skjaldedigting*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, København og Kristiania 1912–15, A II 348); Árni ábóti Jónsson, *Guðmundar drápa* (fourteenth century), verse 78: 'Yfirmeisturum mun eddu listar allstirðr sjá hróðr virðast' (*Skjaldedigting* A II 429); Eysteinn Ásgrímsson (died 1361), *Lilja* verse 97: 'Eigi er glöggt þó at eddu regla undan hljóti at víkja stundum' (*Skjalde digting* A II 394); Hallr prestr, *Nikulásdrápa* verse 4: 'Skil vegligrá(r) eddlu (sic) reglu' (*Íslenzk miðaldakvæði* II, ed. Jón Helgason, Kaupmannahöfn 1938, p. 418). There are many further examples from rímur in *Corpus Poeticum Boreale*, ed. G. Vigfusson and F. York Powell, Oxford 1883, II 560–61 (see also I xxvi–xxvii).

¹² If it is correct that in the Middle Ages *edda* was understood to mean 'ars poetica', the application of the name to the collection of poems in GkS 2365 4to after its rediscovery by scholars about 1643 is clearly as inappropriate semantically as it is historically, and the customary modern distinction of eddic or eddaic poetry from scaldic is also unfortunate, since the term edd(a)ic ought properly to refer to the sort of poetry dealt with in *Snorra Edda*; and the word *skáld* in Old Icelandic meant 'poet' without any restriction based on style or subject-matter. But it is a

There are many Icelandic books that have acquired nicknames; some originally related to particular manuscripts and were later applied to the works they contain. Examples are Grýla, Syrpa, Rímbegla, Grágás, Hungrvaka, Njála, Grettla, Landnáma, Hulda, Hrokkinskinna, Morkinskinna, Vatnshyrna.¹³ They originate from various periods, and as is the nature of nicknames, the meaning of some appears transparent, others are obscure; some of them, like Edda, are in the form of feminine diminutives. Often they must have been applied as the result of some now forgotten anecdote or remote association of ideas that it is now only possible to guess at. The name Edda may be of this last kind. Many attempts have been made to explain it from the seventeenth century onwards, but none is without difficulty. Explanations have been of two kinds, either that the name of the book is a special use of the word *edda* meaning great-grandmother, or that it is a homonym of that word, derived from a different root and coined in the thirteenth century specifically to apply to Snorri's work. Nowadays it is generally assumed that there is some association with the word *edda* meaning great-grandmother, since it is at least certain that this word existed, though the nature of the association has never been satisfactorily explained; the ancient traditional lore the book contains is hardly such as a great-grandmother might be expected to tell of, since there is no association in Icelandic culture between old women and scaldic verse, unless the reference is to some of the traditional tales in *Gylfaginning*.¹⁴ But in the Middle Ages (and later) it was *Skáldskaparmál* that was most often copied and adapted, and it was this part of the work that was evidently considered the most important (it is also the longest part). The name of the work ought to apply primarily to that. The other etymologies that have in modern times been thought possible are derivation from the place-name

forlorn task to try to correct an error of nomenclature however conducive to confusion when it has been hallowed by three centuries of usage, and no one has been able to suggest an alternative title for the collection of poems in GkS 2365 4to that has any hope of acceptance.

¹³ Björn of Skarðsá, in 'Noekorar malsgreinar um þat hvaðan bokinn Edda hefr sitt heiti' (preserved in Sth. Papp. fol. nr 38, foll. 100 f. and elsewhere), lists the names Skálda, Rímbegla, Hungrvaka, Rómferla, Grænsjaldra 'og aðrar fleiri'.

¹⁴ My attention has been drawn to the title 'Ribe Oldemoder (Avia Ripensis)', which was given to a 'Samling af Adkomster, Indtægtsangivelser og kirkelige Vedtægter for Ribe Domkapitel og Bispestol, nedskrevet 1290–1518' (see B. Erichsen and A. Krarup, *Dansk Historisk Bibliografi I*, København 1918–21, p. 636, no. 11195); but this does not seem to be any more than an interesting though insignificant coincidence.

Oddi, where Snorri received his early education, and derivation from the word *óðr* ‘poetry’.¹⁵ It requires some ingenuity to explain why a book written long after the author left Oddi should be called ‘the book of Oddi’ (though there is a parallel in the similar misnomer ‘Laufás Edda’). Derivation from *óðr* at least gives a plausible semantic development, but even if it were accepted that the phonological development were possible, it would have had to have taken place gradually. It is unlikely that the word *edda* could have been coined in the thirteenth century on the basis of *óðr*, and it does not seem likely that *edda* in the sense ‘poetics’ existed in the preliterate period.

Snorri’s Edda is the first book of its kind extant from medieval Scandinavia, and it is unlikely that it had any predecessors either written or oral that dealt theoretically with the art of scaldic poetry (the twelfth-century *Háttalykill* and the *þulur* can scarcely be said to do this). Until it was written, therefore, there would have been no Norse word to describe it, though as soon as it was written one would be required; Icelanders were not in the habit of giving their books foreign titles.¹⁶ It is probable that Snorri (and his first audience) knew at least a little Latin, and most of the treatises that could have inspired him to write his were in Latin. When he came to devise a title for his book, it is far from improbable that he might coin a word that had the form of an Icelandic feminine diminutive but was derived from a Latin word that had to do with composing poetry. He might choose a Latin root because his work was a learned one and had Latin models; an Icelandic form because he wrote in the vernacular about vernacular poetry; and a diminutive because it was customary for authors, especially when publishing a new kind of work, to assume at least the appearance of humility.

Such an etymology of the name Edda is in fact the oldest extant, and was proposed by the priest Magnús Ólafsson in his preface to his version of *Snorra Edda* which he compiled in 1609: ‘Edda dregst af orði latinsku edo, i.e. ég yrki eður dikta’.¹⁷ Although this is not the commonest meaning of *edo*, which more often means ‘publish’, the word is frequently used

¹⁵ All three etymologies are old ones (like the one defended below), and were already discussed by Jón Ólafsson of Grunnavík in British Library MS Egerton 642 (written 1735), fol. 13.

¹⁶ Ari, however, seems to have entitled his only extant work *Libellus Islandorum* (see *Íslendingabók, Landnámabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, Reykjavík 1968, p. 4). In the present context, though, it is interesting that Ari used the diminutive form *libellus*.

¹⁷ See *Edda Islandorum*, ed. P. H. Resen, Havnæ 1665 A1r.

with reference to poetry, and it would not have required very profound learning in Latin to coin the word *Edda* from it. The first two lines of Ovid's *Amores* read:

Arma gravi numero violentaque bella parabam
edere, materia conveniente modis.

Here the word might well be understood to mean 'compose (poetry) about', 'treat in verse', and in *Tristia* 2, 541 (*carminaque edideram*) it could be taken to mean simply 'compose'. Cf. Martial, *Epigrams* I, 91, lines 1–2. Note also Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 9, 4, 74, where the word is used to distinguish what a poet wrote (*edidit*) from a later emendation.

This derivation would remain entirely unconvincing, however,¹⁸ if there were not another Icelandic abstract noun formed in an exactly parallel way from a Latin verb of the same type as *edo*, with the connection between the Icelandic and Latin words (which cannot be doubted) actually made explicit in a medieval Icelandic text that was certainly known to Snorri. *Færeyinga saga*, which was one of Snorri's sources in *Heimskringla*, tells an amusing story of how Þóra questioned Sigmundur about his religious education at the hands of Þrándr í Gøtu. He said he had learned 'Pater noster ok kredduna'. This 'kredda' turns out to be a version of a widespread popular prayer, but not a very exact account of the Christian faith. 'Þykki mér engi mynd á, segir hon (i.e. Þóra), á kredo.' Þrándr's defence is that there are many variants of the faith that have equal validity: 'eru margar kreddur, ok er slíkt, segir hann, eigi á eina lund rétt.'¹⁹

From this anecdote it is apparent, not only that the modern Icelandic word *kredda*, which means 'superstition, illogically held belief' is a hypocoristic form of the Latin word *credo* as used substantivally to mean 'affirmation of faith', but that this derivation was known and understood in thirteenth-century Iceland.²⁰ This parallel makes it possible to imagine Snorri, or one of his small circle of interested friends who must have constituted the first readership of his book, coining the word *edda* from

¹⁸ Cf. Árni Magnússon's comment: 'Magni Olai, viri alias eruditissimi, sententia, de Edda ab edo derivanda, refutari non eget' ('Vita Sæmundi Multiscii', p. xxii, in *Edda Sæmundar hinnis Fróða* I, Hafniæ 1787). This view is repeated by Jón Ólafsson of Grunnavík in Egerton 642 (see note 15 above).

¹⁹ *Færeyinga saga*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, Reykjavík 1967, pp. 110–11; *Flateyjarbók*, Christiania 1860–68, II 400–401.

²⁰ *Kredda* probably came into Icelandic via the Old English loan-word *creda*, but this makes no difference to the present argument, since it is the ultimate etymology of the word and the fact that this was known that is significant.

edo in conscious imitation of the word *kredda*, which he knew was derived from *credo*, as a half-humorous description of his treatise, thus implying that the Edda stood in a similar relation to Latin *artes poeticae* as Þrándr's *kredda* to the official *credo*. There may also at the same time have been an awareness of the pun on the other word *edda*, which might have been taken to reflect the fact that the treatise dealt with a kind of poetry that in the thirteenth century must have been thought by many rather old-fashioned.

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Not until I had written the above did I see Stefán Karlsson's lively defence of the same etymology of *edda* on very much the same lines as mine in 'Eddukredda', *Bríari á sextugsafmæli Halldórs Halldórssonar 13. júlí 1971*, pp. 25–33, published in a single typewritten copy in Reykjavík in that year.²¹ The main difference in his argument is that he takes *edda* to be derived from *edo* in the sense 'edit, compile, relate' with reference principally to Snorri's activity in compiling *Gylfaginning*. It seems to me that *edda* (as a title) must have had the sense 'ars poetica' from the beginning, and that it can only be derived from *edo* if that verb was taken to mean 'compose (poetry)'. Nevertheless, the fact that two people have independently come to revive this etymology is itself a testimony to its plausibility, and I hope that scholars will reconsider it and perhaps add it to the list of possible or likely explanations of the word *edda*; though no doubt on this as on other subjects it is probable that each will continue to stand by his own *kredda*.

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²¹ I have incorporated some corrections and additional remarks suggested by Stefán Karlsson in comments on what I had written, which were offered in a splendid spirit of academic detachment.