

ANDREA DE LEEUW VAN WEENEN

ANOTHER INTERPRETATION OF THE WORD *EDDA*

“BÓK ÞESSI HEITIR EDDA. Hana hefir saman setta Snorri Sturlu sonr.” So begins the Uppsala manuscript DG 11 of the work usually referred to as the *Prose Edda* or *Snorra-Edda*. The implication is that the name *Edda* refers to the work itself rather than to this particular manuscript. As no explanation for the term is offered, we may assume that it was already present in the exemplar, or that the work was known by this name to the scribe. It may even be the title assigned to the work by the author.

Over the centuries various hypotheses have been proposed as to the meaning and origin of the word *edda/Edda*. Some found favour, at least for a time or at least with some scholars, while others have proved less persuasive. I will not go into the details of the hypotheses or follow the trails they left in scholarly discussion, as most of them were critically evaluated not long ago by Anatoly Liberman (Liberman 1996). He rejects the idea that *Edda* could refer to the content of the work and dismisses most hypotheses on linguistic grounds.¹ His three conclusions are: 1. “*Edda* is most probably not a word reflecting the content of Snorri’s book”, 2. “Whatever *Edda* meant, the word must have been clear to Snorri’s contemporaries”, and 3. “Whatever the origin of *Edda*, it was invented as the title of one particular book, more or less, we can assume, at the spur of the moment.”

Liberman, however, does not discuss the oldest etymology for *Edda*, proposed by séra Magnús Ólafsson in the introduction to his edition of the *Laufás-Edda*: “*Edda* dregst af orði Latinsku Edo eg yrki e(dur) dickta.”² This etymology was firmly rejected by Árni Magnússon: “Magni Olai,

1 *Edda* cannot be related to *óðr*, as i-umlaut would have resulted in *ø*, not e. Nor can *Edda* be derived from *Oddi* in a phonologically correct way. That *Edda* could have the same meaning as the noun *edda* “great-grandmother” is rejected for semantic reasons.

2 AM 758 4to f. 1r.

viri alias eruditissimi, sententia, de Eddâ ab edo derivandâ, refutatione non eget” (Finnur Jónsson 1930 2, 103). It is not possible to assess Magnús’s arguments as none were presented, and it might well be his problematic status as a scholar that caused this etymology to disappear from view for several centuries. In 1971 Stefán Karlsson revived the idea that *edda* could be derived from *edo* in a short article in a festschrift for Halldór Halldórsson’s 60th birthday. His reasoning is as follows: *kredda* is a loanword from the OE *crēda*, which in turn is the vernacular form of Latin *credo*. Even if this English origin had been forgotten, the relationship between OI *kredda* and Lat. *credo* was perfectly clear and a new word *edda* derived from Lat. *edo* could have been created. Unlike Magnús Ólafsson, Stefán Karlsson suggests that in this instance *edo* should be taken to mean “to publish” or “to put into writing”, citing Isidore of Seville’s phrase “Marcus euangelium edidit”. That Snorri knew the word *kredda* is certain, as it occurs in *Færeyinga saga*, a work with which he was familiar, and it is highly unlikely that his knowledge of Latin fell short of understanding the verbs *credo* and *edo*. Moreover, the phrase cited from Isidor occurs in a manuscript partly written in 1254 that contains a good deal of material connected to the Sturlung family.

As this 1971 festschrift for Halldór Halldórsson was published in a single typewritten version, it is not surprising that Stefán’s article made little impact. However, the idea was taken up independently by Anthony Faulkes (Faulkes 1977). He notes that various compounds or collocations of *edda* are used in poems of the 14th century, and that in the phrase “edda list” *edda* must mean “poetry” or “poetics”, and thus for these poets *edda* must have meant “ars poetica”. Faulkes then suggests that either the term represents a special use of *edda* “great-grandmother” or a homonym coined in the 13th century to apply to Snorri’s work. As the *Snorra-Edda* was the first work of its kind, there was no vernacular word available to describe it, and thus one had to be invented — and who better to do so than the author himself. Faulkes cites the etymology proposed by Magnús Ólafsson and remarks that even if the meaning “to compose (in verse)” is not common, it can be found, for example, in the second line of Ovid’s *Amores*. Accordingly, anyone with even the most cursory acquaintance with the *Edda* would have come across it. Finally, Faulkes supports the link with *edo* by pointing to the *kredda-credo* parallel.

When his oversight in respect of the possible *edo* etymology was drawn to his attention Liberman (1997) devotes two pages to summarizing Faulkes's article and then refutes it on the grounds that Snorri's audience would have known too little Latin to understand the pun.

Liberman's rejection of the *edo* etymology seems precipitate. It was not necessary for Snorri's readers to understand the word's etymology in order for the author to use it. It was sufficient that he himself found it pleasing, and his pleasure will have been shared by others who either recognised the play on words or had it pointed out to them. Indeed, this was my own experience on reading Faulkes article; "of course", I said to myself.

Perhaps, indeed, the word *edda* is even more of a pun than has been suggested, for not only might it have been coined as a parallel to *kredda* but it could even derive directly from it. *Kredda* is a loanword from OE *crēda*, the vernacular form of Latin *credo*. Both *crēda* and *credo* are nouns, meaning originally either the *Apostles' Creed* or the *Nicene Creed*. As Old Norse had no intervocalic single /d/, this had to be replaced by either /dd/ or /ð/, and, as in *stedda* from OE *stēda*, it became /dd/. The OE ending -a was retained as it fitted neatly into the ON declension system. The meaning of *kredda* developed into "superstition, illogically held belief", probably replacing an intermediate phase when it meant "belief (in general)", but we may assume that the original meaning was "creed", in the sense of a summary of the Christian belief. If we create the equation

kredda = *kristin trú*,
 or with an abbreviation
kredda = *kr. trú*,
 removal of the letters *kr* produces
edda = *trú*.

In this way *edda* signifies a summary of non-Christian belief, a definition that accords well with the mythological part of the *Snorra-Edda*.

This hypothesis may seem far-fetched and unlikely to have been generally understood. But we have to realize that the *Edda* was intended for poets working within and familiar with the complicated rules of skaldic poetry. They probably knew quite a few poems by earlier skalds and were thus no strangers to the mental agility required to decipher and appreciate such verse. Unusual vocabulary, unfamiliar word-order and the use of complex kennings served to make the poetry difficult to understand,

even with pen and paper at hand, while in the sagas there are accounts of these poems often being composed extemporaneously and reacted to immediately. And sometimes even more verbal trickery was involved, as exemplified by verse 42 in *Egils saga* (ch. 65), where for a long time scholars were puzzled by the last line “ek bar sauð með nauðum”,³ as the immediately preceding narrative mentions neither sheep nor bearing. As Egill fights a duel with Atli the Short, he finds that his sword will not bite his opponent; eventually they wrestle and Egill bites through Atli’s throat, thereby killing him. He then breaks the neck of the sacrificial bull, returns to his companions and composes a verse, in which he explains how his sword would not bite, because of the spell that Atli had cast over it, and how he had been forced to use his teeth. The cited line then follows. Until Jón Helgason’s clever analysis (Jón Helgason 1957) this line had proved difficult to understand; the only way to make any sense of it was to take *sauð* to mean not “sheep”, as elsewhere in Old Norse, but “sacrifice” as in Gothic. Jón Helgason, however, reordered the line as

bar ek sauð með nauðum,

by making *ek* into an enclitic and replacing *sauð* with its synonym *á*. Thus:

bark á með nauðum.

Because in unstressed positions there can be no long-short opposition, as attested in the *First Grammatical Treatise*, this can also be read as

barka með nauðum,

so that the last two lines now read:

jaxlbróður lét ek eyða barka með nauðum,

which translates as: “With difficulty I let my teeth destroy his throat”.

If we view the verse from the poet’s perspective, we have a verse that tells firstly of Egil’s sword failing to bite because of Atli’s spell (lines 1–4), and then of Egil using force against his opponent (lines 5–6), and, finally, of his destroying something with his teeth (line 7). Not mentioned in the verse thus far is the fact that Egil bit through Atli’s throat. We would expect to find the word *barki* in line 8 as an object with *eyða*. *Eyða* usually governs the dative, but can be found occasionally with the accusative. Here it is irrelevant, however, as the form would be *barka* in both cases. The

3 Such is the text in *Möðruvallabók*. *Ketilsbók* and the *Wolfenbüttel* manuscript read “af” instead of “með”, cf. Finnur Jónsson 1912, 57.

poet has decided to disguise the word *barka* by splitting it into three parts: *bar-k-a*, where *bar* would be understood as the preterite of *bera*, *-k* is the enclitic form of *ek*, and, as noted above, the final *a* can be taken as long. By using *á* to mean “sheep” and substituting a synonym (*sauð*) the poet succeeds in hiding the keyword in a perfect metric line. In his article Jón pointed out that such substitutions of one synonym for another are often found in skaldic poetry and later in *rímur*.

When compared with this sleight-of-hand, which Snorri as the author of *Egils saga* was certainly aware of, even if he did not compose the verse himself, my suggestion that the first two letters of *kredda* should be taken as a reference to the fact that the *credo* is the summary of *Christian* belief is not as far-fetched as it may seem at first sight.

It remains to be said that the name *Edda* may well have been multi-layered in meaning. It could have involved the connection with Latin *edo* (with one or both shades of meaning attached to it), the rebus-like connection with *kredda*, and possibly even the link with the noun *edda* “great-grandmother”, in order to indicate that the book contains ancestral lore, or to hint that the beliefs described were outdated.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Faulkes, Anthony. 1977. "Edda." *Gripla* 2: 32-39.
- Finnur Jónsson (ed.). 1912. *Den Norsk-Islandske Skjaldedigtning A, 1. Text efter Håndskrifterne*. Copenhagen: Villadsen & Christensen.
- Finnur Jónsson (ed.). 1930. *Árni Magnússon levned og skrifter* 1–2. Copenhagen: Gyldendal.
- Jón Helgason. 1957. "Ek bar sauð." *Acta Philologica Scandinavica* 23: 94–96.
- Lieberman, Anatoly. 1996. "Ten Scandinavian and North English Etymologies." *Alvissmál* 6: 63–96.
- Lieberman, Anatoly. 1997. "An Addendum to 'Ten Scandinavian and North English Etymologies' (*Edda* and *glide/gleiten*)." *Alvissmál* 7: 101–104.
- Sigurður Nordal (ed.). 1933. *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*. Íslenzk fornrit 2. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag.
- Stefán Karlsson. 1971. "Eddukredda." *Briari á sextugsafmali Halldórs Halldórssonar 13. júlí 1971*. Reykjavík: [unpublished copy], 25–33.

Andrea de Leeuw van Weenen
 Tjalkenwerf 3
 NL-2317DD Leiden
 andreal@xs4all.nl