SIGRÚN DAVÍÐSDÓTTIR

OLD NORSE COURT POETRY

Some Notes on its Purpose, Transmission and Historical Value

> Nu saa som ofte leverede de Lærde i al Troskyldighed blot Beviser *en gros* for Tanker, som var fremherskende i Tiden, og som de saa at sige havde indaandet med Atmosfæren.
>
> *Paul V. Rubow*

1.0 Most of the scholarly literature on Old Norse court poetry deals with individual poets or poems. Less attention has been paid to the more fundamental questions of purpose, transmission and historical value. It is also significant that in the past Old Norse court poetry has often been dealt with as if it was more or less unique. This is far from being the case, and it is of some interest to examine, however briefly, what court poetry in Scandinavia has in common with court poetry elsewhere.

In this paper the following problems will be considered:

(1) The poems were composed for the benefit of chieftains or kings and were delivered at their courts. But why?

(2) After the poems were delivered they were handed down. But how?

(3) The poems were committed to writing, often many centuries after they were composed. But why?

It goes without saying that the study is based on sources of a later date than the period in which Old Norse court poetry flourished, and this makes the conclusions less certain. Parallels from societies where more is known about court poetry may be used to throw some light on the less clear Old Norse tradition, although this method has its limitations.

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Examples from Old Norse court poetry and references to the sagas have in most cases been omitted. Such examples are easily accessible in Finnur Jónsson 1920:321–635, Jón Helgason 1953:101–158, Jan de Vries 1964:99–207, 226–294, and Peter Hallberg 1975:105–172.

2.0 The themes of poems composed at the courts, in most cases in the *dróttkvætt* metre, can be divided into several groups. The most important are:[1]

(1) The munificence of chiefs.
(2) Voyages and battles.
(3) Laments.

In what follows poems dealing largely with these themes will be called court poetry. Most of it is considered to be the work of court poets who spent some time at the courts or were members of a chief's retinue.[2] Court poetry constitutes the largest part of all extant scaldic poems.[3]

Court poetry is by no means an exclusively Scandinavian phenomenon. In the Middle Ages and later it was known elsewhere in Europe, e. g. in France and in Ireland.[4] Outside Europe it is found for instance in India and in Africa. For a deeper understanding of court poetry it is of importance that scholars have been able to study it as a living tradition in several African societies, both in West and in East Africa. The genre is everywhere remarkably similar.

Finnegan, for instance, has this to say about African court poetry (1976:82):

[1] A more detailed classification is given by Jón Helgason 1953: 111–158.

[2] The court poets are listed in the Skáldatal, finished around the year 1265, which records 146 names.

[3] This fact does not prove that this was always the case, as it is possible that the transmission of court poetry was particularly good, cf. Jón Helgason 1953: 116. The reason could be the secondary function or purpose it gradually acquired, see 4.0 below.

[4] There is a noteworthy difference between the virtues extolled by the scalds and by Central and South European poets in the Middle Ages. The former concentrated mainly on military prowess whereas the latter dealt with a more complicated set of virtues, including education (cf. on "Herrscherlob", Curtius 1965: 184–186). This, no doubt, reflects differences in social structure. A similar difference appears in the descriptions of heroes in the Icelandic sagas and in translated romances.

> The most specialized genres of poetry occur in association with royal courts.

And furthermore (1976:111):

> In its specialized form panegyric is *the* type for court poetry and is one of the most developed and elaborate poetic genres in Africa. It seems to go with a particular ethos, a stress on royal or aristocratic power, and an admiration for military achievement. . . . But the most specialized forms, . . . are the formalized praises which are directed publicly to kings, chiefs, and leaders, and which are composed and recited by members of a king's official entourage.

The same is true of Old Norse court poetry. It was practised in a society founded on aristocratic power, and it was elaborate and extremely complicated.

2.1 According to the sources the scalds delivered their poems at the courts. At the same time they were members of the chief's retinue and served as councillors. Thus they were by no means merely the practitioners of an abstruse art. It is also apparent that the chiefs were careful not to let just anybody present a poem. When a poem had been delivered it was handsomely paid for and seems to have acquired the status of an official opinion or a public statement. This goes far to explain the respect accorded to the court poets.

This respect and the close relationship between a chief and his poets has parallels elsewhere. Kailasapathy (1968:55) has this to say about the Tamil court poets:

> It may be accepted that the minstrels depended on their patrons for largess and expected it from them. But that does not adequately explain the mutual regard that existed between the two. . . . the minstrel in the Heroic age occupied an honoured place in the king's court. He was more than a passive spectator depending on the doles given to him.

And furthermore (1968:85):

> As part of the royal retinue they enjoyed the full confidence of the princes. For some of them were sent as 'political' messengers. They also used their position of respectability to settle conflicts.

This is not to deny that the reciting of court poetry may have been an esteemed and popular entertainment.[5] But where court poetry as a living tradition has been investigated it has been shown to have a more complicated and serious function.

This is shown by Vansina (1973:147) who divides traditional African poetry into two main categories, personal and official. Official poetry is delivered in public at the instigation of chiefs. Old Norse court poetry would fit admirably into this category. Vansina says:

> Official poetry is either straight propaganda, or else awakens feelings which, in the eyes of the community as a whole, ought to be aroused and meditated upon.

And furthermore (1973:148):

> Official poetry is more likely to convey the attitudes and behaviour patterns which society wants to impose upon its members.

Kailasapathy (1968:77) has this to say about Tamil court poetry:

> There is considerable evidence to suggest that the praises of the bards were designed not only to please pleasure-seeking, flattery-loving princes, but also to serve as propaganda and publicity for them among others. It has been observed that the bards were the counterparts in the Heroic Age of the modern mass-media.

The same seems to be true of Old Norse court poetry. It follows that it must have served an important political purpose. The following were apparently its main features:

(a) To serve as a medium for the chiefs' propaganda for themselves and their power.

[5] Jackson (1962:37–38) who discusses the purpose and function of medieval literature points out that genres with no obvious social connotations may have the greatest social impact:

> It is, curiously enough, in the less obviously didactic works that the social element is strongest. Although the primary purpose of the courtly romance and the national epic was to entertain, the idealized setting of the former and the historical background of the latter made its authors (and audience) very sensible of conformity to a set of values, often idealized, and of the demands of a particular social milieu. . . . The authors of these works were conscious of their impact and proud of their influence. They believed in the morality which they depicted and in the ethical value of the stories they told.

(b) To be the chiefs' lasting monument.

(c) To describe the feats of ancient warriors as a model conduct.

(d) To bring to the notice of the chiefs serious discontentment among their subjects.

2.2 In what follows these four features will be dealt with briefly:

(a) The chiefs' propaganda appears in two ways. On the one hand the poems were intended to show their right to power. This could, i.a., be done with genealogies tracing their descent from ruling families and ultimately from Óðinn.[6] On the other hand their prowess in battle was described, as a proof of their ability to govern in a society founded on military power. At the same time this prowess was held up as a worthy model for their subjects.

Similar features of Tamil heroic poetry are discussed by Kailasapathy (1968:77):

> We may venture to suggest that with the progressive consolidation of the Three Tamil Kingdoms, the concept of divine royalty, which was, indeed, nascent in the community, blossomed into a full-fledged political theory. Such a theory enabled the bards to construct 'a poetic theogony glorifying aristocratic history'.

And in Africa by Finnegan (1976:142):

> In societies where status and birth were so important, the praise poems served to consolidate these values. As so often with panegyric, the recitation of the praises of the chief and his ancestors served to point out to the listeners the chief's right to the position he held both through his descent from those predecessors whose great deeds were commemorated and through his own qualities so glowingly and solemnly depicted in the poetry.

(b) It is a common idea that the fame of the dead survives and that poems may be lasting monuments. Parallels to this from Tamil court poetry are furnished by Kailasapathy (1968:78):

> The idea of the bards immortalizing those whom they praise seems to be a subordinate but important theme running like a thread

[6] Examples of this are the two poems Ynglingatal and Háleygjatal, which are, however, not composed in the *dróttkvætt* metre. The chiefs traced their descent from the gods, no doubt to consolidate their power. Similarly, in Christian societies kings were sometimes said to govern by divine grace.

> through the greater portion of the poems; for that reason the dead and the glorious are said to live in the songs of the bards. The ideal hero while alive 'lived' in the battle ground, and after death passed into the verses of the singers.

Norse chiefs were apparently no exceptions to this, and this could explain in part their interest in panegyric, and at the same time their fear of satire.[7] There may, of course, have been additional causes for the latter (cf. Almqvist 1965).

(c) The heroism of ancient warriors is extolled, not only in their honour but also as an exhortation.[8] This is also known elsewhere, see Kailasapathy (1968:251):

> It appears from the poems that the cherished memories of ancestors were restraints on the conduct of heroes.

And furthermore (1968:82):

> By singing songs that recalled memories of the valiant feats of their forefathers, the soldiers were urged to emulate them.

(d) Poets occasionally told a king something others did not dare to say openly.[9] If this was one of the poets' tasks, it is somewhat reminiscent of the position of ombudsman in present day Scandinavia.

A similar phenomenon in Africa is discussed by Finnegan (1976: 142):

> . . . praises could contain criticism as well as eulogy, a pressure to conform to expectations as well as praise for actual behaviour. In

[7] In the laws of the Icelandic commonwealth, valid until 1271, the proper subjects of poems are determined (Grágás II 1852:183–185), stating at the outset that one is neither to compose a poem of abuse nor of praise. Considering the quantity of poems handed down this may seem strange. In dealing with poetry among the Hausa, Finnegan (1976:94–95) points out that poets who make a living out of praise poetry outside the courts may turn praise into abuse if an adequate remuneration is not forthcoming, and continues:

> In view of the effectiveness of this type of poetic pressure—the extraction of money by virtual blackmail—it is small wonder that attempts have been made in some Hausa kingdoms recently to forbid or limit the activities of these singers.

[8] Bjarkamál is a well known example.

[9] Examples can be found for instance in Heimskringla I 1941:183, Heimskringla II 1945:56, and Heimskringla III 1951:26–31.

this way, praise poetry could also have the implicit result of exerting control on a ruler as well as the obvious one of upholding his position.

The function of the court poems comprised at least the four features (a)–(d). The scalds and their poems were a social institution, and this institution remained intact as long as the society remained unchanged.[10] The main function of the court poets was thus political. This is the primary function of the court poetry.

3.0 When the court poems were written down, mainly in the 13th century, some of them were said to be the work of poets who served chiefs or kings who lived in the 9th century. According to this they had been handed down for four centuries, or about twelve generations, before being committed to parchment. The question of their transmission will be dealt with in what follows.

3.1 Poems handed down orally usually show this in one way or another. The following features of scaldic tradition and scaldic poetry indicate oral tradition:

(a) Tradition knows no instance of a scald writing down a poem for the benefit of a chief. The scalds declaim or recite (*kveða, flytja*) their poems and the listeners learn (*nema*) the poems.

(b) Some scalds are said to have recited the poems of other scalds along with their own.[11] Thus it appears that the repertory of a scald was not limited to his own poems. In fact, the training of a scald must have included the memorizing of a considerable corpus of poems, no doubt with accompanying tales and appropriate explanations. It is therefore likely that the transmission of scaldic poetry was largely in the hands of the scalds themselves. It is noteworthy that there are examples of poetic families (cf. Finnur Jónsson 1920:332–333), a phenomenon also known elsewhere (cf. Finnegan 1976:88).

The sources say little about how young scalds learned their trade.

[10] When the Scandinavian states and their rulers achieved a greater stabilization, comparable to the rest of Western Europe, the poets and the poems lost their function. Courtly romances from Central Europe brought with them a human ideal, different from and more complicated than the ideal held up by the scalds. At the same time romances and jongleurs substituted the court poems as a pastime.

[11] Examples of this have been collected by Finnur Jónsson 1920:341–342.

Bardic handbooks existed for instance among the Tamil and the Welsh (Kailasapathy 1968: 49–50). Their Icelandic counterpart is Snorri's Edda written about 1220. This work, while bearing the stamp of Snorri's classical education and genius, gives no doubt a fair idea of the instruction imparted orally to apprentice scalds for centuries before Snorri's time.

(c) No examples of court poetry have been found in writing from the 9th to the 12th century, whereas the earliest example of a scaldic verse written in runes is dated to about 1000. But considering the lack of sources this proves nothing.

(d) The dating of scaldic poems by applying linguistic criteria is difficult. The language of the poems is more variegated than that of the accompanying prose, and the same verse may show both old and young features. It is clear that old features may be preserved in a poem, especially when it is composed in an elaborate metre. But old features may occur in a young poem, not in order to give it an old appearance on purpose, but simply because such features were a part of the poetic diction.[12] Thus the rule of thumb stating that a verse must be as old as the oldest linguistic form found in it is invalid. The statement that a poem is as young as the youngest linguistic form found in it is equally erroneous. In both cases important arguments are simply ignored. The fact that scholars have been working on the linguistic dating of poems for more than a century without making much headway or reaching a consensus shows the difficulties inherent in this, and even the impossibility of the task.

One of the characteristics of poems handed down orally is the mixture of old and new features. Kirk (1976:6) has this to say on the language of Homer:

> The diction of Homer was archaic and yet constantly renewed, and

[12] In this context *vindandin forna* mentioned by Ólafr Þórðarson hvítaskáld (13th century) may be of interest (Den tredje og fjærde grammatiske afhandling i Snorres Edda 1884:87). This is the occurrence of *v-* in words as *vreiðr* 'angry, wroth' and *vrangr* 'wrong', which was dropped in Icelandic before the time of the earliest extant texts (12th century) and probably much earlier. It is hardly reasonable to consider Ólafr a precursor of 19th century historical linguistics, but as a scald he was well versed in poetic diction, and a knowledge of this feature probably belonged to a scald's schooling, designated by the somewhat enigmatic term quoted above.

> that accounts for the existence side by side of terms and linguistic forms from the Mycenaean dialect of the Achaean heroes, from the contemporary world of Homer himself and from many anonymous generations between.

And furthermore (1976:38):

> . . . the conservative oral tradition preserved many old usages, although with no special consistency.

The Todas, a small Dravidian speaking people of South India have a remarkable poetic tradition. Emeneau (1958:320) remarks on the language of their poems:

> The morphology, especially of the verb, is different, whether more archaic or merely a contrived difference I cannot yet say. In a few points, by comparison with related languages, it has been possible to identify archaisms of morphology or of vocabulary.

And Finnegan (1976:88) has this to say about the court poetry of Rwanda:

> The style was full of archaisms, obscure language, and highly figurative forms of expression.

The linguistic dating of a document where written tradition is abundant may be difficult enough, but in the case of a composition in poetic diction handed down orally in an illiterate society it is almost bound to fail.

(e) Another characteristic of Norse court poetry is its lack of dialect features. It is possible to envisage different explanations of this: (1) It is possible, but not likely, that dialect differences were negligible. (2) Dialect differences gradually disappeared when the poems were handed down or when they were written down. (3) There was a special poetic language or dialect. The material at hand does not permit of an answer to this. But special poetic languages are common elsewhere, languages based on one dialect or composed of features from different dialects, and containing old and young elements. Renou (1956:10) has this to say on the Rgveda:

> Bien que dû à des auteurs multiples, préparé dans des localités séparées, il ne présente guère de diversité dialectale. Autrement

> dit, nous avons affaire dès l'origine à une sorte de norme linguistique.

For Irish this phenomenon has been described by Corkery (1956: 73–74):

> . . . the Irish language was the very apple of their eye to the bardic schools. That language they took, and ruling out dialect and the passing turn of speech, refined it and set it apart as a special dialect, a language for literature, which became known from end to end of Ireland. It was known also in Scotland. It remained unchanged for centuries.

There are other examples still, for instance the language of the German Minnesänger which has been compared to Norse poetic language by Kuhn (1969:111–112).

The discussion in (a)-(e) above leads to the somewhat unsurprising conclusion that the court poems were indeed handed down orally before being committed to parchment. Comparison with similar as well as with different poetic genres elsewhere supports this.

4.0 The court poems have come down to us in manuscripts, mainly embedded in the texts of the kings' sagas. Complete poems are seldom found, only single verses. This is strikingly different from the Eddic poems. The historians claim to use these verses as sources for their works. This claim, as well as the historical value of the poems, will be examined briefly below.

4.1 It is not known when the poems were taken to pieces but there are at least two possible explanations:

(a) The historians based their works on the poems and at the same time they took the poems apart and inserted single verses into their story as a proof of its veracity.

This explanation leaves something to be desired, because the prose sections contain a wealth of information not to be found in the verses.

(b) When the sagas were written there existed oral tales interspersed with verses or poems accompanied by more or less detailed tales. The historians collected these tales and committed them to parchment more or less changed, thus working at the same time as collectors, editors

and authors. This is in accordance with the methods used by the historians of Medieval Europe.

This explanation is more adequate, i.a. because the prose sections and the verses serve different purposes. In the prose sections concrete facts are presented, for instance what happened, where, and who took part. The verses on the other hand describe how things happened, almost devoid of concrete facts, somewhat beside the main story and similar to an illustration accompanying the text.[13]

It is not possible to determine when this conglomerate of prose and verse came into being, but in all probability it happened not very long after the poems were composed and when they passed into oral tradition.

Above, in 2.1–2.2, the primary, political, purpose of court poetry was discussed. As it passed into oral tradition its function changed into serving as illustrations in prose tales. This is the secondary purpose of the poems leading to their conservation, at least in part, because the historians used the poems later in the same way.

That prose and poems serve a different purpose is well known elsewhere. Emeneau (1966:342–343) has this to say on the Todas:

> The semantic orientation of the songs is very different from what is often considered to be the primary purpose of speech. The songs are not instruments of information, but of comment, socially directed or individually emotional; . . . Prose, no doubt, can and does say the same things. But the semantic essence of Toda songs is that the comments that are made are made in a highly formulaic, and consequently restricted, way. On the occasion of an event information may be given and comment made in prose, but the socially directed, traditionally directed comment is made in song.

Vansina (1973:149) says about African praise poetry:

> Moreover, although the poems themselves give very little precise

[13] Sturla Þórðarson, one of the latest of the court poets (13th century), composed a poem in honour of king Hákon Hákonarson, and later included verses from the poem in his own written saga of Hákon Hákonarson. As the poet Sturla Þórðarson could know no better than the historian Sturla Þórðarson, this has been taken as an example of a tradition-bound but in his case meaningless use of court poetry as a historical source. In fact, this is in complete agreement with the regular use of court poems in the sagas, as outlined above.

> information about historical events and refer to them mostly by allusions, they are accompanied by a commentary which gives more detailed information.

And about African praise poetry Finnegan (1976:133):

> The imagery in this form of poetry provides a striking contrast to the much more straightforward expression in prose.

In discussing the Pañcatantra Renou (1956:148) says:

> . . . Pañcatantra . . . en prose, sauf insertion de versets discontinus, . . . Les vers servent d'introduction et de conclusion (moralité), ils égrènent des maximes, de type volontiers épigrammatique comme celles des vieilles *gāthā*; rarement ce sont des éléments narratifs. La prose est simple, coulante . . .

The Pañcatantra is of course different from the literature discussed here, but it is noteworthy that also here the verses are somewhat beside the main story.

This conglomerate of prose and verse, so characteristic of the sagas of the kings and many of the sagas of the Icelanders, is therefore far from being unique.[14]

The contrast between the simple, straightforward language of the prose, and the complicated, often obscure, language of the poems is also common.

4.2 The historian Snorri Sturluson states that he uses court poetry as a source (Heimskringla I 1941:5):

> Með Haraldi konungi váru skáld, ok kunna menn enn kvæði þeira ok allra konunga kvæði, þeira er síðan hafa verit í Nóregi, ok tókum vér þar mest dœmi af, þat er sagt er í þeim kvæðum, er kveðin váru fyrir sjálfum hǫfðingjunum eða sonum þeira. Tǫkum vér þat allt fyrir satt, er í þeim kvæðum finnsk um ferðir þeira eða orrostur. En þat er háttr skálda at lofa þann mest, er þá eru þeir fyrir, en engi myndi þat þora at segja sjálfum honum þau verk hans, er allir þeir, er heyrði, vissi, at hégómi væri ok skrǫk, ok svá sjálfr hann. Þat væri þá háð, en eigi lof.

[14] To explain this feature of Old Icelandic literature Irish influence has been suggested, but it is much more likely that this is an indigenous development.

He states expressly that he considers what is said in the poems to be true, especially in poems recited for the chiefs themselves or their sons, because no poet would dare to hold a chief up to ridicule by attributing to him in his presence feats that he as well as the rest of the audience knew he had never performed.[15] It appears from this statement that Snorri, and no doubt other historians as well, used the poems in good faith. But this optimistic statement, while expressing Snorri's view on the matter, tells nothing about the historical value of the poems. Apparently the historians considered a verse containing a vague description a reliable source and a corroboration of the accompanying tale.

In what follows the historical value of the court poems will be briefly touched upon:

(a) A verse or verses inserted in a tale often lack both personal names and place names and therefore contain no concrete information. This makes it uncertain whether the verses and the tale originally dealt with the same matter.

(b) A verse often contains a description of a very general nature that could just as well fit a number of other tales. This is especially clear in the case of battle descriptions.

(c) The descriptions found in the verses are remarkably similar. The reason for this may be that the poets were expected to deal with special subjects only. Besides, they were restricted by the elaborate poetic diction. It may in fact be impossible to decide whether a poet was faithfully describing an event or merely filling in a scheme furnished by poetic convention and poetic diction. Cf. on this de Vries (1964: 99):

> Die Hofpoesie läßt persönlichen Einfällen des Dichters nur wenig Raum, denn sie ist gewissermaßen festgegliedertes Element der höfischen Etikette: Hauptsache ist, daß dem Herrscher nach den althergebrachten Formeln der Tradition das ihm gebührende Lob gespendet wird, nicht, daß der Dichter eigener Phantasie und Gestaltungskraft frönen kann.

And furthermore (1964:100):

[15] Some control being exerted by the audience, both regarding the truthfulness of the poem as well as the accuracy of the recitation is well known elsewhere, cf. Vansina 1973:28.

> . . . das skaldische Preislied war nicht eigentlich Dichtkunst nach der Vorstellung, die wir von Poesie haben, sondern ein Teil des höfischen Zeremoniells.

Similarly Steblin-Kamenskij (1969:430):

> Scalds were authors in a very peculiar sense. In fact it was so to speak mere "form authorship".

Court poets dealing with a restricted subject matter are also known among the Tamil, see Kailasapathy (1968:19):

> . . . composition by theme appears to have been a practice of the bards. . . . the bards composed their poems on the basis of themes. The themes themselves came into being and were cultivated by them to illustrate the glory of the heroes.

Beside the limited subject matter thought fit for court poetry, a complicated diction replete with stereotypes makes different descriptions rather similar. Also this throws some doubt upon the historical value of court poetry. The complicated diction is a famous feature of Old Norse court poetry, and it is therefore of interest to note that the same is true of court poetry elsewhere.

Finnegan (1976:117–118) has this to say about African court poetry:

> Most praise poetry, above all the official type, seems to adopt a more or less obscure and allusive style. The language may be archaic and lofty . . . and figurative forms of expression are common . . . the actions and qualities of the hero may be almost completely conveyed in metaphorical terms . . . Praise of a person (or a thing) is not something to be expressed in bald or straightforward language.

And Vansina (1973:149–150) has this to say about African court poetry:

> Any attempt to study the poem itself in order to learn something about the history of the institution to which the person whose praises are sung belonged comes up against the difficulty of deciding whether a statement is merely a stereotype phrase, or one which describes actual facts.

(d) If the poems were at the outset meant to serve as a kind of

propaganda for the chiefs, see 2.1–2.2 above, some exaggeration of their feats may be expected. Vansina says (1973:76):

> For instance, poems in praise of the kings . . . The purpose of these poems is to extol the kings, therefore they distort events of the past in the sense that they exaggerate the valorous deeds of the kings and pass over their defeats in silence.

And on praise poems dealing with military actions Finnegan (1976: 126) has this to say:

> The basis of the events mentioned is authentic, but the emphasis is on those incidents in which the hero excelled.

But while the poems throw a considerable light on the society in which they came into being, they were probably never intended to record history. This has been dealt with by Vansina (1973:149):

> A poem of praise is certainly not composed for the purpose of recording history. Poetry of this kind is composed either during the lifetime of the person concerned, or immediately after his death . . . It is obligatory to use a large number of stereotype phrases in this category of poems, so the poems serve as a source of information about the social ideals prevalent at the time when they were composed.

(e) The court poems were handed down orally, but it is an open question how accurate this tradition was. Snorri Sturluson (Den store saga om Olav den hellige 1941:4) has this to say on the problem:

> Þau orð er i qvedscap standa ero en somo sem i fyrstu voro ef rett er kveðit þott hveR maðr hafi siðan numit at auðrom. oc ma þvi ecki breyta.

He states, again somewhat optimistically, that the poems cannot be altered if they were metrically correct at the outset. There is no reason to doubt that those who knew and recited the poems intended to hand them down unchanged, and that they occasionally succeeded in this. But there are examples of the same verse being found in two different sources in divergent, even widely divergent versions, and this in spite of the metre (cf. Jón Helgason 1953:107–108).

This is of course only what is to be expected in the case of an oral

tradition. Lord (1974:28–29) mentions that Jugoslav singers stress that they can sing a song exactly as they heard it. Upon examination this did not turn out to be the case, and it was apparent that their notion of what was the same song was rather a question of subject matter than of a word to word correspondence, as would be the case in a literate society or among philologists. Vansina (1973:56) deals with the same problem in Africa:

> It does, however, sometimes happen that a tradition which an informant declares to be cast in a fixed form is found to have variants when other versions are recorded. But the intention is that it should have a fixed form, and the predominating tendency is to keep to the fixed form.

Shoolbraid (1975:4–5), in discussing epic tradition in Siberia and in Central Asia, has this to say about the veracity of texts handed down orally:

> The primitive (i.e., the unsophisticated preliterate) does not relish change and is likely to resist it strenuously. He is by nature conservative, traditionally oriented. Yet change does occur in his society; despite the forces of opposition, a gradual shift of values and evolution in material culture and language can be observed.
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> The very gradual nature of this shift will, often enough, prevent the primitive from noticing it. "This is my grandfather's axe; my father gave it a new haft, and I have given it a new head" is a reflection of his stubborn traditionalism in the face of all civilized logic; the eternal changelessness of things will be dogmatically insisted upon, no matter how evident is the contrary.
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> The "primitive" may rationalize these obvious changes in his society, ignoring them and denying their existence. The bard of this society can hardly be blamed for insisting, as he does, that there have been no changes in his recitation, that all is as it has ever been. He is not guilty of bad faith, for without written records he has no opportunity of "correcting" his version according to the "received text".
>
> So while deliberate change is anathema to the reciter, uncon-cious modification can and will occur in his tale, although most likely it will be denied by its perpetrator. After centuries of this

process of gradual alteration, the entire piece may have changed beyond recognition. However, since gradual change is seldom noticed, its cumulative effect will be accepted as "the way things have always been". Some things may still remain from the old versions, so that one finds words being used in recitation which the bard no longer understands and historical details which are, to say the least, unfamiliar to the performer and his society.

The historical value of the court poems can only be determined by comparing their testimony in each particular case with the testimony of other independent sources. But such sources are rare and the results have turned out to be meager.[16]

But considering what has been discussed in (a)-(e) above, it is clear that there is no reason whatsoever to put much faith in the historical value of the court poetry.

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[16] See on this, e. g., Campbell 1971.

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