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Men's Business? Two Female Skalds of the Uppsala Edda  
and the Origins of Poetry

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# Men's Business? Two Female Skalds of the Uppsala Edda and the Origins of Poetry

Anna Solovyeva<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract:

Skaldic poetry is associated almost exclusively with men: especially in a court setting, both the professional poet delivering the verses and the patron receiving and rewarding the poet's performance were almost always male. However, *Skáldatal*, the early-fourteenth century list of professional court poets and their patrons found in the *Codex Uppsaliensis* of *Snorra-Edda*, includes not only several dozens of male names, but also two female ones. According to this list, one of the earliest skalds was Áslaug, the legendary wife of King Ragnarr *loðbrók*. The other woman, coming at the end of *Skáldatal*, is Steinvör Sighvatsdóttir, the niece of Snorri Sturluson. The presence of these two names allows us to question the gendering of skaldic tradition as it is portrayed in *Skáldatal* and in the Uppsala manuscript of *Snorra-Edda* in general. In order to account for the significance of Áslaug and Steinvör in this context, I discuss the structure and ideological agenda of the *Codex Uppsaliensis* on the one hand, and, on the other, the connection between these two women and poetry known to us from other extant sources. I propose that the image of Áslaug, on the one side shadowed by Steinvör and on the other echoing the role played by Gunnlóð in the myth of poetry, represents the model of behaviour for professional skalds and acknowledges otherworldly feminine origins of the skaldic art widely practised by male poets.

**Keywords:** skaldic poetry, skalds, Uppsala Edda, fornaldarsögur, skáldkonur

Skaldic poetry appeared as an artistic form and a phenomenon of Scandinavian court culture in the ninth century and quietly went out of fashion by the end of the fourteenth century. During this period, skaldic poetry was both a way to shape, preserve and disseminate memories about the exploits of great kings and warriors, and the means of gaining wealth and prestige for the poets. With few exceptions, most skalds were Icelanders. With even fewer exceptions, they were

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male. According to the Icelandic sagas and medieval treatises, skaldic poetry and all interaction with it seems to have been almost exclusively the domain of powerful males. Even in regard to commissioning verses, hearing the skalds' performances and rewarding their craft, the women of Scandinavian royal families were usually passive witnesses sitting next to their royal husbands or fathers, who were the addressees of the poetry. When a woman did take the role of a skald's patron, both her character and the situation had to be exceptional, like when Gunnhildr *konungamóðir* commissioned the commemorative poem *Eiríksmál* about her husband Eiríkr *blóðox*.<sup>2</sup> While being the subject of a praise poem contributed to the fame and prestige of a man, for a woman that was deeply problematic: even if the content of the poem was purely laudatory, questions could arise as to how the skald gathered the material for his praise. The implied close acquaintance with the male poet could bring dishonour to both the woman and her legal guardian.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Ottar *svarti* almost lost his head for composing a poem about King Óláfr's wife, and most other skalds did not even attempt to include their patrons' wives, sisters or daughters into their verses.

Composing her own poetry appears less problematic for a woman. A number of female characters across different types of sagas speak in verse, and, as Sandra Straubhaar notes, this 'indicates a readiness on the part of saga authors to accept women and young girls as composers of poetry.'<sup>4</sup> However, women's poetry mostly includes impromptu versified dialogues or visionary verses. It is not common for a woman to act as a court poet: to stand up in front of a powerful ruler, praise him in verse and be rewarded for her effort. In the business of court poetry, a man is wont to stand at both the giving and the receiving end of the interaction. In this context, it is all the more striking and intriguing that some women are exceptions to the rule. I would like now to draw attention to two women who are not only counted among professional skalds,

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<sup>2</sup> *Fagrskinna* 8.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Clunies Ross, *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics* (D.S.Brewer, 2005), 41.

<sup>4</sup> Sandra B. Straubhaar, 'The Forgotten *Skáldkonur* and Their Place in Early Scandinavian Culture,' in *Creativity, Influence, Imagination: The Worlds of Medieval Women*, ed. Judith Rice Rothschild (Morgantown, West Virginia: University of West Virginia Press, 1987), 18.

but occupy prominent positions in a late-thirteenth – early-fourteenth century portrayal of the skaldic tradition.

*Skáldatal: A Portrait of a Tradition*

My point of departure is *Skáldatal*, the list of skalds and their patrons from the legendary origins of court poetry until the mid-thirteenth century. Every single patron listed in this long document is a man (one of them might not even be human, but a dog named Saurr, who is still male). However, two poets in *Skáldatal* are women. Both extant versions of the list give pride of place at the beginning of the tradition outlined here to Áslaug, the wife of King Ragnarr loðbrók. The slightly later and longer version of *Skáldatal* includes another woman: close to the end of the list, Steinvör Sighvatsdóttir is mentioned as the skald of Gautr af Meli. The irregular character of the final section of *Skáldatal* in this version suggests that the presence of Steinvör is deliberate—and significant for our understanding of the list as a whole and of the way it portrays the skaldic tradition. To contextualize and understand the significance of the two women whose names frame the long list of male skalds and patrons, I will introduce *Skáldatal* in more detail, before turning to the female skalds themselves.

As its name suggests, *Skáldatal* is a list of skalds, or poets who composed *dróttkvæði* (court, or ‘skaldic,’ poetry). This medieval document includes professional skalds, who composed for and about the powerful rulers of Scandinavia in the period from the ninth to the middle of thirteenth century. The list follows several bloodlines, and the names of skalds are listed together with the names of their patrons (mostly Scandinavian kings and earls). *Skáldatal* also includes several short narrative passages, focusing on prominent figures who stood at the origins of the skaldic tradition and on certain types of skaldic composition or relationships between patrons and poets. The list is extant in two versions, both closely connected to the works attributed to Snorri Sturluson: one was found in the *Kringla* manuscript of *Heimskringla* from the second half of the thirteenth century, and the other in the manuscript DG 11 4to, or the *Codex Uppsaliensis* of *Snorra-Edda*, from the early fourteenth century. The *Kringla*

manuscript, with the K version of *Skáldatal*, perished in the Great Fire of Copenhagen in 1728, but we know its content through seventeenth-century copies. The *Codex Uppsaliensis*, containing the later and longer U version of *Skáldatal*, is preserved in Uppsala and has recently received ample scholarly attention. The U version is the primary source for my present investigation, and although *Skáldatal* itself has not been the primary focus of attention for scholars studying this manuscript,<sup>5</sup> I am indebted to the recent edition and translation of the full contents of DG 11 4to by Hermann Pálsson and Anthony Faulkes, and the monograph on the ‘Uppsala Edda’ by Hermann Pálsson. The most up-to-date source on the *Kringla* manuscript, its content, provenance, and the related scholarship is the monograph by Jon Gunnar Jørgensen.

*Skáldatal* is most often seen as a reference list that medieval writers could use to keep track of their poetic sources and that the scholars today can still use as a ‘who is who’ guide to medieval court poetry. Additional value of the list as a historical source can be appreciated by the scholars of *Kringla*, as the references to several thirteenth-century figures found in *Skáldatal* have proved to be useful clues to the dating of the manuscript. Due to the relative age and length of the two versions of the list, the U version has been seen as likely dependent on the K version, repeating its testimony and bringing the list up to date.<sup>6</sup> Without necessarily questioning the validity of this approach, I will point out some independent special features of the *Codex Uppsaliensis* and of the U version of *Skáldatal*, in order to put the references to the two female skalds into a proper context.

The text preserved in DG 11 4to is the earliest extant version of *Snorra-Edda*. Its structure and content have sparked comments about its possible closeness to a lost draft by Snorri Sturluson himself.<sup>7</sup> At least, the *Codex*

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<sup>5</sup> One of the few notable exceptions is in Guðrún Nordal, *Tools of Literacy: The Role of Skaldic Verse in Icelandic Textual Culture of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Heimir Pálsson, ‘Introduction,’ in Snorri Sturluson, *The Uppsala Edda: DG 11 4to*, ed. Heimir Pálsson, transl. Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2012), lxxvi–lxxvii.

<sup>7</sup> Anthony Faulkes, ‘Introduction,’ in Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál 1. Introduction, Text and Notes*, ed. Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1998), xliii.

*Uppsaliensis* is certainly more closely associated with Snorri Sturluson than any other medieval manuscript of *Snorra-Edda*. It is the only medieval version of this work which attributes the composition of the Edda—or at least, the compilation of its particular form—to Snorri.<sup>8</sup> The codex opens with the following lines:

Bók þessi heitir Edda. Hana hefir saman setta Snorri Sturluson eptir þeim hætti sem hér er skipat. Er fyrst frá ásum ok Ymi, þar næst skáldskapar mál ok heiti margra hluta. Síðast Háttatal er Snorri hefir ort um Hákon konung ok Skúla hertuga.

(This book is called Edda. Snorri Sturluson has compiled it in the manner in which it is arranged here. First it is about Æsir and Ymir, next Skáldskaparmál ('poetic diction') and (poetical) names of many things. Finally Háttatal ('enumeration of verse forms') which Snorri has composed about King Hákon and Duke Skúli.)<sup>9</sup>

Thus, the text postulates Snorri's authority in matters of mythology and poetics, his ability to compose poetry, and his connection to the powerful rulers of Norway. This message is reinforced by the three lists included into the compilation: *Skáldatal*; *Ættartala Sturlunga* (genealogy of the Sturlungs), tracing the bloodline from Adam, through heroes of the Trojan War and of Scandinavian antiquity, to Snorri and his contemporaries; and *Lögsögumannatal* (list of lawspeakers), following the history of lawspeakership in Iceland from the legendary Úlfjótr—again, to Snorri. The physical layout of the codex suggests that the lists were not a later interpolation, but integral to the initial design. They come after *Gylfaginning* and the first section of *Skáldskaparmál* (including the myth about the mead of poetry), where mythological matters are addressed and the poetry quoted is almost exclusively the anonymous Eddic poetry. After the lists, the focus shifts to technical aspects of composing and understanding poetry, and verses by named skalds are quoted extensively. As Stephen Tranter suggests, the lists at this point in the compilation allow the compiler to set 'out his authorities in advance: first the corpus of known skalds, then the credentials of his author according to the criteria of descent and public office.'<sup>10</sup> In the laconic form of lists of recognizable names, the prestigious image is created for

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<sup>8</sup> See Guðrún Nordal, *Tools of Literacy*, 53.

<sup>9</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *The Uppsala Edda: DG 11 4to*, ed. Heimir Pálsson, transl. Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2012), 6–7.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Tranter, 'Medieval Icelandic *artes poeticae*,' in *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 152.

the skaldic tradition and personally for Snorri Sturluson. Together, *Skáldatal*, *Ættartala Sturlunga*, and *Ljósögumannatal* represent the network uniting the knowledge of various kinds of lore (poetic, legal, genealogical), political power, and illustrious bloodlines.<sup>11</sup>

The version of *Skáldatal* found here further supports this agenda by prioritizing certain skalds and including some non-royal patrons. The most notable difference from the K version of *Skáldatal* is in the last section, unique to the U version. Unlike the previous parts, that list the names of kings and earls according to their dynasty, the final section of *Skáldatal* here lists 19 Norwegian chieftains, not united by a single bloodline.<sup>12</sup> Many of the skalds associated with these chieftains are prominent figures in the tradition; they appear elsewhere in *Skáldatal*, and their poetry is known from other sources. It is likely that, while the rulers listed before this section were included into *Skáldatal* on the basis of their royal blood and power, the chieftains judiciously grouped in this final part of the list owe their inclusion to the association with the skalds who were particularly interesting to the writer. The final entry in this version of *Skáldatal* lists the skalds associated with Gautr af Meli: Steinvör Sighvatsdóttir, Óláfr Herdísarson, and Dagfinnr Guðlaugsson. While none of the three are prominent figures in the extant sources, Steinvör is the most intriguing addition. Notably, the end of *Skáldatal* in this redaction mirrors its beginning. The opening lines of both versions also feature two named male skalds and one woman:

Starkaðr inn gamli var skald. Hans kvæði eru fornust þeira sem menn kunnu. Hann orti um Danakonunga. Ragnarr konungr loðbrók var skald, Áslaug kona hans ok synir þeira.<sup>13</sup>

(Starkaðr the Old was a poet. His poetry is the oldest remembered by men. He composed about the Danish kings. King Ragnarr *loðbrók* was a poet, [and so were] his wife Áslaug and their sons.)

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<sup>11</sup> On the interconnections between the various kinds of knowledge and their relation to social status, see, for example, Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir, 'Legal Culture and Historical Memory in Medieval and Early Modern Iceland,' in *Minni and Muninn: Memory in Medieval Nordic Culture*, eds. Pernille Hermann, Stephen A. Mitchell and Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 211–230; Hannah Burrows, 'Rhyme and Reason: Lawspeaker-Poets in Medieval Iceland,' *Scandinavian Studies*, 81, 2 (2009) 215–238.

<sup>12</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *The Uppsala Edda*, 114–116.

<sup>13</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *The Uppsala Edda*, 100 (the following translation is mine).

I do not propose to put too much significance in numbers but having a female skald both as the third from the beginning of the list and the third from its end creates a pleasant symmetry—and may suggest more or less conscious design. But who were these women, and what was their association with poetry, power, and with the men who more habitually wielded both power and poetry?

*Áslaug – The Queen, the Mother, and the Poet*

Between the two women of *Skáldatal*, Áslaug is by far the better-known and the more popular—both in the Middle Ages and today. She appears episodically in *Völsunga saga*—as the daughter of Sigurðr and Brynhildr—and takes central stage in *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* and *Ragnarssona þáttr* as the second wife of King Ragnarr loðbróke, mother of several outstanding sons, a lady of many talents, as well as an able ruler and warrior-leader. In addition to the narratives focused directly on Áslaug and her family, we also find her name across the extant Old Norse-Icelandic literary corpus, in numerous genealogies tracing the descent of powerful kings and chieftains to Ragnarr, Áslaug, and their sons.<sup>14</sup> Thus, *Skáldatal* falls into a well-attested pattern when it traces the (professional) descent of poets to this family.

Many readers—including twentieth-century scholars—have admired the character of Áslaug and noted the many merits attributed to her. Characteristically, at the time when *fornaldarsögur* were held in low esteem, Bjarni Guðnason writes of *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*: ‘Í fornaldarsögu, þar sem söguhetjur eru blóðlausar manngerðir, frægðaprá tengir atburði, stíll er blæbrigðasnauður og lýsingar trénaðar, verða menn þakklátir fyrir allt, sem er öðruvísi’<sup>15</sup> (‘In a *fornaldarsaga*, where characters are bloodless human images, action is driven by desire for fame, style lacks nuance and descriptions are wooden, one is thankful for anything that is different’). For Bjarni, rising above this text is the image of

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<sup>14</sup> The numerous references to Ragnarr, Áslaug, and their descendants in medieval sources are discussed at length in Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, *Vikings in the West: The Legend of Ragnarr Loðbróke and His Sons* (Studia Mediaevalia Septentrionalia 18; Wien: Fassbaender, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Bjarni Guðnason, ‘Gerðir og ritþróun Ragnars sögu loðbrókar,’ in *Einarsbók: Afmáliskveðja til Einars Ól. Sveinssonar*, eds. Bjarni Guðnason, Halldór Halldórsson and Jónas Kristjánsson (Útgefendur Nokkrir Vinir, 1969), 34–35. The translations from secondary sources are my own.



Áslaug: lifelike, feminine, relatable—and at the same time dreamlike and heroic. The group of sagas among which *Ragnars saga* is traditionally counted has been rehabilitated in the recent decades, but in the more favourable studies of this saga, the character of Áslaug is still often singled out. For instance, Ólafía Einarsdóttir suggests that Áslaug, ‘[d]en mest islandske skikkelse i familien’<sup>16</sup> (‘the most Icelandic character in the family’) was the character that a medieval Icelandic audience would most likely relate to and admire. Indeed, Ragnarr’s second wife can be compared to the greatest women of the *Íslendingasögur*, as she possesses all the most admirable qualities: ‘foruden skønhed og klogskab var hun i besiddelse af handlekraft og storsindethed, og hun var en selv-skreven leder af familien’<sup>17</sup> (‘in addition to beauty and wisdom, she possessed energy and generosity, and was an obvious leader of the family’).

Arguably, the story of Áslaug is central to *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*. The Y redaction of this saga, preserved in NKS 1824b 4to from ca. 1400, contains the most detailed extant account of Áslaug’s life.<sup>18</sup> Other references in the extant corpus suggest that at least the key points of this account were part of widely-spread traditional knowledge. NKS 1824b 4to also preserves the only medieval redaction of *Vølsunga saga*, which precedes *Ragnars saga* (with no strict boundary between the two). While the story of the Vølsungs in other forms was part of a productive popular tradition, this fact of transmission has allowed scholars to speculate that the prose version had been written down specifically as a prequel to *Ragnars saga* and that the two narratives could even be approached as a single saga.<sup>19</sup> The most obvious bond between the two narratives is the story of Áslaug,

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<sup>16</sup> Ólafía Einarsdóttir, ‘Dronning Aslaug i Island: Fra Historie til Sagn – en Mentalitetshistorisk Analyse,’ *Gripla VIII* (1993), 98.

<sup>17</sup> Ólafía Einarsdóttir, ‘Dronning Aslaug i Island,’ 99.

<sup>18</sup> For a detailed discussion of the two redactions, see: Bjarni Guðnason, ‘Gerðir og ritþróun Ragnars sögu loðbrókar,’ Rory McTurk, ‘The Extant Icelandic Manifestations of Ragnars saga loðbrókar,’ *Gripla I* (1975), 43–75; Rory McTurk, *Studies in Ragnars saga loðbrókar and Its Major Scandinavian Analogues* (Medium Ævum monographs, new series, 15; Oxford: The Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature, 1991), 54–56; Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, *Vikings in the West*, 207.

<sup>19</sup> This feature of transmission has been reflected in some of the twentieth-century editions and translations – for example, those of Magnus Olsen (1906–08) and Margaret Schlauch (1930). For a consistent reading of the two sagas as one, see Klaus von See, ‘Snorri Sturluson and the Creation of a Norse Cultural Ideology,’ *Saga-Book Vol. XXV* (1998–2001), 367–393; for a more nuanced approach, see Carolyne Larrington, ‘*Vølsunga saga*, *Ragnars saga* and

who mediates the blood and the character of the Völsungs to the later generations through her fertile marriage to Ragnarr *loðbrók*.

The plot of the saga hardly needs an extensive introduction; instead, I will focus on the role of Áslaug and on the way poetry accompanies significant moments of her life.<sup>20</sup> The saga starts with a story of Áslaug's childhood—following the brief reference to her birth and fosterage in *Völsunga saga* 27. After the death of her parents Sigurðr and Brynhildr, the three-year-old girl travels with her foster-father Heimir; soon, a greedy peasant couple kills Heimir, and the girl grows up with them, in poverty and hard labour, with her beauty concealed by dirt and rags and her name changed to Kráka. Only after this prelude does the saga turn to the story of its titular hero. By chapter 5, Ragnarr is a disconsolate widower who neglects the duty of ruling his land, engaging in Viking raids instead. During one of his expeditions, Ragnarr's men find a beautiful young woman—an equal of Ragnarr's first wife Þóra. Over the next two chapters, Ragnarr woos and marries Kráka. From their first meeting up to their wedding night, poetry accompanies the narrative.

First, Ragnarr challenges the unknown beauty to come to his ship neither clad nor unclad, neither fed nor unfed, and neither with a person nor unaccompanied. Kráka fulfils the requirements and explains her solution in a stanza, showing that she is wise as well as beautiful. Moreover, she is capable of communicating in poetry—an ability she must have acquired at a very early age or inherited from her parents. The first dialogue between Ragnarr and Kráka is also presented in verse. Here and throughout the saga the poetry is in a loose *dróttkvætt* form, imperfect, but still recognizable as a metre suitable for court poetry.<sup>21</sup> However, so far, the use of poetry is typical of a *fornaldarsaga*, where dialogue can often be versified.

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Romance in Old Norse: Revisiting Relationships,' in *The Legendary Sagas: Origins and Development*, eds. Annette Lassen, Agneta Ney and Ármann Jakobsson (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2012), 251–270.

<sup>20</sup> The saga portrays this character under three subsequent names: Kráka, Áslaug, and Randalín. I will follow the original in using the appropriate name at each stage of her life story, since the names are thematized as an important part of the character's identity.

<sup>21</sup> See Rory McTurk 'Ragnars saga loðbrókar,' in *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages, Vol. VIII, Poetry in Fornaldarsögur, Part 2*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross (Brepols, 2017), 623. In

The next exchange between the couple is more intriguing in the context of skaldic tradition. As Ragnarr leaves and Kráka agrees to wait for his return, the king offers her a present: a lavish shirt that belonged to his first wife. Kráka graciously refuses the gift as one too rich for a peasant girl, but the stanzas accompanying the exchange belie Kráka's claim to low birth: in her reply she skillfully mirrors Ragnarr's words, transforming his offer into her refusal.<sup>22</sup> This episode, while still not seeming too unusual in a saga about ancient times with heroes spouting poetry, is at the same time reminiscent of a gift exchange between a king and his poet, where the latter would be expected to compose a verse in return for the former's generosity. The reminiscence is ironic, as King Ragnarr praises his own gift, while Kráka, acting as a poet honoured with the gift, declines it. Furthermore, this exchange has an affinity to another popular type of episode: a poetic competition where a poet responds to his patron's challenge and shows his skill (among the rulers who engaged in such competitions were jarl Rögnvaldr *kalf*<sup>23</sup> and King Haraldr *harðrúðr*<sup>24</sup>).

After Kráka becomes Ragnarr's second wife, at the end of chapter 6 she utters another verse, entreating her husband not to consummate the marriage in the first three nights and warning him that otherwise their first son would be born deformed. Kráka's prophecy is fulfilled with the birth of Ívarr *beinlaus* ('the

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*Háttatal* 54, Ragnarr is mentioned as one of the ancient skalds who composed in loose forms of *dróttkvætt* – although the irregularities in the example associated with Ragnarr in *Háttatal* do not match exactly the irregularities of poetry in *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*.

<sup>22</sup> Here and on the following pages, I quote the poetry from *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* and *Ragnarssona þáttr*, along with the English translations, according to the most recent scholarly edition in *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages*. Ragnarr: 'Viltu þenna þiggja, / er Þóra hjörtr átti, / serk við silfr um merktan? / Sama alvel þér klæði. / Fóru hendr hvítar / hennar um þessar görvar; / sú var buðlungi bragna / blíðum þekk til dauða.' ('Are you willing to accept this shift, decked out with silver, which Þóra hjörtr ("Hart") possessed? [Such] garments suit you very well. Her white hands stroked these trappings; she was dear to the joyful prince of men [KING = Ragnarr] right up to her death.') (McTurk, '*Ragnars saga loðbrókar*,' 632).

Kráka: 'Þorik eigi þann þiggja, / er Þóra hjörtr átti, / serk við silfr um merktan; / sama ælig mik klæði. / Því em ek Kráka kölluð, / í kólsvörtum váðum, / at ek hefí grjótt um gengit / ok geitr með sjá reknar.' ('I dare not accept that shift, decked out with silver, which Þóra hjörtr ("Hart") possessed; wretched garments are suitable for me. I am called Kráka ("Crow") because I have walked on stones in coal-black clothes and driven goats by the sea.') (McTurk '*Ragnars saga loðbrókar*,' 633).

<sup>23</sup> Most notably, in the alleged composition of *Háttalykill* with Hallr Þórarinnsson (*Orkneyinga saga* 81).

<sup>24</sup> For example, in *Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar* 32.

Boneless').<sup>25</sup> This episode once again bridges the floating gap between the old and new ways to use poetry. On the one hand, the heroine utters a versified prophecy, as women in myths and legends are wont to do. On the other hand, the prophecy is in skaldic metre, and the queen acts as an advisor to the king, trying to talk him out of a rash course of action—not unlike the wise court poets of later times (such as Þjóðólfr *inn hvínverski* for Haraldr *hárfagr*<sup>26</sup> or Sighvatr Þórðarson for Magnús *góðr*<sup>27</sup>). In chapter 9, Kráka again predicts a physical peculiarity in her unborn son (the youngest, Sigurðr *ormr-í-auga*, 'Snake in the Eye')—a demonstration of wisdom that proves her own illustrious descent, saves her marriage, and allows her to revert to the name Áslaug. The occasion also moves Ragnarr to act as a court poet, praising the newborn prince; however, as no verse is attributed to Áslaug here, this intriguing episode falls beyond the scope of the present article.

Chapter 10 of *Ragnars saga* contains the largest amount of verse, accompanying one of the most dramatic parts of the narrative. Eiríkr and Agnarr, Ragnarr's sons from the first marriage, are killed in Sweden; before his fall, Eiríkr sends home a messenger with a verse and a gold ring. While Ragnarr is away, Áslaug receives the messenger and incites her sons to avenge her stepsons' killing. Incitement is one of the functions typical of women in the sagas—especially in *Íslendingasögur*. Less typical for saga-women (although not unheard-of) is taking an active part in the revenge—as Áslaug does in chapter 11 of the saga, taking the Valkyrie-type name Randalín. However, no less striking than the image of the queen going to war is the image of her sitting on the throne, combing her hair and receiving the news of her stepsons' fall. She is both feminine and powerful; while Ragnarr is away, she is the ruler of the land and the head of the family—despite the presence of her grown-up sons. The messenger introduces his errand with his own stanza and recites Eiríkr's dying

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<sup>25</sup> This interpretation of Ívarr's nickname is consistent within the saga narrative; for other interpretations and their implications, see Rory McTurk, 'Recent and Projected Work on *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*,' in *Fornaldarsagornas struktur och ideologi: handligar från ett symposium i Uppsala 31.8–2.9.2001*, eds. Annette Lassen, Agneta Ney and Ármann Jakobsson (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2003), 124 and references.

<sup>26</sup> *Haralds saga ins hárfagra* 26.

<sup>27</sup> *Magnúss saga góða* 16.

verse; thus, Áslaug assumes the role of a patron listening to poetry in ‘his’ hall—the role not usually played by women. The queen demonstrates her ability to act both as a poet and a patron—the duality also characteristic of Ragnarr.

Áslaug/Randalín is, in fact, more successful than Ragnarr. When the king comes home to find his glory overshadowed by the successful Swedish expedition of his wife and sons, he decides to go to England with only two ships and prove his own worth there. Despite Randalín’s council, he embarks on this suicidal mission (explaining his decision in two boisterous stanzas) and perishes in chapter 15 of the saga. As the couple says farewell, Randalín gives Ragnarr a shirt, explicitly mirroring the exchange that took place at the beginning of their courtship. She accompanies her gift with a verse, explaining the magical properties of the shirt, and once again demonstrating her wisdom and her connection to the supernatural. In contrast to the first shirt-episode, Randalín’s gift-giving is successful: Ragnarr accepts the gift and is protected from harm until the shirt is taken away from him. Although his life cannot be saved, his rashness and failure are contrasted by his wife’s prudence and success.

After this episode, the saga focuses on Ragnarr, his sons and their adversary, the English king Ella. Randalín’s last appearance, in chapter 18, is a culmination of her portrayal as a mother and a poet. The aged queen learns of the glorious death of her son Hvítserkr and utters two stanzas in his memory.<sup>28</sup> Commemoration was among the major functions of skaldic poetry: professional skalds composed such verses both at their own initiative and at the behest of a dead ruler’s relatives, ensuring the continuity of memory about great warriors and kings, dealing with grief and turmoil, and confirming the legitimacy of

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<sup>28</sup> These two stanzas are preserved only in the Y redaction of the saga, in which the character of Áslaug is more prominent (starting from her connection to the Völsung and her early life as Kráka). The second stanza can serve as an example: ‘Höfðum lét of hrundit / hundmörgum gramt undir, at feigum bör fólka / fíngi eldr yfir syngja. / Hvat skyli beð enn betra / böðheggr und sig leggja? / Olli dýrr við orðstír / allvaldr jöfurs falli.’ (‘The leader allowed a great many heads to be thrust under him, so that fire would have a chance to sing over the doomed tree of battles [WARRIOR]. How could a battle-tree [WARRIOR] place beneath himself an even better bed? The mighty ruler caused a prince’s death with renown.’) (McTurk ‘*Ragnars saga loðbrókar*,’ 683–85).

succession.<sup>29</sup> In *Ragnars saga*, Eiríkr and Ragnarr compose their own death verses, like other legendary heroes.<sup>30</sup> The commemoration of Hvítserkr, however, places him and his mother at the edge of a new era, where kings have professional poets to remember them. Randalín is fit for the role of such a professional, since she is not only his closest relative, but also a distinguished ruler and warrior herself—and a skilled poet.

A similar, but not identical episode is also present in *Ragnarssona þáttr*, a narrative extant in the early-fourteenth century *Hauksbók* and telling a similar story of Ragnarr and his family, with differences in detail.<sup>31</sup> The brief *þáttr* contains fewer verses than the saga; here two stanzas are attributed to Áslaug<sup>32</sup>—in contrast to nine stanzas and one half-stanza in the saga. Most of the poetry in the *þáttr* is either the same or close to the poetry in the saga, but the last verse by Áslaug is a notable exception. The verse is completely different, and the commemorated son is Sigurðr *ormr-í-auga*.<sup>33</sup> The focus on Sigurðr is easily explained: the text is interested in the descendants of Ragnarr, especially the royal lines going back to Sigurðr. Conversely, the extant sources do not mention any descendants of Hvítserkr. The use of Áslaug's verse at this point in the narrative suggests that her poetic role was well-known to the writer, and that her words were suitable sources for verifying an account of an important event. The

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<sup>29</sup> See Erin Michel Goeres, *The Poetics of Commemoration: Skaldic Verse and Social Memory, c. 890–1070* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>30</sup> On death-poems and Ragnarr's connection to this tradition, see Margaret Clunies Ross, 'Introduction,' in *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages, Vol. VIII, Poetry in Fornaldarsögur, Part 1* (Brepols, 2017), lxxxvi.

<sup>31</sup> For a discussion of differences between the saga and the *þáttr*, see Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, 'Ragnars saga loðbrókar, Ragnarssona þáttr, and the Political World of Haukr Erlendsson,' in *Fornaldarsagaerne: Myter og Virkelighed*, eds. Agneta Ney, Ármann Jakobsson & Annette Lassen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Forlag, 2009), 347–360.

<sup>32</sup> The first of the two stanzas, similar to the corresponding stanza in chapter 10 of *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, is found in chapter 2 of the *þáttr*, where Áslaug incites her sons to avenge the death of Eiríkr and Agnarr.

<sup>33</sup> Not only the commemorated subject, but also the language is different from the stanzas preserved in the saga. The style is more elaborate: 'Sitja veiðivítjar / vals á borgar hálsun; / böl er, þat er hefr um hafnat / hrafn Sigurðar nafni. / Blási nýtinjótar / nás í spán at hánun; / ofsnumma lét Óðinn / álf valmeyjar deyja.' ('Hunting-visitors of the slain [RAVENS] sit on the heights of the fortress; it is a misfortune that the raven has forsaken the name of Sigurðr. Let the devourers of the dead [RAVENS/EAGLES] whistle for him; Óðinn has caused the elf of the carnage-maiden [VALKYRIE > WARRIOR] to die too early.') (Rory McTurk 'Ragnarssona þáttr,' in *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages, Vol. VIII, Poetry in Fornaldarsögur, Part 2* (Brepols, 2017), 780).

writer was certainly aware of this function of skaldic poetry: earlier in the *þáttr*, another verse verifies the account of King Ella's defeat. This half-stanza is attributed to Sighvatr Þórðarson's *Knútsdrápa*. Coming two chapters later, but with no verses cited in between, the commemorative stanza by the legendary queen is thus aligned with the oeuvre of one of the most famous eleventh-century professional skalds.

We can understand the reference to Áslaug as one of the earliest skalds in *Skáldatal* against the background of these narratives. Behind the brief wording of the list there was the traditional knowledge about at least some of the episodes outlined above—or about similar episodes, as the comparison between the saga and the *þáttr* suggests the possibility of variation, particularly in connection with Áslaug's poetry. The third skald mentioned in *Skáldatal* was a queen, a warrior, and a mother, as well as a wise woman and a poet. With her life story, her blood, and her skillful use of poetry, she links the legendary times of the Völsungs and the times of historical kings and their professional skalds.

#### *The Feminine Source of Poetry*

Over thirty years ago, Sandra Straubhaar regretfully noted that, although female skalds (*skáldkonur*) likely played a significant role in ancient times, 'the significance of the *skáldkonur* to the greater skaldic tradition was forgotten, both by medieval anthologists and their modern counterparts.'<sup>34</sup> Of course, the number of male skalds in the extant sources is overwhelmingly larger than the number of *skáldkonur*. However, the position of women in *Skáldatal* may suggest that an important contribution of *skáldkonur* to the tradition was not forgotten—at least by the compiler of the *Uppsala Edda*. The presence of two women at the two ends of the list hints at the special significance of the women themselves and the powers they represent. We have already seen that Áslaug the poet cuts a striking figure. With her verses composed in a loose *dróttkvætt* form, she skillfully and subtly competed with King Ragnarr, gave advice and commemorated the dead in her poetry; moreover, her verses could be cited as

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<sup>34</sup> Straubhaar, 'The Forgotten Skáldkonur,' 22.

historical sources verifying the narrative. Her success as a leader and a warrior adds to an image of a prototypical court poet, as many professional skalds were also distinguished for their diplomatic skills and battle prowess. At the same time, Áslaug is by no means a male character in a female body. Her femininity, her role as a wife and a mother, is central to her character. Moreover, her connection to the supernatural and her knowledge of the future are markedly feminine, tied to her motherhood. In the wider context of the Old Norse-Icelandic sources, Áslaug's motherhood is repeatedly emphasized in genealogies: it is through her that the precarious maternal link is forged between the Scandinavian royal dynasties and powerful Icelandic families, on the one hand, and the glorious Vǫlsungs, on the other.

The woman standing at the other end of *Skáldatal* also enjoyed the respect of saga-writers and belonged to a distinguished family. However, Steinvǫr Sighvatsdóttir was hardly as popular as Áslaug, and next to no poetry is associated with her in the extant sources. Steinvǫr's presence in the list echoes and reinforces the image of a feminine skald represented by Áslaug and strengthens the Sturlungs' claim for prestige in the *Uppsala Edda*. The curious deficiency of Áslaug's image is that, unlike many other powerful families, the Sturlungs did not claim descent from her. She is an excellent symbol of the power and prestige intertwined with skaldic poetry, but there is no direct connection between her and Snorri Sturluson. Steinvǫr, on the other hand, was Snorri's niece<sup>35</sup> and a welcome stand-in for a powerful female figure connected to the origins of the skaldic tradition. Unfortunately, we cannot explain the connection between Steinvǫr and Gautr af Meli on the basis of the extant sources—although, considering the gap between Steinvǫr's lifetime and the writing down of *Skáldatal* (less than 200 years), the medieval audience of the list would likely associate a specific episode with the reference, lest the truth of the document and its ideological implications be compromised. However, the only extant verse associated with Steinvǫr is the half-stanza in *Íslendinga saga* 134. One

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<sup>35</sup> *Ættartölur* 2.



of the first omens preceding the Battle of Örlygsstaðir is the dream of Steinvör Sighvatsdóttir: she sees a human head on the fence and a dead man who recites an ominous half-stanza. This verse is not composed by Steinvör herself but experienced by her as a revelation which she later repeats to other people. Poetry is not a product of a human creative act, but a dark gift from the Other World.<sup>36</sup> That the only verse surviving in connection with the woman listed as a skald should bear such character is at least in part a chance of transmission. However, it fits well with how the origins of poetic gift are portrayed in *Snorra-Edda*.

The myth about the mead of poetry, associated with the male god Óðinn is well-known; the exclusive masculine connotations of this myth can be debated in connection with the part played by the Vanir, or with the ‘sexual ambiguity’ of Óðinn.<sup>37</sup> However, to conclude this brief discussion of the feminine associations of poetry, I would like to emphasize the role of Gunnlǫð in the myth. In its making, the mead of poetry passes through several stages of transformation, and through the bodies of several owners; as Judy Quinn notes,

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<sup>36</sup> The concept ‘Other World’ is most commonly used to designate the world of the supernatural, distinct and separated from This World where the everyday life of humans takes place. Conversely, in the Norse myths, we can see the Other World as the realm(s) of the *jǫtnar*, contrasted with This World of the gods, from whose perspective the stories are told. The contact between This World and the Other World is achieved through ritual, travel, dreams, and often through fantastic and bizarre encounters that blur the boundary between the two worlds (as when a revenant intrudes into the otherwise familiar and normal human world). Seen broadly, the Other World can acquire different qualities depending on the cultural, religious, and narrative paradigms, and ‘[a]s a universal category, The Other World can thus only be defined structurally as that which is completely different’ (Jens Peter Schjødt, *Initiation between Two Worlds: Structure and Symbolism in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion* (Odense: The University Press of Southern Denmark, 2008), 17). I follow Schjødt in noting that the fundamental otherness of the Other World can be defined in terms of time as well as in terms of space. In the context of the present article, we encounter two kinds of Other World: namely, the world of the *jǫtnar*, to which Gunnlǫð belongs, and the world of the legendary past, in which heroes like Sigurðr Fáfnisbani lived. I would argue that the second Other World lies just beyond the horizon of the past which the thirteenth-century audience can claim as ‘its own’ and identify with (see Jan Assmann, ‘Communicative and Cultural Memory,’ in *Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, eds. Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning (Berlin, New York: DeGruyter, 2008), 113, for the idea that ‘Cultural memory reaches back in the past only so far as the past can be reclaimed as “ours”’). The past of the legends is remembered as structurally different from the contemporary world, adhering to different values, different natural and supernatural laws, and often manifesting affinity with the mythical Other World. Áslaug, through her lineage as well as through the roles she assumes in the narratives, occupies the liminal place between This World of the present and the Other World of the legendary past.

<sup>37</sup> Straubhaar, ‘The Forgotten Skáldkonur,’ 21.

[a]t each transfer, the value of the liquid swells with the attributes of the class of beings who lose it.<sup>38</sup> Gunnlǫð is a representative of the *ǰtmar*, but also of women. The myth makes the place of her seclusion the last stage of transmission before the mead falls into the hands (or, rather, mouth) of Óðinn. This stage is the final point of origin for poetry: the precious drink is received by a woman from a powerful ancestral figure of supernatural origin (her father Suttungr) and kept safe, until the male god claims the poetic gift from her through sexual intercourse. Can the feminine frame of the skaldic tradition in *Skáldatal*, preserved next to the myth of the poetic mead in the *Uppsala Edda*, reflect a similar image, with the role of female intermediary more active and independent in the human past than in the myth? Áslaug, an imposing female figure born of an old and respected family, acquires the supernatural gift of poetry from mysterious powers – and passes it to her male descendants. Born several centuries later, Steinvǫr reminds us that the feminine origin and supernatural aspect of the seemingly all-male skaldic tradition is by no means forgotten, but essential for the legitimation of the male poets' status. The female figure may not receive credit as the creator of poetic skill, but she is remembered as the (more or less active) link between, on the one hand, the men who use the gift of poetry in their contemporary struggles for power and fame, and, on the other hand, the Other World of ancient times and supernatural creatures, where this gift was conceived.

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<sup>38</sup> Judy Quinn, 'Liquid Knowledge: Traditional Conceptualisations of Learning in Eddic Poetry,' in *Along the Oral-Written Continuum: Types of Texts, Relations and their Implications*, eds. Slavica Rankovic, Leidulf Melve and Else Mundal (Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy 20; Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 193.

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