



# Gender, Violence, & the Past in Edda & Saga

DAVID CLARK

OXFORD

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## Abbreviations

- Cleasby–Vigfusson Richard Cleasby, *An Icelandic–English Dictionary*, rev. Gudbrand Vigfusson [Guðbrandur Vigfússon]; 2nd edn by William Craigie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957)
- DII* *Diplomatarium islandicum*, I, ed. Jón Sigurðsson (Copenhagen: S. L. Möller, 1857)
- Dronke I Ursula Dronke, ed. and trans., *The Poetic Edda*, volume I: *Heroic Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969)
- Dronke II Ursula Dronke, ed. and trans., *The Poetic Edda*, volume II: *Mythological Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997)
- HHI* *Helgakviða Hundingsbana in fyrri*
- HHII* *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*
- HHv* *Helgakviða Hundingsbana 9nnor*
- Neckel–Kuhn Gustav Neckel (ed.), *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, 4th edn., rev. Hans Kuhn, 2 vols. (Heidelberg: Winter, 1962)
- NGL* R. Keyser, P. A. Munch, *et al.* (eds.), *Norges gamle Love indtil 1387*, 5 vols. (Christiania: Grøndahl, 1846–95)

# Contents

<i>Abbreviations</i>	viii
Introduction	1
1. Undermining Vengeance: Distancing and Anti-feminism in the Guðrún Poems	17
2. Heroic Homosociality and Homophobia in the Helgi Poems	46
3. Kin-slaying in the <i>Poetic Edda</i> : The End of the World?	67
4. Sexual Themes and the Heroic Past in <i>Gísla saga</i>	89
5. Violence in Moderation: The Church and Vengeance in the Sagas	117
6. Manslaughter and Misogyny: Women and Revenge in <i>Sturlunga saga</i>	142
Epilogue	164
<i>Bibliography</i>	167
<i>Index</i>	181

# Introduction

## OUTLINE AND METHODOLOGY

This book is the first study to investigate both the relation between gender and violence in the Old Norse *Poetic Edda* and key family and contemporary sagas, and the interrelated nature of these genres. Beginning with an analysis of Eddaic attitudes to heroic violence and its gendered nature through the figures of Guðrún and Helgi, the study broadens out to consider the whole poetic compilation and how the past (and particularly the mythological past) inflects the heroic present. This paves the way for a consideration of the comparable relationship between the heroic poems themselves and later re-workings of them or allusions to them in the family and contemporary sagas. Accordingly, the study considers the use of Eddaic allusion in *Gísla saga's* meditation on violent masculinity and sexuality, assesses the impact of the Church on attitudes to revenge in family and contemporary sagas, and finally explores the scapegoating of women for male violence in the contemporary sagas. Although the Eddaic poems themselves present a complex and sometimes conflicting attitude to vengeance, revenge and other forms of violence are in later texts regularly associated with the past, and often represented by Eddaic figures. Moreover, saga authors often attempt to construct a national narrative which shows moderation and peace-making as the only viable alternatives to what is seen as the traditional destructive model of vengeance. Nevertheless, the picture the sagas present is far from uniform, rather being one of conflicting voices as the attractions of heroic violence prove difficult to resist for many, particularly when issues of masculinity are at stake.

The book's thematic concentration on gender and violence (whether sexual or familial), and its generic concentration on the



*Poetic Edda* and later texts which rework or allude to it, enable a diverse exploration of both key and neglected Norse texts and the way in which their authors display a dual fascination with, and rejection of, heroic vengeance.

The book employs a range of critical approaches, aiming to unite the use of contemporary theories of gender and sexuality with more traditional close readings of literary texts, and, where this is known, to situate them in their historical context. This approach allows medieval and modern material to be brought into productive dialogue, rather than attempting simply to impose modern perspectives on the material. The book aims to illuminate these fascinating texts from a variety of angles and thus to stimulate further work in the many areas upon which this study touches. Because it is hoped that the book will be of interest both to Norse scholars and medievalists (some of whom may be unfamiliar with some of the theoretical approaches employed) and also to theorists of gender and sexuality (who may be unfamiliar with the medieval texts), it seems useful to provide a general introduction here to both sets of material and summaries of the key texts examined. Readers can, of course, skip straight to the analysis in Chapter 1.

## OLD NORSE LITERATURE

Old Norse literature—or Old Norse–Icelandic literature, as it is sometimes called, to reflect the fact that the majority of it was written down or composed in Iceland—constitutes an exceptionally large and varied body of texts. The best-known examples of this are the *Íslendingasögur* (sagas of Icelanders), or ‘family sagas’, which are set in the *söguöld* (saga-time) from the settlement of Iceland in the late ninth century until the early eleventh century, after Iceland’s conversion to Christianity in around the year 1000. They were not written down in manuscript form, however, until the thirteenth century. They are often compared to the novel because of the way they combine gripping plots with naturalistic accounts of Icelanders’ (often violent) interactions. Unlike the realist novel, however, the saga authors affect a unique stance which mixes omniscience at some times with non-omniscience at others, usually maintaining an appearance of objectivity by external focalization—that is, the events



are seen from outside the world of the characters and we are rarely told what a character is thinking or feeling. Characters are less important than events. As Heather O'Donoghue writes: 'Saga narratives end not with denouement, but when causality finally runs out of steam, or when characters, having often lived longer or shorter lives than they deserved, die.'<sup>1</sup> Although sagas were once taken to represent historical accounts, over the last few decades their unique literary characteristics have been explored, and the often subtle narrative art of their authors revealed. Much less literary attention has been paid to the other works of Norse literature, from the poems of the *Poetic Edda* (the focus of Chapters 1, 2, and 3) to the contemporary sagas (Chapters 5 and 6), and so, although the family sagas are discussed (particularly in Chapters 4 and 5), they are mainly considered in terms of their reworking of and attitude to Eddaic poetry, concentrating on *Gísla saga* (Chapter 4).

The chapters in one sense follow a broadly chronological order, from the Eddaic poems (set in the distant mythic or heroic past) through the family sagas (set in the late ninth to the early eleventh centuries) to the contemporary sagas (set in the first half of the thirteenth century). However, this should not be taken to indicate a chronology in the true sense, since the dating and contextualization of these texts is extremely problematic, as we shall see, and they were all in fact written down (in their current form) at around the same time. For instance, the Eddaic poems are collected in the *Codex Regius*, an Icelandic manuscript from around 1270, the contemporary sagas were compiled in around 1300, and the family sagas were written down from the thirteenth century. Thus, whilst they are by no means a homogeneous body of material and are discussed as individual texts below, it also makes sense to discuss them within the context of thirteenth-century audiences.

What is most important to remember is that, although the subject matter of a particular text may be later than that of another, there is

<sup>1</sup> Heather O'Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 60. This is one of the most accessible introductory accounts of the area, and can be supplemented by the chapters collected in Carol J. Clover and John Lindow (eds.), *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

no simple correlation to the composition of that text, nor any straightforward way to determine the direction of influence between one text and another. Although the issues are discussed briefly below, there is much that we still do not know (and perhaps will never know) about the relative datings and composition of Norse texts.

## GENDER AND SEXUALITY THEORY

Following the Second Wave Feminism of the 1960s and 1970s, and the emergence of the gay and lesbian political and social activism after the Stonewall Riots of 1969, there was an explosion of scholarly research in the areas of Gender Studies and Gay/Lesbian Studies, aimed at uncovering the history of the oppression of women in general, gay men and lesbians, and other non-(hetero)normative persons, including the ways in which this is manifested in literature, and at drawing attention to and analysing the work of marginalized writers from these groups. The publication of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* in 1990 inaugurated the era of Queer Theory, which aimed to uncover not only the way that constructions of gender and sexuality have structured twentieth-century Western thought (and literature), but also the ways in which apparently stable gender and sexual identities are in fact contested and indeterminate, emphasizing the fluidity and multiplicity of human experience.<sup>2</sup>

Medievalists have increasingly turned to gender and queer theory in the last couple of decades, although this has been particularly evident in the study of later medieval literature.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, more

<sup>2</sup> For a summary of these issues and extracts from some of the key theoretical texts, see Part Nine of Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, *Literature Theory: An Anthology*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 885–956.

<sup>3</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Post Modern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Karma Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn't* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Tison Pugh, *Queering Medieval Genres* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Richard Zeikowitz, *Homeropticism and Chivalry: Discourses of Male Same-Sex Desire in the Fourteenth Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); as well as the essays in Glenn Burgess and Steven F. Kruger

recently it has influenced Old English scholarship.<sup>4</sup> Old Norse scholarship has been less keen to follow the trend. Jenny Jochens has looked at literary attitudes to women from a broadly feminist perspective in two books,<sup>5</sup> and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen's book *The Unmanly Man* is invaluable for attitudes to same-sex activity (and is referred to extensively below, especially in Chapter 4).<sup>6</sup> There are, of course, also several works that deal with women from a largely non-literary perspective.<sup>7</sup> However, although several excellent articles have appeared recently, this is the first literary monograph to engage substantially with contemporary theories of gender and sexuality.<sup>8</sup>

## DATING OF EDDAIC POEMS

There is a particularly wide range of critical opinion on the date of composition of the Eddaic poems, although the general consensus dates *Hamðismál* (The Lay of Hamðir) and *Atlakviða* (The Poem of Atli) early (late ninth to early eleventh century) and *Guðrúnarhvot*

(eds.), *Queering the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Karma Lochrie et al. (eds.), *Constructing Medieval Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Jacqueline Murray (ed.), *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities: Men in the Medieval West* (New York: Garland, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> David Clark, *Between Medieval Men: Male Friendship and Desire in Early Medieval English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Allen Frantzen, *Before the Closet: Same-Sex Love from Beowulf to Angels in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Carol Pasternack and Lisa M. C. Weston (eds.), *Sex and Sexuality in Anglo-Saxon England: Essays in Memory of Daniel Gillmore Calder*, MRTS, 277 (Tempe, Ariz.: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), and *Old Norse Images of Women* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, trans. Joan Turville-Petre (Odense: Odense University Press, 1983).

<sup>7</sup> For instance, Judith Jesch's *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. David Ashurst, 'The Transformation of Homosexual *Liebestod* in Sagas Translated from Latin', *Saga-Book*, 26 (2002), 67–96; Carl Phelpstead, 'The Sexual Ideology of *Hrólfs saga kraka*', *Scandinavian Studies*, 75 (2003), 1–24, and 'Size Matters: Penile Problems in Sagas of Icelanders', *Exemplaria*, 19 (2007), 420–37.

(The Whetting of Guðrún) and *Atlamál in grœnlensku* (The Greenlandic Lay of Atli) late (late twelfth to early or mid-thirteenth century).<sup>9</sup> The argument by Klaus von See that *Hamðismál* forms part of the 'younger' layer of poems and is thus later than *Guðrúnarhvöt*, has not gained general acceptance.<sup>10</sup> It seems to me impossible at present to solve the problem of the dating of these poems, since linguistic tests continue to prove inconclusive for both Old English and Old Norse poems, and internal evidence is unhelpful. For instance, one might argue that the poems quoted above which place their events in the distant past do so because they were composed later than those poems which place their events in the present. However, it seems more profitable to view this as a poetic choice and to investigate the literary *effects* of this distancing, especially given the continuing debate over dating. Similarly, it might be argued that early poems represent Guðrún as avenger and later ones as lamenter. However, some of the Guðrún elegies in fact break down this binary, particularly *Guðrúnarkviða 2nnor* (The Second Lay of Guðrún), since it is generally considered late, but centres on Guðrún's insistence on vengeance. In the analyses below, the aim is to treat the dating and audience of these poems as unproven, whilst nevertheless to provide material which may contribute to the continuing discussion of these issues.

Although there is no agreement as to when the compilation took its current form, the Codex Regius was written down in Iceland in about 1270, as we have seen, and it has been established on scribal and linguistic evidence that all the poems must have existed in written form before the mid-thirteenth century and that the lost exemplar or exemplars from which the Codex Regius was copied cannot have pre-dated the beginning of the thirteenth century.<sup>11</sup> The original

<sup>9</sup> For an overview see Joseph Harris's article in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, vol. 4, ed. Joseph R. Strayer (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985), sub 'Eddic Poetry', and the discussion in his chapter 'Eddic Poetry' in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, ed. Clover and Lindow, 68–156, at 93.

<sup>10</sup> See his 'Die Sage von Hamðir und Sörli', in his *Edda, Saga, Skaldendichtung: Aufsätze zur skandinavischen Literatur des Mittelalters* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1981), 224–49, and 'Guðrúnarhvöt und Hamðismál', *ibid.* 250–8.

<sup>11</sup> See further Dronke I, pp. xi–xiii and Gustaf Lindblad, *Studier i Codex Regius av äldre Eddan* (Lund: Gleerup, 1954), esp. 257–75 *passim*.

composition of many (though not all) of the poems certainly predates the thirteenth century, and we do not know how many copyists intervened between then and the copy that has come down to us. However, the present form of the poems is at least as important, if not more so, since it represents firmer evidence.<sup>12</sup> Whatever the poems' lost origins may have been, it therefore surely makes sense to interpret the compilation in the light of thirteenth-century Icelandic sociocultural conditions. Similarly, although there is much debate over the integrity of the poems as we have them, it seems useful to interpret the poems as extant, rather than trying to interpret a reconstruction of a hypothetical 'original'.<sup>13</sup>

It is not practical to give a detailed summary of every one of the almost thirty poems contained in the Codex Regius, so the account below concentrates primarily on those poems most discussed in this book. The manuscript is commonly divided into two parts, the first dealing with mythological themes and the activities of the Norse gods, starting with *Völuspá* (The Seeress's Prophecy) and continuing through poems about the gods Óðinn, Freyr, and Þórr. The second part centres on the exploits, relationships, and deaths of heroes like Helgi Hundingsbani and Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, and the conflict between the latter's two loves, Brynhildr and Guðrún, and the fate of Guðrún's children by her subsequent marriages. This neat division is problematized, however, by the placement of *Völundarkviða* (The Lay of Völundr) in the 'mythological' section, since, although he is designated as a prince of the elves, his actions and the poem's setting seem to relate it better to the 'heroic' section. The arguments below, particularly in Chapter 3, also point to purposeful links between the two sections.

<sup>12</sup> For a lucid account of *mouvance* theory, which argues for the importance of each extant copy of a text against some putative reconstructed 'ideal' text, see Bella Millett, 'Mouvance and the Medieval Author: Re-Editing *Ancrene Wisse*', in A. J. Minnis (ed.), *Late Medieval Texts and their Transmission: Essays in Honour of A. I. Doyle* (Woodbridge: Brewer, 1994).

<sup>13</sup> For detailed accounts of these debates, see Dronke I and II, and the volumes of Klaus von See's ongoing *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1993–). For a facsimile edition of the Codex Regius with transcription, see Ludvig F. A. Wimmer and Finnur Jónsson, *Håndskriftet Nr. 2365 4<sup>to</sup> gl. kgl. Samling* (Copenhagen: Møller, 1891). For consistency, poems are cited from Neckel-Kuhn. Translations are my own.

## VQLUSPÁ

The first poem in the Codex Regius has a cosmic scope, recounting as it does the events before the beginning of the world but ranging forward through divine and human history to the end of the current dispensation at Ragnarøk (the Doom of the Gods) and beyond to a new world-order. The death of the beautiful god, Baldr, at the hands of his brother Höðr but instigated by the malevolent god Loki, is avenged by Óðinn's one-day-old son, Váli, born precisely for this purpose. However, his death and Loki's punishment appear to be the harbingers of Ragnarøk. The end of the world is preceded by a cosmic war between gods and giants: Óðinn is killed by the wolf Fenrir (and avenged by his son Víðarr), Freyr by the fire-giant Surtr, and Þórr by the Miðgarðsormr (the Midgard Serpent). The world ends in a fiery conflagration, but the seeress's vision promises renewal and the peaceful return of Baldr and his brother. Much of the poem is obscure or debated, and particularly controversial is the question of how much Christian influence has affected this account of the Norse cosmogony.<sup>14</sup>

## OTHER 'MYTHOLOGICAL' POEMS

Following *Vqluspá* we have *Hávamál* (Sayings of the High One), a long piece of wisdom poetry, which is almost certainly a composite drawn together by the figure of Óðinn, obsessed with learning to the extent of hanging himself on the world-tree Yggdrasil for nine nights whilst wounded with a spear to gain the mystery of the runes. More gnomic wisdom is revealed in *Vafðrúðnismál* (Sayings of Vafðrúðnir), a wisdom contest between Óðinn and the giant Vafðrúðnir, and *Grímnismál*, a contest between Grímnir (Óðinn in disguise) and King Geirroðr. *Skírnismál* follows, which tells of Freyr's servant Skírnir's wooing mission to get the giantess Gerðr to agree to marry the love-struck god. In *Hárbarðsljóð* (The Song of Hárbarðr) Þórr

<sup>14</sup> See the commentary in Dronke II, and John McKinnell, *Both One and Many: Essays on Change and Variety in Late Norse Heathenism* (Rome: Il Calamo, 1994), esp. 123–4.

and Óðinn (in disguise as the ferryman Hárbarðr) engage in a verbal contest because the latter refuses to ferry Þórr across a fjord. Þórr is also at the centre of *Hymiskviða*, in which he must obtain a giant cauldron for a feast and in the course of which he goes on a fishing trip with the giant Hymir and almost catches the Miðgarðsormr, to the peril of the earth and the terror of Hymir. In *Lokasenna* (Loki's Quarrel) Loki insults all of the gods in turn until he is silenced by Þórr's arrival and threat to destroy him with his hammer. The comic *Þrymskviða* centres on the giant Þrymr's refusal to return Þórr's stolen hammer unless the goddess Freyja marries him. When she refuses, Þórr must go instead, disguised as a (less than dainty) bride so that he can get his hands on the hammer and kill the giants.

*Völundarkviða* tells of skilled smith Völundr's obsessive revenge against his captor by killing his two sons and impregnating his daughter. The final poem in the so-called mythological section is *Alvíssmál*, another wisdom contest, but this time between Þórr and the dwarf Alvíss.

## THE HELGI POEMS

### *Helgakviða Hundingsbana in fyrri* (The First Lay of Helgi Hundingsbani)

Helgi's birth is attended by the Norns, the Norse version of the classical Fates, who predict his fame as a warrior-prince. He kills a ruler named Hundingr at the age of 15, followed by Hundingr's four sons when they come seeking revenge. He meets Sigrún, a valkyrie who complains that her father Hogni has betrothed her to an unworthy suitor, Høðbroddr son of Granmarr. Helgi sails with his warriors to fight Granmarr and claim Sigrún himself, and after his half-brother Sinfjötli bests Høðbroddr's brother Guðmundr in a verbal contest (or *flyting*), he leads his armies to victory, aided by the valkyries, and can claim land, treasure, and bride.

### *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* (The Lay of Helgi Hjörvarðsson)

This poem precedes the first lay chronologically, since Helgi and his valkyrie bride Sváva are said to have been reincarnated as Helgi and



Sigrún, but it is positioned between the other two lays in the Codex Regius. It starts with a prelude recounting how Helgi's father King Hiorvarðr won his mother Sigrlinn through the agency of his second-in-command Atli. Then, after an inauspicious youth, Helgi is directed to a special sword by the valkyrie Sváva, with which he kills his mother's former suitor Hróðmarr and the giant Hati. Hati's daughter Hrímgæðr then engages in a *flyting* with Atli, now Helgi's companion, but he keeps her talking until the sun comes up and turns her to stone. Helgi and Sváva marry, but his brother Heðinn insults a troll-woman and is cursed to make a foolish drinking-vow to have his brother's wife. Heðinn guiltily wanders off but encounters Helgi, who magnanimously forgives him, explaining that he is doomed anyway, because the troll-woman was his *fylgia* (a sort of guardian spirit) and he thinks therefore he will die in his imminent duel with Hróðmarr's son Alf. This duly occurs, and Helgi asks his bride not to weep but to marry his brother Heðinn. However, the poem ends with Heðinn's vow to avenge his brother.

### *Helgakviða Hundingsbana 2nnor* (The Second Lay of Helgi Hundingsbani)

This poem follows much the same course as the first lay, of which it may represent an oral variant; this version, however, emphasizes the conflict Sigrún feels between her love and family loyalty. The *flyting* is abbreviated, and instead we learn of the revenge Sigrún's brother Dagr takes on Helgi for killing his father. After an exchange of hostile words between sister and brother, we are shown Helgi's pre-eminence in Valhalla over Hundingr, and the poem ends with a supernatural encounter between Helgi and Sigrún at the burial mound. Sigrún wishes to stay with her dead husband, but he rides away and we are told that she dies from grief.

## THE SIGURÐR AND GUÐRÚN POEMS

We now enter upon a series of poems dealing with the birth, life, and death of Sigurðr, the pre-eminent hero amongst men, and the consequences of his murder. *Grípisspá* is a prophecy by Grípir of the

events of Sigurðr's fateful life (though it was clearly written later than the other poems and acts as a summary of what is to come). Three poems then deal with Sigurðr's youth: *Reginismál* explains how, in order to compensate Hreiðmarr for the accidental killing of his son Otr (Otter), Loki and the gods take the gold of the dwarf Andvari, who therefore curses it to be the cause of strife. Hreiðmarr's son Fáfnir kills his father for the gold, then guards his treasure in dragon's form. His brother Reginn helps Sigurðr to kill his brother Fáfnir, recounted at length in *Fáfnismál*. When Sigurðr roasts Fáfnir's heart and tastes his blood he understands the speech of birds and overhears them discussing Reginn's plans to kill him. He therefore kills his erstwhile mentor and carries off the treasure. The following poem, *Sigrdrífumál*, tells how the hero obtains advice from the wise valkyrie Sigrdrífa. It is incomplete, since at this point the manuscript has a large lacuna, or gap, so the missing material has to be reconstructed from the late *Völsunga saga*, which was based on the heroic Eddaic poems. Sigurðr meets and agrees to marry Brynhildr, but is given a potion which makes him forget this promise. He therefore marries Gunnarr's sister Guðrún and agrees to woo Brynhildr on Gunnarr's behalf (disguising himself as his friend). Eventually Guðrún is goaded to reveal this deception to the proud Brynhildr, and this sets in motion the events of the rest of the compilation. Brynhildr incites the murder of Sigurðr by Guðrún's brothers; Guðrún is inconsolable and Brynhildr kills herself; then Guðrún is forced to marry again. Her second husband Atli kills her brothers, whom she then avenges by killing her sons by him and serving up their bodies at a feast, before stabbing him in their bed and setting the hall on fire. The compilation ends with two texts which recount the events of her third marriage and, in the final text, *Hamðismál*, the end of the dynasty.

### *Hamðismál*

At the start of *Hamðismál* Guðrún incites her sons to kill Iqrmunrekkr, who has had their sister Svanhildr, whom he had married, trodden to death with horses. The prose preceding *Guðrúnarhvot* informs us that this is because Iqrmunrekkr believed his son Randvér to have had adulterous designs on his wife and so hanged him and executed