



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

The Implications of Knowledge Acquisition
in *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál*

A multidisciplinary approach to Eddic Wisdom Poetry

Ritgerð til M.A.-prófs

Carlos Osvaldo Rocha

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1. Introduction

Among Eddic poems, *Hávamál* is considered a ‘wisdom poem’ because of its visible gnomic component (st. 1-103 and st. 112-137), but didactic verses are also found in *Sigrdrífumál* (st. 5-37) and to a lesser extent in *Reginismál* (st. 4 and 19-22) and *Fáfnismál* (12-15). In fact, these three heroic poems are consecutive in the *Codex Regius* manuscript (c. 1270) and together with a lost fragment in the final eight-leave lacuna are considered to have been a continuous composition dedicated to the early life of the hero Sigurðr *fáfnisbani* prefaced by *Gripisspá*. What is certain is that they provide a context that is not available for *Hávamál*, which basically stands alone in the Eddic compilation. However, wisdom poetry may include other kinds of knowledge, too, particularly in anonymous compositions with oral implications.

Wisdom poetry has been often criticised due to its unstructured appearance, which has been explained by its catalogue nature. Yet another reason for this is that such knowledge must have had a gradual origin and thus one or many different structures before it came into writing, considering that at least a part of it is originally rooted in the oral tradition. Most views about Eddic poetry tend to take rather extreme positions, going from claiming that long traditional compositions were preserved untouched by influence from written sources to asserting that they were produced by a literate mind under scarce influence from oral tradition. The principle that lies beneath this dissertation is that Eddic poetry was composed in a transitional period and it should be considered a transitional product, considering that orality is not only attested by (oral-formulaic) composition but also by other factors such as performance, transmission and even narrative plot.

The aim of this thesis is to show that the fragmentary all-in-one knowledge structure that is particularly present in *Hávamál* but also recognisable in *Sigrdrífumál* can be explained to some degree by their transitional nature, i.e. between the medieval literate mind and the oral cognitive structures, though such an idea does not confirm the explicit Latin influence suggested by some scholars. In order to understand the transitional character of this poetry, both the oral-formulaic theory and the oral-written continuum theory are revisited and thus shed some light on how these different kinds of knowledge rely on both cognitive means of communication and function at different levels, which ultimately results in a complex literary product that transcends the

boundaries of wisdom (gnomic) poetry. This will also lead to a discussion of the different theories on their composition, especially the likelihood that *Sigrdrífumál* was written down following *Hávamál* as a model, a suggestion that has emerged in line with the book-prose theory mostly used concerning saga composition.

Beyond the philological analyses that focus on the coincidences and probable influences that arise in Eddic wisdom poetry when compared with other traditions, this dissertation will explore the implications of knowledge acquisition within the selected Eddic wisdom poems from a multidisciplinary approach, viewed as wide-ranging and paradigmatic outcome which reflects many types of knowledge as well as elements from both the oral tradition and the literate mind. *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál* contain a blend of ethical, esoteric and mythical knowledge as no other poem, and subsequently an epistemological survey may clarify the conceptualisations of knowledge and wisdom. Moreover, knowledge acquisition is often related to initiation rituals, an approach that addresses some of the most relevant questions in literary studies but taking into account the relevant anthropological implications. Óðinn, as the undisputed god of wisdom, is present throughout the poems in their multiple-level knowledge representations. Unlike the myths associated with Kvasir and Mímir, where the primary character of knowledge is narrated and centred on orality, the Eddic poems *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál* also emphasise runes and charms as esoteric knowledge. On the other hand, it is uncertain whether all kinds of knowledge –joined into a single composition– are intended for all kinds of people or the different kinds of knowledge are a construction that originally was intended to address different social agents.

The premise for this dissertation is that philological studies –especially those focused on Eddic wisdom poetry– and some of its questionings not only admit but demand complementary theories. Therefore, I will survey various suggested arrangements and patterns of composition for both poems but is not intended to demonstrate a probable ‘original’ structure. It is important, though, to take these structures into account in order to understand the message conveyed by the final product.

1.1 Wisdom in poetry

In a very broad sense, poetry always carries some especial knowledge –it may be called ‘wisdom’ too– given that it is an act of communication in a somewhat artificial phrasing. As showed by Aristotle, poetry was assigned a superior value in terms of knowledge and truth since Antiquity, arguing that poetry provides ‘general truths’ rather than ‘particular facts’, and thus it can be more serious than history.¹ The so-called ‘oral literature’, and particularly epic poetry, developed in numerous cultures around the world from the early stage of oral tradition, given that lays were a traditional form to preserve historical memory in the absence of writing.² In fact, there is evidence to maintain that historical knowledge occurs in epic, even if the mythical narrative is at times opaque within the discourse,³ which, however, does not automatically indicate that the facts contained are historical truth. According to Albert Lord, the surrounding substance in epic is not history but myth, because historical events do not provide the force needed to ‘survive’ the changes of tradition, a process that should be regarded as a constant reinterpretation of succeeding generations rather than corruption.⁴ The notion of historical truth enclosed and transmitted through oral lore was, indeed, the main focus of the historical-geographical school within oral studies, a step forward from the romantic and evolutionist theories that dominated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁵ Important here is that, despite the claims over a hardly attestable immemorial transmission, some of these earlier theories were already concerned with the implications of poetry not only regarded as depository of knowledge but also as carrier of wisdom in a metaphysical sense.

For instance, the first ‘philosophy of myth’, proposed by Giambattista Vico in *Principi di Scienza Nuova d'intorno alla Comune Natura delle Nazioni* (1725),

¹ ‘Poetry is something more scientific and serious than history, because poetry tends to give general truths while history gives particular facts. By a ‘general truth’ I mean the sort of thing that a certain type of man will do or say either probably or necessarily. That is what poetry aims at in giving names to the characters,’ *Poetics* [1451b] [1]

Available online at

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0056%3Asection%3D1451b>

² As observed by Foley in *Immanent Art*, p. 8, ‘a traditional work depends primarily on elements and strategies that were in place long before the execution of the present version or text, long before the present nominal author learned the inherited craft’.

³ Zumthor, *Introduction à la poésie orale*, p. 113.

⁴ See Lord, *The Singer*, pp. 27-8. Romantic views usually considered oral transmission as a predominantly deteriorating process. See also Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, p. 141.

⁵ See Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, 30-46, for a detailed survey about the development of the different schools within the study of oral tale and poetry up to the twentieth century.

conferred superior attributions to the poetic traditions of Antiquity. His theory of myth, strongly related to poetical composition and utterance, maintained that poetic wisdom was the first wisdom of the gentile world and thus it must have started from prehistoric metaphysics different from modernity's learned tradition, abstract and not reasoned but felt and imagined as by the first men. He believed that such men had a very robust fantasy and apprehension of the divine, which in turn made their poetry so sublime that it has never been surpassed.⁶ To Vico's mind, poetry has a revelatory function, as it keeps the first truth imagined by the first men.

In addition, Vico suggested that civilization goes through a three-stage cycle (*ricorso*): divine, heroic and human, a model that was somewhat re-evaluated in a more positivist way at the end of the eighteenth century by the anthropologists Edward B. Taylor in *Primitive Culture* (1871) and James Frazer in *The Golden Bough* (1890), who claimed that mankind is defined by three levels of development: magic, religion and science, where science corresponds to the most advanced civilization level.⁷ According to Vico's classification, however, the rise of rationality experienced in the third stage must lead to the so-called *barbarie della riflessione* ('barbarism of reflection') also called *barbarie degl'intelletti* ('barbarism of the intellects') and then civilization will descend back into the poetic stage, the original source of wisdom (*sapienza*),⁸ a term defined by him as 'the faculty which commands all the disciplines by which we acquire all the sciences and arts that make up humanity.'⁹ Contrary to what one might think, this marked emphasis on poetry and imagination as sources for wisdom has not vanished, since recent theories suggest that poetical learning should be promoted and re-established as a more intuitive way of learning.¹⁰

⁶ Vico also supported the idea that the poetic language must come from the myth and prose must derive from poetry.

⁷ August Comte also organised knowledge in three progressive stages: theological (fictitious), metaphysical (abstract) and positive (scientific). See also Hans Penner, *Rationality, Ritual and Science*, pp. 11-26, for a brief anthropological survey on Frazer's and Taylor's theories as well as further developments by Bronislaw Malinowski, John Beattie, Keith V. Thomas, etc.

⁸ Vico established a difference between the modern 'barbarism of reflection' and the original 'barbarism of sense' (*barbarie del senso*) in Antiquity. In this sense, Vico argues that this returned barbarism ('barbarie ritornata') he predicts is not a movement back but forward in the cyclic human history. See Verene, *Vico's Science*, p. 193-5. Meletinsky (*The Poetics of Myth*, Introduction) has also discussed Vico's theories in order to show that poetry, nourished by myth, is the prehistoric stage of all literature.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

¹⁰ There is a modern attempt of restoring the so-called 'poetic way of learning' described and supported by James S. Taylor insists on the fact that poetry was 'the ultimate form of communicating knowledge', and it was therefore preserved after the Christian popularization of writing, arguing that before the Renaissance and the Cartesian revolution in philosophy this intuitive way of knowing was essential for the human being's ability to know reality. See Taylor, *Poetic Knowledge*, pp. 4-5.

In the end, Vico's theories illustrate the wide range of possibilities that wisdom and poetry bear to the human psyche, as well as putting forward some questions about 'wisdom' and its deeply abstract meanings, on the one hand, and the relevance of oral transmission and learning, on the other. While studying the authority and didactic function of traditional oral epic and tragic poetry in the context of Ancient Greece, Eric Havelock argued that Plato had to condemn it in order to establish a new way of reasoning based on prose and eventually on literacy.¹¹ In any case, the significance of lays and poems as a means of storing and communicating knowledge within an oral tradition is not subject to debate, and Northern Europe was not excluded from this practices since the earliest accounts we have notice of. Already in the first section of *Germania* (98 AD), Tacitus described how important poetical utterance was for the Germanic peoples at the margins of the learned Latin culture and some of the multiple functions it covered.¹²

Beneath the different motifs in this poetry, the surviving compositions show that the knowledge transmitted through them must have comprised a significant and heterogeneous cumulus of information, including epic accounts, mythical narratives, magical knowledge and ethical advice. Among all these types, ethical advice or common sense compositions have been often named 'wisdom poetry' or 'gnomic poetry'. Although it is frequently associated with psalms and proverbs in the Hebraic tradition and with the gnomic poets from Ancient Greece, ethical advice occurs in many other traditions. Rooted in the theories of his time, John Addington Symonds suggested that in Ancient Greece old epic narratives gave way to lyrical compositions and meditative writing when the Greeks were beginning to 'think definitely',¹³ a rather positivist statement obviously based on the assumption that mythic/epic knowledge is a lower kind of knowledge when compared with ethical, abstract thought, which has been regarded as 'wisdom' more often than any other type of knowledge.

¹¹ See Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, p. 208-9 and *The Muse Learns*, p. 8.

¹² 'Fuisse apud eos et Herculem memorant, primumque omnium virorum fortium ituri in proelia canunt. Sunt illis haec quoque carmina, quorum relatu, quem barditum vocant, accendunt animos futuraeque pugnae fortunam ipso cantu augurantur'. Available online at:

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/tacitus-germ-latin.asp> (last viewed July 2nd, 2012)

[They have a tradition that Hercules also had been in their country, and him above all other heroes they extol in their songs when they advance to battle. Amongst them too are found that kind of verses by the recital of which (by them called Barding) they inspire bravery; nay, by such chanting itself they divine the success of the approaching fight.]

English translation by Thomas Gordon. Available online at:

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/tacitus-germanygord.asp> (last viewed July 2nd, 2012)

¹³ Symonds, *The Greek*, p. 49.

Needless to say, such ideas do not automatically suggest an extrapolation to the Germanic peoples during the Middle Ages, even though there was an Old Germanic gnomic tradition aimed at shaping human behaviour. In fact, the occurrence of this indigenous ethical wisdom has been regarded as a sort of folk-wisdom common to all Germanic poetry,¹⁴ an assumption that, however, has been difficult to demonstrate since there is not sufficient evidence of overlap.¹⁵ What is certain is that there was a native tradition of literature based on common knowledge and sententious truths before the introduction of literacy. In the case of Anglo-Saxon society, Thomas Hill has emphasised the conservative desire to preserve an ancient tradition of inherited wisdom with rhetorical and cultural force, which very likely could apply to medieval Icelandic society, too.¹⁶

In addition to this, it should be noted that some compositions might have been more influenced by the learned Latin tradition than others and even composed under its values, surely depending on the incidence of medieval Christianity in that society. The new moralising environment –influenced in turn by the Hebraic, Greek and Latin wisdom traditions– might partially explain why wisdom poetry becomes more popular after the medieval conversion of northern Europe,¹⁷ markedly in the Old English Corpus, which includes poems such as *Maxims I*, *Maxims II*, *The Fortunes of Men*, *The Gifts of Men*, *Salomon and Saturn*, *Precepts*, *A Father's Instructions to his Son*, *The Wonders of Creation* and *The Order of the World*. To a lesser extent, this also occurred in the Old Norse Corpus, where *Sólarljóð*¹⁸ and *Hugsvinnsmál*¹⁹ were clearly shaped under Latin/Christian models despite being composed following a traditional Eddic style: the *ljóðaháttir* metre ('song metre'), strongly associated with speech and wisdom unlike the *fornyrðislag* metre ('old story metre'), which was mostly used for heroic lays.²⁰ Although these poems are out of the scope of the present dissertation for the above mentioned reasons, they will be considered in relation with the Eddic wisdom

¹⁴ See Larrington, *A Store*, p. 18.

¹⁵ Cavill, *Maxims*, p. 25.

¹⁶ Hill, *Wise Words*, p. 171.

¹⁷ Also, the anthropologist Jack Goody observed that literacy makes religions (spiritual ideas) less flexible and more universalistic and ethical. See Goody, *Literacy*, p. 2.

¹⁸ As observed by Frederic Amory in *Norse-Christian Syncretism*, p. 253, at least *Sólarljóð* is far from true syncretism, since this literary synthesis of poetry, mythology and mysticism does not seem to discriminate doctrinally the faith of the poet or his audience. For a recent review on this poem see also Sager, *Death and the Wisdom of Sólarljóð* (1998) and Schorn, *Eddic Poetry for a New Era* (2011).

¹⁹ *Hugsvinnsmál* has been generally considered as an Old Icelandic translation of the Latin collection of wise sayings *Disticha Catonis*, originally composed in the third or fourth century.

²⁰ In fact, both metric forms appear combined in poems such as *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál*.

poems *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál*, two Eddic poems with an important number of gnomic elements also featuring other significant kinds of knowledge. Finally, in order to clarify the reasons why *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál* are the current objects of study it will be necessary to define the criteria under which they are considered wisdom poems and the other Eddic poems are excluded, even if regarded as wisdom poems themselves under broad criteria.

2. Defining wisdom and wisdom poetry

The only Old Norse poem commonly regarded as pre-Christian and gnomic is *Hávamál*, attributed to the god Óðinn, and in particular its first and largest section (st. 1-79), known as *The Gnomic Poem* or *Gestaþáttur*, as well as the intermediate section (st. 111-137) *Loddfáfnismál*. This extensive gnomic content seems to fit the general concept of wisdom poetry (often synonymous terms) as studied in other traditions, and constitutes an isolated case in the Old Norse-Icelandic Corpus, which has led to much attention among scholars. However, the concept of ‘wisdom’ has been widened and thus it has come to include other poems as well. Evidently, to designate a literature as ‘wisdom literature’ seems to be as ambiguous as the term ‘wisdom’ itself, to the extent that, in order to avoid ambiguity in his research about Old English wisdom poetry, Thomas Hill has preferred to label these sayings about life and wisdom as ‘sapiential poetry’,²¹ the Latin equivalent used for the biblical texts dealing with proverbial knowledge known as *Sapiential Books*.²² ‘Sapiential’ seems to me a perfectly suitable choice considering the restrictive character of the more frequently used term ‘gnomic’. Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, usually quoted for the first definition of ‘gnome’ (often translated as ‘maxim’), states that ‘it is a statement; not a particular fact, but of a general kind; nor is it about any and every subject, but only about questions of practical conduct, courses of conduct to be chosen or avoided’.²³ After this restrictive definition, Munro and Nora Chadwick defined two different types of gnomes while studying Old English wisdom literature: (1) those in line with Aristotle’s definition, concerned with human actions and implying choice or judgment, and (2) those concerned with objects derived from observation and

²¹ Hill, *Wise Words*, p. 166.

²² The seven *Sapiential Books* are: *Job*, *Psalms*, *Proverbs*, *Ecclesiastes*, *The Book of Wisdom*, *The Song of Songs* and *Sirach*.

²³ Online at <http://rhetoric.eserver.org/aristotle/rhet2-21.html> (last viewed July 15, 2012).

not capable of being converted into precepts, including human actions not subject to choice or judgment and operations of fate or gods.²⁴

In my opinion, driving the concept outside the realm of pure philosophy has been more convenient in order to refer to this kind of moralising literature in general. In her 1914 publication of gnomic poetry in Old English, Blanche Colton Williams used the adjective ‘gnomic’ (meaning ‘sententious’) as a generalization of any nature, even if it is not proverbial but a physical truth, moral law or ethical ideal.²⁵ However, recent studies on Old English and Old Norse studies have discussed more detailed definitions. Paul Cavill has dubbed the Chadwicks’ type I (concerned with human actions) as ‘gnome’ and type II (concerned with other objects) as ‘maxim’, whereas ‘proverb’ is a more complex type of generalization that usually provides a parallel.²⁶ Most frequently, however, maxim and gnome are used interchangeably.²⁷

More recently but in the same line as Williams, Antonina Harbus has provided a comprising definition taking into account the usual difficulties to establish basic requirements, since other literary modes such as the elegiac and the heroic frequently contain a wisdom or gnomic component. Harbus acknowledges that these poems tend to appraise the acquisition of certain types of knowledge, but they also contain generalised statements about the social and natural worlds, and therefore both didactic poems and imperative messages and maxims with more generalised pronouncements can be widely regarded as ‘wisdom poetry’.²⁸ For the purpose of this study, I will keep to this general view on the gnomic as opposed to other kinds of knowledge instead of categorising different kinds of gnomic knowledge, though keeping in mind that ‘gnomic’ (e.g. gnomic poetry) is not a full synonym to ‘wisdom’ (e.g. gnomic poetry), that is to say, this kind of knowledge is not the only element in ‘wisdom’.

²⁴ In accordance with this division, the Chadwicks suggest that ‘the first type may be regarded as the beginning of ethical literature and the second type as the beginning of scientific literature in general’ in Chadwick, *The Growth of Literature*, p. 377.

²⁵ Colton Williams, *Gnomic poetry*, p. 8.

²⁶ Cavill, *Maxims*, p. 43.

²⁷ As used by Nicolas Jacobs in his studies of Welsh gnomic poetry, where he also states that ‘every proverb is a maxim, and every maxim is an observation, but not every observation is a maxim nor every maxim a proverb’, mainly because a proverb –unlike a maxim– tends to include moral as well as descriptive elements, which is rather similar to Cavill’s definition. See Jacobs, *Early Welsh*, Introduction (xviii-xviii).

²⁸ Harbus, *The Life of the Mind*, p. 62.

Within the Eddic Corpus, traditionally divided in mythological²⁹ and heroic poems,³⁰ the mythological poem *Hávamál* has attracted the most attention due to its prevalent gnomic style as no other Eddic poem. Nonetheless, gnomic strophes have been also identified in the heroic poems *Reginismál* and *Sigrdrífumál*, both devoted to the youth of the mythical hero Sigurðr.³¹ More recently, Carolyn Larrington has worked on both Old English and Old Norse wisdom poetry, mostly taking the same general approach, considering *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál* as the two most characteristic wisdom poems in the Eddic Corpus. But unlike Clarke, who decided to exclude magic knowledge from wisdom, Larrington stresses the fact that *Hávamál* brings together different types of wisdom in its desire to encompass all kinds of knowledge, an idea endorsed by Ursula Dronke in her most recent edition of Eddic mythological poems.³² Such a desire is also noticeable in the poems of Sigurðr's youth: *Gripisspá*,³³ *Reginismál*, *Fáfnismál* and *Sigrdrífumál*, which show how Sigurðr acquires different types of knowledge from various sources. Larrington also ventures to establish the most characteristic kinds of knowledge for each of these poems: fortunate omens in *Reginismál*, mythological wisdom in *Fáfnismál*, and runic lore and social wisdom in *Sigrdrífumál*.³⁴ Correspondingly, we can note that the same qualities of wisdom shown in these poems are present in *Hávamál* together with the already mentioned ethical advice: fortunate omens, mythological narrative (for instance, Óðinn's seduction of Gunnlöð and the acquisition of the mead of poetry) and runic lore (Óðinn's self-hanging in the Yggdrasil tree and the final list of spells).

Largely due to the above mentioned diversity of knowledge preserved in the Eddic poems, a limited focus on gnomic knowledge seems to leave out other relevant representations for 'wisdom'. For instance, Brittany Schorn has claimed that there is not really any distinction –either grammatical or syntactic– in the way gnomes and mythological information are expressed and combined in Eddic poetry, and consequently there is no reason to consider gnomes distinct from the mythological facts

²⁹ Included are *Völuspá*, *Hávamál*, *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Grímnismál*, *Skírnismál*, *Hárbarðsljóð*, *Hymiskviða*, *Lokasenna*, *Þrymskviða*, *Völundarkviða*, *Alvíssmál*, *Baldurs traumar*, *Rígsþula*, *Hyndluljóð* and *Svipdagsmál*.

³⁰ Included are *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, *Frá dauða Sinfjötla*, *Gripisspá*, *Reginismál*, *Fáfnismál*, *Sigrdrífumál*, *Brot af Sigurðarkviðu*, *Guðrúnarkviða I*, *Sigurðarkviða hin skamma*, *Helreið Brynhildar*, *Dráp Niflunga*, *Guðrúnarkviða II*, *Guðrúnarkviða III*, *Oddrúnargrátr*, *Atlakviða*, *Atlamál*, *Guðrúnarhvöt* and *Hamðismál*.

³¹ See Clarke, *The Hávamál*, pp. 24-5.

³² See Dronke, *Poetic Edda III*, p. 37.

³³ Although this poem is basically an introduction and provides less information than the other three.

³⁴ Larrington, *A Store*, p. 73.

of poems such as *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Grímnismál* or *Alvíssmál*.³⁵ However, this statement is very debatable if we observe *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál*, which are clearly structured in differentiated types of knowledge, something that has led to suggest different episodes or even different poems, far from the free mixture claimed by Schorn.

From an amplified scope, Schorn recognises as wisdom poems those marked by Óðinn's search for knowledge and those where this action is emulated by other characters, namely the 'classic Odinic wisdom poems' *Hávamál*, *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál*,³⁶ the 'neo-Eddic poems' *Sólarljóð*, *Hugsvinnsmál*, *Alvíssmál* and *Svipdagsmál* and 'sequences' from *Reginismál*, *Fáfnismál* and *Sigrdrífumál*. However, Schorn warns that not all Eddic poems dealing with a quest for knowledge are wisdom poetry, albeit a common motif in wisdom poetry. In the case of *Völuspá* and *Baldrs draumar*, for instance, Schorn argues that the transmitted knowledge is part of the narrative frame –the prophecy– rather than wisdom.³⁷ In this sense, it is rather paradoxical that in both *Völuspá* and *Baldrs draumar* Óðinn seems to acquire knowledge which he ignores, in opposition to the poems where he basically exhibits his accumulated wisdom during a contest. Moreover, it seems to me that the knowledge transmitted through the *Völuspá* narrative brings a detailed context to place the rest of the mythological poems, particularly *Hávamál*, which is consecutive to *Völuspá* in the *Codex Regius*.

We could also suggest that medieval Scandinavians did not discriminate between different kinds of knowledge but regarded this heterogeneous knowledge as wisdom. This supposition, however, would not fit the structure of *Hávamál*, where mythological, magical and runic knowledge are certainly differentiated from the ethical knowledge in the gnomic sections. As already noted, Schorn excludes the poems where Óðinn receives his knowledge from a *völva*, such as *Völuspá* and *Baldrs draumar*, or

³⁵ Schorn's doctoral dissertation (the most recent research on Old Norse wisdom poetry) has criticised the use of a restrictive gnomic category, arguing that it does not apply to the Old Norse-Icelandic Corpus. See Schorn, *How Can*, p. 32.

³⁶ Hárbarð in *Hárbarðsljóð* has been identified as Loki and as Óðinn. The second choice was defended by Finnur Jónsson in *Hárbarðsljóð, en undersøgelse*.(1888).

³⁷ Schorn, *How Can*, p. 146. In a similar way, Kari Ellen Gade has viewed *Hávamál*, *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Grímnismál* and *Alvíssmál* as the most representative didactic poems, deliberately leaving out *Völuspá*. Quite the opposite, Terry Gunnell has regarded *Völuspá* as a wisdom poem under these general criteria and conclusively includes the initial four Óðinn poems of the Poetic Edda –*Völuspá*, *Hávamál*, *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál*– as wisdom poems even if they display different kinds of knowledge, namely mythological, gnomic, and magical in different settings. However, Gunnell has stressed that *Völuspá*, composed in *fornyrðislag* metre, unlike the poems composed in *ljóðaháttur* metre, cannot be regarded as a dramatic poem but rather a semi-dramatic one. See Gade, *Poetry*, p. 64, Gunnell, *Eddic Poetry*, p. 85 and Gunnell, *The Origins*, p. 17.

Hyndluljóð, where the goddess Freyja meets a *völva*, as they contain ‘second hand knowledge’ and not ‘direct personal experience’.³⁸ Nonetheless, such passive acquisition of knowledge is also displayed in *Sigrdrífumál*, albeit because of its gnomic component. In addition, the gnomic knowledge –along with the mythological and magical knowledge– is not uttered by the protagonist, Sigurðr, but by a summoned female character, the *valkyrja* Brynhildr (here called Sigrdrífa), who parallels the role of the *völva* in the compositions rejected by Schorn. It is also worth mentioning that Schorn avoids almost completely any oral feature of these poems and their transition into literacy while alleging that wisdom poems tend to focus on interpersonal action, leaving aside the theories that consider such disposition as an essential feature of all oral, performative poetry.³⁹

In any case, it is clear that Eddic wisdom is not exclusively devoted to ethical advice and *Hávamál* and the Sigurðr poems are unique under this broadened scope of wisdom. Whereas *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Grímnismál* and *Alvíssmál* are wisdom contests mainly related to mythological and esoteric facts, *Hávamál* and the Sigurðr poems display such kinds of knowledge adding a considerable amount of ethic advice. It is true, however, that both *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál* –the latter as a continuation to *Reginismál* and *Fáfnismál*– leave the mythological story aside while presenting different kinds of knowledge. In conclusion, although pre-Christian Scandinavians might have regarded all the Eddic poems as bearers of wisdom, it is unlikely that they could not notice natural epistemological differences between *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál* (and along their sections), on the one hand, and the rest of Eddic poems, on the other, taken for granted that they always had the structure featured in the *Codex Regius*. Also significant is the strong relation between *Reginismál*, *Fáfnismál* and *Sigrdrífumál*, which might have been a single poem in the beginning and could be considered under the title *Sigurðarkviða Fáfnisbana önnur*, often given exclusively as an alternative title for *Reginismál*.⁴⁰ Additionally, even if the structure of the three poems is different enough to consider them as separate compositions as it has been done so far, it is also possible to view *Sigrdrífumál* as constituted by different poems, just as *Hávamál*. The present

³⁸ Schorn, *How Can*, p. 94.

³⁹ Among recent scholars, Terry Gunnell has extensively argued for the performative features of the Eddic poems composed in *ljóðaháttir* metre, including *Hávamál*, *Fáfnismál* and *Sigrdrífumál*. See Gunnell, *Til hólts ek gekk* (2006).

⁴⁰ As noted by Gunnell in *The Origins*, p. 256, first footnote, the title *Reginismál* was first attributed by Bugge in *Norroen fornkvaedi* (1867). See also Simek, *Die Edda*, p. 92.

dissertation will then analyse the acquisition of knowledge by Óðinn in *Hávamál*, and Sigurðr in *Sigrdrífumál*, contextualised in connection with *Reginismál* and *Fáfnismál*.

2.1 Eddic wisdom poetry

The *Codex Regius* manuscript (*GKS 2365 4to; R*) –previously known as *Sæmundar Edda*–,⁴¹ where most Eddic poems are contained, was written down more than two centuries after Christian conversion, by the end of the thirteenth-century (c. 1270), probably in the Benedictine monastery of Þingeyrar,⁴² in northern Iceland, where an important literary activity was carried out since the twelfth century.⁴³ It must apparently have comprised 53 leaves in the original complete version, since 8 leaves have been lost resulting in the so-called ‘great lacuna’, located around the final section of *Sigrdrífumál* and the first part of *Brot af Sigurðarkviðu*. Also, more than a half of the manuscript covers heroic lays, whereas only 15 leaves deal with mythological motifs. Apart from the *Codex Regius*, several mythical accounts have been preserved in the fourteenth-century manuscript *AM 748 I 4to: Grímnismál, Hymiskviða, and Baldrs draumar*, as well as incomplete versions of *Skírnismál, Hárbarðsljóð, Vafþrúðnismál* and *Völundarkviða*. Furthermore, the existence of *AM 748 I 4to* as well as some relevant spelling mistakes suggest that *Codex Regius* is a copy based on manuscripts from the first half of the thirteenth century and it was not always in the preserved order.⁴⁴ Finally, despite being written down in the fourteenth century, the *fornaldarsögur* (‘legendary sagas’), especially *Völsunga saga* and *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, contain mythical accounts that suggest a much earlier origin, which has led to numerous efforts toward the reconstruction of heroic material for over a century.⁴⁵

The uncertain origin of Eddic poetry makes it difficult to establish an exact date for ‘original versions’ or even determine such a thing, thus it is merely hypothetical to

⁴¹ The Icelandic scholar Finnur Jónsson used this term in his edition of the Eddic poetry from 1905. However, this assumption is nowadays widely disputed, as Sæmundr fróði lived between 1056 and 1133 and it is difficult to demonstrate an earlier date for the writing of these poems before the date of the *Codex Regius* manuscript (c. 1270).

⁴² Lindblad, *Studier i Codex Regius*, p. 291.

⁴³ See Guðvarður Már, *Manuscripts*, pp. 247-8, for a recent overview of the main literary centres in medieval Iceland.

⁴⁴ See Vésteinn Ólason, *The Poetic Edda*, p. 230 and Heusler and the Dating, p. 188.

⁴⁵ Germanic parallels to the mythical accounts transmitted depicted in *Völsunga saga* were first identified and analyzed by Andreas Heusler in search of a reconstruction in *Die Lieder der Lücke im Codex Regius der Edda* (1902).

situate an earlier date than that of the *Codex Regius* or the *AM 748 I 4to*, which has been a matter of debate among scholars for a considerable time.⁴⁶ *Hávamál* is regarded as pre-Christian by the most scholars, but most heroic poetry, including the set *Reginismál-Fáfnismál-Sigrdrífumál*, has not been agreed upon. Mainly based on Gustaf Lindblad,⁴⁷ Jónas Kristjánsson defined three wide-ranging categories: (1) mythological poems, composed in heathen times before the introduction of writing, (2) old heroic poems composed before the introduction of writing, and (3) young heroic poems, composed in Christian times after the introduction of writing.⁴⁸ On a similar basis, German scholars such as Andreas Heusler and Hans Kuhn typically referred to *Atlakviða*, *Brot af Sigurðarkviðu*, *Hamðismál*, *Hlöðskviða* and *Volundarkviða* as the ‘five old poems’ in opposition to the ‘younger Sigurðr poems’.⁴⁹

A very distinct view is that of Lars Lönnroth, who believes that Eddic poetry is closer to the ballad than to the epic and shows a literary manufacture rarely found in traditional compositions.⁵⁰ Also characteristic from Lönnroth is to maintain that the dating problems regarding Eddic poetry have preoccupied Old Norse scholars ‘far too much’, which bears some truth.⁵¹ However, even if different from other traditions, invalidating the epic character in Eddic poetry seems to me an exaggeration. The view I find most accurate is that proposed by Bjarne Fidjestøl in his comprehensive survey about the dating of Eddic poetry to date, where he concludes that even though all attempts from literary history are bound to reach a dead end, the impossibility of dating the Eddic poems does not keep us away from exploring them as sources of Old Norse and Germanic culture. According to Fidjestøl, assuming that only the written versions of Eddic poems are legitimate objects of study implies an enormous restriction and loss

⁴⁶ Among the mythological poems, Jan de Vries considered that only *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Grímnismál*, *Hávamál*, *Hárbarðsljóð* and *Völuspá* were pre-Christian compositions, whereas Einar Ólafur Sveinsson also included *Skírnismál*, *Prymskviða*, *Baldrs draumar* and *Rígsþula*, but suggested that *Völuspá* was slightly more recent (c. 1000, the same date he assigned to *Lokasenna*). Among the heroic poems, de Vries suggested that only *Hlöðskviða*, *Hamðismál*, *Atlakviða*, *Völundarkviða* and *Gróttasöngur* were pre-Christian, whereas Einar added *Brot af Sigurðarkviðu*, *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, *Helgakviða, Hjörvarðssonar*, *Reginismál*, *Fáfnismál* and *Sigrdrífumál*.

⁴⁷ Lindblad suggested that the heroic poems might have been redacted around 1240, while the mythological poems were written down after several draft versions in 1270. See Lindblad, *Studier i Codex Regius*, pp. 275-6.

⁴⁸ Jónas Kristjánsson, *Stages*, p. 151.

⁴⁹ Heusler (*Die altgermanische Dichtung*, p. 23) was also aware that oral poetry tends to change both in form and content throughout its existence without changing its nature, and thus it does not admit a fixed dating. This view was further developed together with the concepts of variability and adaptation in oral poetry since the 1930s by Milman Parry and subsequently by Albert Lord in *The Singer of Tales* (1960), which is discussed in Chapter 3.1.

⁵⁰ Lönnroth, *Hjálmar's death-song*, p. 2.

⁵¹ Lönnroth, *The Old Norse Analogue*, p. 75.

and consequently supports the idea of a poetical development by pointing at skaldic poetry, largely datable, as an intermediate state between orality and literacy, since Eddic and skaldic poetry may have coexisted for centuries before any Old Norse poem was written down.⁵²

It has actually been suggested that skaldic metres developed from the Eddic metre *fornyrðislag*, predominant in heroic poems, while the Rök runestone in Sweden evidence the existence of skaldic poetry already in the ninth century (c. 850).⁵³ However, Eddic poetry is anonymous, like most West Germanic alliterative poetry, which suggests that Eddic compilers did not regard the creative process of composing Eddic poetry as a personal artistic activity.⁵⁴ What is certain is that both poetic traditions emerged as a part of the native oral tradition and later developed into a textual form. It is precisely such an intermediate state between orality and literacy what constitutes the primary aim of this dissertation despite the difficulties in dating Eddic poetry. Even though any attempt to reconstruct an oral version is ultimately void, it is clear that the medieval setting shapes and defines the resulting, surviving product.

Additionally, the distinctive Eddic metres, *fornyrðislag*,⁵⁵ *málahátt*,⁵⁶ and *ljóðahátt*⁵⁷, less abundant in circumlocutions or *kenningar* than skaldic verse, have been regarded as vehicles with different purposes, audiences and contexts.⁵⁸ The works composed either primarily in *fornyrðislag* or in *ljóðahátt* metre provide information about the intended oral performance and the contextual background. Most of the works largely composed in *ljóðahátt* metre, such as *Skírnismál*, *Lokasenna*, *Fáfnismál*, *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Harbarðsljóð*,⁵⁹ are rich in dialogues that suggest a different origin or at least a different way of performance, since the action occurs in a frame similar to that of drama, an assumption that is strongly supported by the presence of margin

⁵² See Fidjestøl, *The Dating*, p. 194-5.

⁵³ Gade, *The Structure*, pp. 226-38.

⁵⁴ According to Kari Ellen Gade, could be equated to the anonymous authors of Icelandic family sagas who might have considered themselves perpetrators of commonly known lore and past events, just as Eddic poets preserved stories of pagan gods and legendary heroes. See Gade, *Poetry*, p. 65.

⁵⁵ It contains stanzas of from two to eight lines, two lifts per half line, with two or three unstressed syllables.

⁵⁶ It is a variant of *fornyrðislag* that contained more syllables per line.

⁵⁷ It contains stanzas of four lines with four lifts and two or three alliterations. It had variants such as *galdrhátt* or *kviðuhátt*, including a fifth line in the stanza.

⁵⁸ See Gunnell, *Eddic Poetry*, p. 96.

⁵⁹ *Harbarðsljóð* is also considered within this group because of its overall characteristics despite the fact that it is a mixture of *fornyrðislag*, *málahátt*, and *ljóðahátt*.

annotations in the manuscript.⁶⁰ *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál* are among those poems primarily composed in *ljóðahátttr*, two monologue poems that, however, do not behave like the above mentioned dialogue poems. In fact, it is evident that both poems are different from the ‘normal’ *ljóðahátttr* poems in many ways,⁶¹ which justifies again a study focused on both compositions as a paradigmatic case within Eddic poetry.

Even though Eddic poetry is broadly classified under two main thematic groups, mythological and heroic, other more detailed classifications have been suggested in connection with the particular motifs and features of each poem, despite the fact that some of the Eddic poems could have been built up from different poems or fragments. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson divided in (1) dialogic poems (e.g. *Skírnismál*, *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Lokasenna*, *Fáfnismál*, *Alvíssmál*), (2) first-person monologues (e.g. *Völuspá*, *Hávamál*, *Grímnismál*, *Sigrdrífumál*) and (3) narrative poems (e.g. *Rígsþula*), and also in this third category those named ‘epic-dramatic’ (e.g. *Hamðismál*, *Hlöðskviða*, *Völundarkviða*, *Atlamál*, *Guðrúnarkviða*).⁶² Heusler classified between lower genres (*niedere Gattungen*), including ritual poetry, charms, proverbial poetry, memorial poetry, and short lyrics, which were composed and recited by anyone in an earlier period, and higher genres (*höhere Gattungen*), including praise poetry and narrative lays, which were performed by the court poet.⁶³

Mainly based on Einar Ólafur Sveinsson and Andreas Heusler, Hans Klingenberg divided Eddic poems in two types according to their structure: continuous narrative and enumerative, and names, in a somewhat more vaguely classification, different subgenres by theme: magic poetry, ritualistic poetry, gnomic poetry, epigrammatic and parabolic stanzas, mythological, mnemonic or didactic poetry through revelation or contest, prophetic utterance and mythological invective or lampoon.⁶⁴ Similarly, Hermann Pálsson has distinguished two big groups: narrative verse and non-narrative verse poems. Within the narrative poems he includes the following subcategories: encomiastic verse (*lofkvæði*), memorial verse (*erfíkvæði*), defamatory verse (*níðvísur*), heroic verse (*hetjukvæði*) and mythological verse

⁶⁰ As claimed by Gunnell following the orthographical and palaeographical studies by Gustav Lindblad and stylistic observations by Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Powell. See Lindblad, *Studier*, pp. 62-8. Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Powell, *Corpus Poeticum Boreale*, I, pp. lxxvii and 100-23.

⁶¹ As noted by Noreen in *Studier*, III, pp. 28-32 with regard to *Sigrdrífumál*. This is also maintained by Gunnell in *The Origins*, p. 189.

⁶² See Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Íslenzkar bókmenntir*, pp. 200-20. This classification has been held by Terry Gunnell too in *The Origins*, pp. 185-186.

⁶³ See Heusler, *Die altgermanische Dichtung*, pp. 108-13.

⁶⁴ See Klingenberg, *Types of Eddic*, pp. 134-64.

(*goðakvæði*); the non-narrative poems comprise persona lyric (*einkaljód*) and didactic poems (*fræðiljóð*), where he counts primarily *Hávamál*, *Hugsvinnsmál* and *Sigrdrífumál*, but also *Málsháttakvæði*, *Rúnakvæði*, the *pulur*, the *Heiðreks gátur* and *Bersöglisvísur* of Sighvatur.⁶⁵ Among the main three wisdom poems considered by Hermann Pálsson, however, only *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál* are considered pre-Christian compositions, since *Hugsvinnsmál* is essentially an Old Icelandic translation of the Latin proverb collection *Disticha Catonis*.

In fact, possibly due to the universal character of the principles exposed in this poetry, essentially centred on common sense, a strong debate on the influence from foreign traditions has arisen among scholars leading to diverse and adventurous suggestions. *Hávamál*, the most complex and multifaceted of the Eddic poems, has been subject to multiple speculations, and particularly its first section. Among the non-Germanic influences suggested so far,⁶⁶ Rolf Pipping and Klaus von See have traced some advices back to Seneca, Nore Hagman claimed parallels with *Ecclesiasticus*,⁶⁷ Regis Boyer detected echoes from the Bible, specifically in *Proverbs* and *Ecclesiastes*,⁶⁸ also from the Bible, Samuel Singer found coincidences in *Isaiah* and *Jeremiah*,⁶⁹ Roland Köhne traced some advice back to Cicero's *De Amicitia*,⁷⁰ etc. But the approach that has been most debated is perhaps that of Klaus von See, who points at *Disticha Catonis* and its influence on the whole genre of *Spruchdichtung* based on thematic and linguistic evidence,⁷¹ which has been systematically debated and rejected by many scholars. Given the numerous reactions to it, both Von See's theory and the discussion around it will be addressed more extensively in Chapter 3.3.1.

For the purpose of this dissertation, however, depicting possible foreign influences is not as crucial as acknowledging the various similarities between *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál*. Both poems are the major sources for gnomic knowledge, runic knowledge and to some extent magical knowledge, three types that find their respective section in the poems clearly separate from each other. Nevertheless, the poems present some differences in both content and structure. The main gnomic portions of *Hávamál*, *Gestapátr* and *Loddfáfnismál* are considerably larger than those of *Sigrdrífumál*. In

⁶⁵ Hermann Pálsson, *Towards*, pp. 59-65.

⁶⁶ The multiple theories on the influence of foreign works on *Hávamál* are summarised in Evans (*Hávamál*, p. 15), Harris (*Eddic Poetry*, p. 110) and Larrington (*Hávamál and Sources*).

⁶⁷ See Hagman, 'Kring några motiv i Hávamál' (1957).

⁶⁸ See Boyer, *La vie religieuse en Islande* (1972).

⁶⁹ See Singer, *Sprichwörter des Mittelalters* (1944-47).

⁷⁰ See Köhne, 'Zur Mittelalterlichkeit der eddischen Spruchdichtung' (1983).

⁷¹ See von See, *Disticha Catonis und Hávamál*, pp. 1-18.

addition, *Hávamál* is evidently formed by more differentiated units, among which we can pinpoint at least five, often titled in Icelandic *Gestapáttir* (1-79), *Dæmi Óðins* (80-110), *Loddfáfnismál* (111-137), *Rúnatal* (138-146) and *Ljóðatal* (147-164). Similar claims have been put forward about *Sigrdrífumál*, which could also be considered as a sequence of at least three different poems, here titled *The First Rune Speech* (1-13), *The Second Rune Speech* (14-19) and *The Gnostic Speech* (20-37).⁷² In order to show this in more detail, the theories regarding the structure and composition of both poems are further discussed in Chapter 3.3 in order to understand the way in which they came to be and gather all the kinds of knowledge they embody.

In conclusion, the occurrence of gnomic elements is not the only element that should be considered wisdom in Old Norse-Icelandic literature. Eddic poetry is rich in monologues, dialogues and knowledge contests that provide information on many subjects, after which different criteria such as metre, style and data can be established to include or exclude poems from the group of Eddic wisdom poetry. Furthermore, even though they include gnomic knowledge in a more traditional style, it is the combination of different subjects found in *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál* that makes them unique in the Eddic corpus, which brings a series of questions about their origin, content and composition, but also about the relationship between them once regarded as complete compositions. Despite the infeasibility of dating Eddic poetry, the pre-Christian origin of *Hávamál* is widely acknowledged beyond the claims on Latin influence, whereas *Sigrdrífumál* has been systematically excluded from the pre-Christian heroic poems. Finally, both poems are classified within non-narrative (enumerative) and monologue compositions and share a similar structure containing many types of knowledge while leaving the narrative aside.

2.2 Different kinds of knowledge

The nature of Eddic poetry makes it one of the most interesting medieval compilations preserved, on the one hand, and a source of one of the most diverse and complex contents, on the other. It can be clearly noticed how valuable the information transmitted along its different parts was for those who preserved it, and also how the

⁷² McKinnell, *Meeting the Other*, p. 210. It also noted that the summary provided in *Völsunga saga* adds no more probable sections.

different kinds of information come into sight either intermingled or set apart depending on the composition. *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál* at the same time vehicles of mythic (heroic and mythological), esoteric (runic) and ethical knowledge, and such qualities might have been noticed by any reasonable mind given the structural, stylistic and thematic differences between them. Even if the perception varies through different audiences and their cognitive backgrounds and conditions, every type of information has its own characteristics and a differentiated purpose before it can expect any overall purpose to be perceived. To support this idea it is then necessary to review some terminological and epistemological concepts around common sense, learning, knowledge and wisdom in Old Icelandic. Of course, modern scientific categorisation is not intended to fit traditional societies; hence the aim of this section is to discuss the natural differentiation between kinds or levels in knowledge and wisdom.

2.2.1 Terminological definitions

Following Hermann Pálsson's label for wisdom poetry, *fræðiljóð*, we could argue that gnomic poems are basically 'verses of knowledge' in a very universal sense. The dictionaries by Baetke, Fritzner, Zoëga and Cleasby-Vigfússon are quite congruent regarding the following terms: the noun *fræði* denotes 'knowledge, learning and lore', but also 'magical knowledge', such as 'charms or spells', and eventually comes to include the Christian learning as well. Consistently, the adjective *fróðr* is translated as someone 'knowing, learned or well-informed', not precisely 'wise' by having good sense or common sense.⁷³ This seems to establish one kind of knowledge, as *fræði* is not used to mean 'common sense' in general, a differentiation that seems to have occurred to some extent in people's conceptions or at least in the medieval scribes' semantic understanding.

Otherwise, we would have to acknowledge that our terminological attempt to make sense, as observed for instance in Baetke, Zoëga, Cleasby and Vigfússon, has been influenced by our learned culture. The adjective *snotr*⁷⁴ is considerably frequent to

⁷³ For instance, Ari Þorgilsson, the well-known author of the *Íslendingabók*, is also called Ari *hinn fróði*, which has been translated either as 'Ari the wise' and 'Ari the learned'. From a natural definition, and from Zoëga's consistent point of view regarding this term, 'learned' would be an adjective more suitable for someone who knows many things.

⁷⁴ *æva til snotr sé (Hávamál st. 54, 55, 56)*

denote a wise person in *Hávamál*, and it is also consistently translated exclusively as ‘wise’. A synonym to *snotr* in *Hávamál* is *horskr*,⁷⁵ also translated as wise; however, *fróðr*⁷⁶ is also common in the poem apparently as equivalent to *snotr* and *horskr*. In any case, there is no ambiguity in both *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál* as to the fact that there is something different from *fræði* often called *mannvit*,⁷⁷ ‘man-wit’, translated as ‘understanding’ and more commonly as ‘common sense’. In the same semantic sphere appears the noun *speki*,⁷⁸ adjective *spakr*, whose equivalent is in effect ‘wisdom’ in the sense of understanding rather than the sole possession or acquisition of specific learning, close to *fræði* but different from it at the same time.

Although it would be ultimately unrealistic to ascertain an unequivocal semantic hierarchy in everyday speech and even in the use of language of learned writing, such a terminological abundance can indeed be regarded as an evidence of the importance this subject had for the society which preserved it. Larrington has already noted that the numerous terms –including *Hávamál*’s *fróðr*, *snotr*, *horskr*, *hugalt*, *vitandi*, *spakr* and *kudr*– traditionally associated with wisdom poetry, evidence ‘the interest in the mind and psychological attributes that predate the importation of classical theory with the coming of Christianity’.⁷⁹ Furthermore, the terminological base provided in *Skáldskaparmál*, in Snorri Sturluson’s *Edda*, suggests that the learned tradition in which he was imbued did not give much place to the older kinds of knowledge despite his concern on transmitting the core knowledge of the old lore. For this reason, magical and ritual knowledge was not really underlined for the most part, as Schorn has accurately observed, the connotations of wisdom might be even broader than Snorri realised. Snorri’s list is mostly focused on human rather than supernatural wisdom, though some of his terms could also have magical or ritual associations.⁸⁰ In any case, the literate Christian society predominant in that time did not suppress many of those ritual and magical references in Eddic poetry, which facilitates a more thorough terminological map regarding knowledge and wisdom conceptualizations.

⁷⁵ *sá er vill heitinn horscr* (*Hávamál* st. 63)

⁷⁶ *Fróðr sá þycciz, er fregna kann* (*Hávamál* st. 28)

⁷⁷ *mál oc manvit gefit ocr mærom tveim* (*Sigrdrífumál* st. 4)

⁷⁸ *Hann segir oc biðr hana kenna sér speki* (*Sigrdrífumál* st. 4)

⁷⁹ According to Larrington, for instance, *Hugsvinnsmál* clearly reveals a Christian lexis that is not found in *Hávamál*, which contradicts the theories that place *Disticha Catonis* and *Hugsvinnsmál* as an influence on *Hávamál*. See Larrington, *A Store*, p. 9.

⁸⁰ Schorn, *How Can*, p. 17.

2.2.2 Theoretical definitions

It is clear that knowledge and understanding are immanent to literature considered as an instrument intended to communicate ideas. From an epistemological viewpoint, however, there is the question why literary devices are necessary to discover or formulate knowledge, when such knowledge is propositional and can be paraphrased faithfully, i.e. all literary statements can be formulated in non-literary form. According to Paisly Livingston, an answer to this has often been that literature reveals itself as an ‘indispensable means of realizing various other epistemically valuable results’, one of them being the recreation of experience or knowledge by acquaintance.⁸¹ However, this modern approach assumes a clear separation between science, philosophy and literature, which in all likelihood was not so perceptible in a medieval Scandinavia imbued in a religious doctrine and a transition between the cognitive structures of orality and literacy.

To a certain extent, it seems that knowledge comes as an organic process of recollection for medieval Scandinavians, but not out of the mind itself, in the sense it was thought by Socrates and Plato. What it is true or worth remembering is not inside the mind waiting to be brought to consciousness, it is rather acquired through experience and learning, something that cannot be reached unless it is shared or revealed. In this sense, pre-Christian Scandinavians are closer to the appreciation of the mind made by Aristotle, who claimed that we must perceive first and only then we can apprehend, experience or learn in order to be able to remember.⁸² Hence we can assert that even those poems where the dialogue constitutes a wisdom contest are empirical for all intents and purposes, far from a dialectical acquisition of knowledge in strict sense. Nonetheless, even if it is not possible to consider all pre-Christian traditions as a system or philosophy as in Ancient Greece, practical knowledge is learned and practiced in society in order to fulfil essential needs (e.g. building, seafaring, etc.), to entertain (e.g. sports, music, etc.), or to teach (poems, songs, etc.), and above all, common sense, mostly derived from experience within that society, permeates human life in a binding process of self-adaptation to existence and constitutes itself a sort of natural philosophy. Based upon epistemological grounds, common sense could even be regarded as a sort of logical, natural philosophy, as Roderick Crisholm suggests:

⁸¹ Livingston, *Literature and Knowledge*, p. 497.

⁸² See Coleman (1992, 5-38) for a philosophical survey on the concept of memory and learning in Antiquity.

It is characteristic of ‘commonsensism’, as an alternative philosophical tradition, to assume that we do know, pretty much, those things we think we know, and having identified this knowledge, to trace it back to its sources and formulate criteria that will set it off from things we do not know.⁸³

Common sense functions then as a general overview of the matters that touch upon human universal living circumstances, a sort of link between data and reality that becomes a truth that does not really require being further demonstrated. We can actually notice that, even if there is no exact term for philosophy in Old Icelandic,⁸⁴ there might have been a general idea of *veraldarvitringr*, a man wise in the matters of the world, as opposed to any particular subject or human activity, for instance law, hence *lögvitringr*. In fact, this *veraldarvitringr* is also expected to be a traveller who has acquired his wisdom by wandering far and wide, just like the ‘*ek*’ at the very start of *Hávamál* who gives advice on this matter himself, almost certainly relying on his own experience:

Sá einn veit, er víða ratar
oc hefir fiold um farið,
hverio geði stýrir gumna hverr,
sá er vitandi er vitz.
(*Hávamál* st. 18)

This notion is also confirmed by the term *heimskr*, a term for ‘fool’ that clearly refers to staying home (*heima*). Sigurður Nordal, mainly focused on pre-Christian Scandinavians and saga literature, determined that Old Norse belief cannot be considered a philosophical system,⁸⁵ yet he pointed at a some ethical values characterised by the opposition of honour and shame and eventually sagacity and foolishness. In Nordal’s terms, the adventurous Viking praised those heroic values acquired through varied experiences, in a sort of vital *élan*, which is the only way to get new ambitions and

⁸³ Crisholm, *The Foundations*, p. 113.

⁸⁴ As noted by Cleasby and Vigfússon, the Icelandic word for philosophy, *heimspeki*, was formed in the sixteenth century from the German *Welt-Weisheit* (‘world wisdom’).

⁸⁵ In his work *Íslensk menning* (1942) Nordal stated that Scandinavian fatalism does not constitute a philosophical system but the ‘explanation of existence or that renunciation of an understanding of existence’. Moreover, he finds the ideal man in the *drengur*, a high-minded person (hero), and agrees with the idea of preservation of honor as the highest value among the pagan.

wisdom, because *heimskr* is he who stays home not going into the world to perform big deeds and fulfil his destiny, where Egill Skallagrímsson works as an archetype.⁸⁶

Even though his analysis does not deal with the concept of wisdom or knowledge acquisition itself, Nordal believed that Old Norse-Icelandic literature shows the metaphysical and ethical foundations of the Norse people, claiming that ‘no sophisticated civilization such as that attested by Old Norse-Icelandic literature has ever developed in any nation without some kind of transcendental spiritual experience’.⁸⁷ Such a metaphysical search was represented, according to Nordal, in the *ragnarök*, the fate of the gods, which illustrates one of the cornerstones of Norse pagan thought: fatalism. Fatalism is indeed a disposition noticed in a number of Eddic poems apart from *Völuspá*, regarded by Nordal as ‘the highest poetic creation in the Poetic Edda’,⁸⁸ for instance, *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Grimnismál* and *Baldur’s draumar*, and of course in Snorri’s *Gylfaginning*.

Evidently, Nordal is not the only one who has viewed fatalism and heroism as metaphysical and ethical guiding principles reflected in the pre-Christian myths. It has been widely suggested that the accounts about the mythic gods and their relationships as well as the development of the mythic world from the creation through the end of it reveal the ontological preoccupations of the Scandinavian society and, to some extent, replicate the social structure and practices of that society at a particular stage of its history.⁸⁹ In addition, language –either oral or written– reflects the view and thinking of people in the form of syntactic structures and connotations. In fact, poetry seems to have been used since ancient times as a repository of primary collective knowledge expressed in symbolic units representing foundational and normative values. Mythical knowledge constitutes the world view of that society, their lore or ‘wisdom’. ‘Wisdom’ can work then as a term for a very comprehensive amount of knowledge, unlike any particular knowledge, which is the reason why ‘wisdom’ tends to be associated with the idea of ‘worldview’.⁹⁰

The natural difference between factual knowledge and wisdom has been stressed since Antiquity. Among the pre-Socratic philosophers, Democritus distinguished

⁸⁶ Nordal, *Icelandic Culture*, p. 119.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

⁸⁸ Nordal himself commented an edition of this poem in 1923, later revised in 1952.

⁸⁹ Clunies Ross, *The Conservation*, p. 122.

⁹⁰ David Naugle has noted that both Heidegger and Gadamer agreed on the original use of the term *Weltanschauung* (‘worldview’) in Kant, Goethe and A. Humboldt as the mere ‘contemplation of the world through the senses’. See Naugle, *Worldview*, p. 58.

between skill and wisdom, by which he meant that instruction is not always wisdom; on the contrary, man needs temperance (*sophrosyne*), i.e. discretion and control on one's desires, to achieve harmony and thus be wise.⁹¹ Within medieval scholastic philosophy, Saint Augustine preserved a difference between *sapientia*, defined as contemplation of eternal things, and *scientia*, as the right use of temporal things.⁹² This usual separation has remained through the technological advancement of the modern era, for instance during the scientific revolution, when the English philosopher Francis Bacon classified knowledge in *The Advancement of Learning* (1605) in two main groups: natural and civil, but at the same time quoted the adage 'there is no great concurrence between learning and wisdom' suggesting that wisdom must reflect a superior –or at least more comprehensive– kind of knowledge.

Of course, this separation does not automatically constitute an influence on Eddic poetry directly from Democritus or Saint Augustine, but illustrates the natural character of such a partition and/or stratification. We can even attest that the Latin *sapientia*, understood here as sapience or wisdom, later finds its Old Icelandic translation in *speki*, whereas *scientia*, denoting here factual knowledge or learning, finds it in *fræði*.⁹³ From this point of view, the most comprehensive level of knowledge would be the common sense or ethical wisdom, given that it is not enough to gain information on many subjects, one must also know how to profit from them by keeping certain discernment and behaviour. This assumption is not unequivocal in Eddic poetry, but there are certain passages suggesting that it is not enough to seem wise (*þykkja fróðr*), in order to be wise one must demonstrate it with actions and especially in connection with others:

Ósnotr maðr þicciz alt vita,
 ef hann á sér í vá vero;
 hitki hann veit, hvat hann scal við qveða
 ef hans freista firar.
 (*Hávamál* st. 26)

⁹¹ See Nill, *Morality and Self-Interest*, p. 85.

⁹² See Saint Augustine, *On the Trinity* and Hoitenga, *Faith and Reason*, p. 90-1.

⁹³ Also noticed in Cleasby and Vigfússon's definition for both terms.

He who is ‘unwise’ (*ósnotr*) by thinking to know everything can only be considered ‘wise’ if he is able to answer and ask in an appropriate way, otherwise he should stay silent so that the others never notice he does not know anything, as stressed in the following strophe of the poem. Beyond this factual authentication, the structural division between common sense and other kinds of knowledge in the poem makes clear that there is also an epistemological difference between knowing, as the capacity to remember things, on the one hand, and understanding, which has more to do with the possible implication and treatment we bestow upon such things, on the other. In this sense, the American philosopher Linda Zagzebski has noted that the preference for learning instead of understanding is characteristic of modernity unlike ancient and medieval practices.⁹⁴ Taking this advice into account, it is possible to draw a parallel in the medieval Scandinavian thinking. Opposed –or rather complementary– to plain learning or *fræði*, it seems that *speki* covers the notion of understanding in Eddic wisdom poetry, yet it is sometimes ambiguous when it comes to include prophetic wisdom. More accurately, it seems that *mannvit*, the good sense through the knowledge of human things, shows how valuable the individual’s capacity of understanding is over the sheer ownership or acquisition of information, as openly illustrated in *Hávamál*:

Sá er sæll er sjálfir um á
 lof ok vit, meðan lifir;
 því at ill ráð hefr maðr oft þegit
 annars brjóstum ór.
 (*Hávamál* st. 9)

Moreover, good sense or individual understanding is praised over the advice of others, as it can often be a misleading or bad advice (*ill ráð*). Needless to say, this logical difference between the acquired data and the good sense that governs all we know and think is a central aspect of human consciousness in any society or historical period; hence we can suggest that every society tends to regard wisdom as a multiple-sourced state of mind. As discussed in Chapter 4, the superior kind of wisdom that Óðinn –and eventually Sigurðr– acquires and dispenses in his role of all-wise god is not only legitimated by his allegorical acquisition of elements but in the experience he goes

⁹⁴ Zagzebski, *Linda Zagzebski*, p. 210.

through in order to acquire it, which legitimates his ownership of that wisdom. What it is not really clear is whether common sense is a prerequisite for such deeds and acquisitions or a result of them. In any case, common sense is an element in that comprehensive wisdom and not necessarily an ethical loan from other traditions. It is remarkable, however, how little mythological and esoteric knowledge is intertwined –at least conceptually– in the ethic advice provided by Óðinn, as it is the segmented structure where the different kinds of knowledge are presented. Therefore, in order to understand the implications of these different kinds of knowledge it is pertinent to know how these poems came to be in the only version we know them.

3. Composition of Eddic wisdom poetry

The earlier Christianization of continental Europe and England undeniably led to a longer exposure and a direct influence on indigenous lore than on its Old Norse counterpart.⁹⁵ In Iceland, on the contrary, the preservation of pagan knowledge might be explained by the fact that Christianity was adopted at a later time –in 1000 AD according to *Íslendingabók*– and additionally many priests were dependant on the chieftains or related to them and, which turned them unable to pursue a strict catholic policy to be in opposition to the cultural claims of the chieftains.⁹⁶ Therefore, Eddic poetry has been regarded above all as a solid body of pagan belief that survived for centuries in the collective memory of the Norse peoples –and other Germanic peoples– before the introduction of Christian literacy. Such theories, however, have opened a long-lasting discussion on the authenticity of mythical accounts and their exact European origin, because pre-Christian Norse pagan myths were basically transmitted in writing by Icelandic Christians.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Although pagan lore was still alive in Bede's time –seventh and eight centuries–, the early arrival of Christianity and the absence of writing have been suggested as the main reasons for its suppression. According to Peter Blair, 'the pagan background could only be allowed to survive if, as in *Beowulf*, it had first been steeped in Christianity'. In a similar way, scarce written records have remained from German pagan lore. Apart from *Hildebrandslied* and *Merseburger Zaubersprüche*, no other compositions offer pagan references and after conversion the Christian message was entirely preserved and therefore the alleged 'Germanisation of Christianity' never existed. See Blair, *The World Of Bede*, p. 283 and Boesch, *German Literature*, p. 4.

⁹⁶ Lönnroth, *The Founding of Miðgarðr*, p. 21.

⁹⁷ See Clunies Ross, *The Conservation and Reinterpretation of Myth*, for an overview of the preservation and reinterpretation of Old Norse myth in medieval Icelandic literature.

After Jacob Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie* (1825), Andreas Heusler insistently argued on the importance of Eddic poetry as a traditional heritage from Germanic antiquity in *Heimat und Alter der eddischen Gedichte* (1906). Most of these views, however, have been discarded by modern scholars.⁹⁸ In fact, this *Freiproza* (free-prose) approach was largely overcome by the *Buchproza* (book-prose) approach, which claimed a literary (Icelandic) influence and composition rather than a long-lasting process of oral transmission.⁹⁹ Amid the search for Icelandic independence and contrasting Finnur Jónsson's unromantic views, Siguður Nordal claimed that Eddic poetry, the oldest form of literature preserved in Iceland, was a distinctive component of Icelandic culture rather than a sheer pan-Germanic or even Scandinavian creation.¹⁰⁰ Although Nordal admitted that not all the literature preserved in Iceland is of purely Icelandic origin,¹⁰¹ he believed that the fact that it was preserved and written down in Iceland might have given it a singular character and subsequently boosted the production of native Icelandic poetry and prose.

Even though Nordal's theories overemphasise somewhat idealised values, it has been widely admitted that the literary role of scribes must have had an influence on the final manuscript product. More recently and perhaps with some degree of nationalistic motivations, other Icelandic scholars have defended similar views toward the Icelandic influence. Jónas Kristjánsson believed that Eddic poetry, and in particular the younger poems, must be viewed in the light of the Icelandic culture of the time, since they are 'Icelandic versions of ancient poems'.¹⁰² Similarly, Vésteinn Ólason has stressed that even if Eddic poetry shares many features with traditional poetry from other areas and periods, some of the poems might have been directly composed in writing from the poet's dictation or at least composed in a milieu where the idea of a verbally fixed text influenced the creation and preservation of texts showing literary influences.¹⁰³ In this sense, for the purpose of understanding how knowledge is conveyed in Eddic poetry is

⁹⁸ See Harris, *Eddic Poetry as Oral Poetry*, pp. 210-42.

⁹⁹ In *Über die Eddalieder. Heimat, Alter, Character* (1871), the Danish scholar Edwin Jentsen claimed that the preservation of Eddic poetry had more to do with a literary period in Iceland (twelfth and thirteenth centuries) than with a South Scandinavian middle Iron Age.

¹⁰⁰ Nordal praised both *Eddukvæði* (Eddic poetry) and *Íslendingasögur* (sagas of early Icelanders) over the skaldic poetry and other kinds of sagas emphasizing, at the same time, the fact that it was the Icelandic civilization the only one that preserved this old lore, a civilization that he believed had its golden age from 930 to 1030, during the so-called *Söguöld* ('Saga Age'), and in a broader sense, under the Commonwealth (930-1262). See Nordal

¹⁰¹ Neither the Eddic poetry nor the skaldic poetry was originally developed in Iceland.

¹⁰² Jónas Kristjánsson, *Stages*, p. 158.

¹⁰³ Vésteinn Ólason, *Heusler and the Dating*, p. 170.

essential to bear in mind that the medieval vernacular poetry does not originate in two different worlds, either literary or oral, but through a long-lasting interplay between these different modes of creation.¹⁰⁴

The anonymous Eddic poems have been the main source for Norse mythological knowledge since the Middle Ages, later retransmitted in Iceland by Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* (c. 1220) and in Denmark by Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum* (c. 1200), and a direct influence on the skaldic poetry contained in many sagas of the early Icelanders (*íslendingasögur*) as well as in the kings' sagas (*konungasögur*). In fact, traces of Eddic verse have been detected in skaldic poetry, which suggests acquaintance with poems such as *Hávamál*, *Völuspá* and *Fáfnismál* already in the tenth and eleventh centuries.¹⁰⁵ The accounts contained in the main section dedicated to pagan myth in *Snorra Edda*, *Gylfaginning*, differ from the accounts available in the *Codex Regius* and *AM 748 I 4to*, and despite being the first recorded and most comprehensive attempt of preserving pagan knowledge, there is still some speculation regarding the truthfulness of the myths exposed by Snorri and/or his collaborators, and it is very likely that some of the myths were actually reinterpreted or even reconstructed.¹⁰⁶ Despite it all, Snorri's retelling is highly valuable given that the principal basis for writing his *Edda* incorporated oral sources, some of which were subsequently written down in the *Codex Regius*, and the historical texts available at the time.

The *Codex Regius* was also a compilation of diverse sources and its structure has been considered as the result of an ordering mind.¹⁰⁷ As previously suggested by Finnur Jónsson, there was an 'idea' behind the construction of the manuscript in spite of the major difficulties to establish a mind behind the whole composition.¹⁰⁸ Hence there are at least two steps in the process of composing the *Codex Regius*. In a first stage the poems were selected for inclusion on the basis of the editor's plan and criteria, and then the content was progressively organised according to a plan to convey a message, and it is precisely here where the explanatory or linking prose passages between poems or

¹⁰⁴ Vésteinn Ólason, *The Poetic Edda*, p. 252.

¹⁰⁵ As noted by Gade in *Poetry and its Changing Importance*, Neckel and Kuhn (1962) found parallels in *Hákonarmál*, *Þorfinnsdrápa* and *Haraldsdrápa* respectively.

¹⁰⁶ See Faulkes, *Sources of Skáldskaparmál*.

¹⁰⁷ Most of these philological concerns have been reviewed by Joseph Harris, who points at the debate on whether the *Codex Regius* was composed or compiled as a single book from the beginning or not, as well as the probable influence from Snorri's work on the writing of the *Codex Regius*. Harris, See Harris, *Eddic Poetry*, p. 78.

¹⁰⁸ This idea popularised by Finnur Jónsson in *Eddadigtenes samling*, pp. 223-5, was also supported by scholars such as Elias Wessén in *Den isländska eddadiktningen*, pp. 3-4, and Hans Klingenberg in *Edda*, pp. 37-41.

within them became necessary.¹⁰⁹ Mythological poems follow a certain thematic pattern defined, for instance, by the leading role of the god Óðinn, in the first part, and Þórr in the following section. In a similar fashion to the mythological poems, the heroic lays clearly distinguish between the accounts about Helgi Hundingsbani, Sigurðr *fáfnisbani* and the fall of the Burgundians, including the death of Hamðir and Sörlí.

Hávamál, in particular, provides a scarcely cohesive structure through its different parts, probably put together following this general idea of an all-in-one wisdom composition, a product rather uncommon in Eddic poetry and in wisdom literature in general. This multilayer structure also occurs in *Sigrdrífumál* but also in *Reginismál*, *Fáfnismál* and *Sigrdrífumál* taken as a continuum. However, such a lack of structure is characteristic of most wisdom poetry. As observed by David Ashurst following Nicholas Howe's *The Old English Catalogue Poems* (1985), works of catalogue nature such as wisdom poems are often seen as inorganic and bad ordered, which has been a major issue in the appreciation of the genre. Nevertheless, Ashurst claims that for instance *The Rune Poem* is a poem that despite being apparently not well structured is determined by the heterogeneous nature of the rune names that contains, and thus its unity is provided by the traditional sequence of the runic characters.¹¹⁰ Yet the catalogue nature is only a partial explanation for *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál*, since it might cover the rune and charm listings but not the complex structure of mythic accounts and intertwined ethical precepts. On the other hand, it is important to acknowledge the variations that emerge while putting an oral composition in writing, since the agglutination and resulting catalogue form has different characteristics in an oral tradition and in a written milieu.

3.1 Oral Tradition

In spite of the widely accepted preference for a text-focused approach toward Eddic poetry, given that such is the only source we can have access to, it is generally assumed throughout this work that Eddic poetry was mostly composed after sources rooted in a pre-literate society. Therefore, even if the only creation we can deal with is a group of thirteen-century manuscripts and some more recent material, the study of Eddic poems goes far beyond literature and any attempt of clarifying is bound to deal with it having

¹⁰⁹ Vésteinn Ólason, *The Poetic Edda*, pp. 231-2.

¹¹⁰ Ashurst, *Old English*, p. 129.

in mind orality and performance.¹¹¹ What is more, even if they were completely composed in writing, the medieval society in which they were produced was still in a transitional process between orality and literacy. Consequently, it seems to me that oral theory is unavoidable when it comes to medieval literature and particularly in the case of anonymous lays such as Eddic poems, either mythological or heroic, as it also addresses philological concerns such as composition, structure and motifs.

Largely developed after the seminal works by Milman Parry (early 1930s), comprehensively continued and settled in *The Singer of Tales* (1960) by his assistant Albert Lord, the oral-formulaic theory was originally defined around Homeric epic and twentieth-century Serbo-Croatian traditional singers, evidencing their oral origins and preservation as ‘oral literature’ and rejecting the views on textual literature as the sole possible object of study. Aware of certain patterns in a sort of repetition system, Parry originally defined a ‘formula’ as ‘a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea’.¹¹² Lord continued this idea and concluded that the only purpose of formulas and groups of formulas of any size is to provide a means for telling a story in song or verse. Moreover, and in close relation with the idea of ‘formula’, Lord defined a ‘theme’ as ‘a group of ideas regularly used in telling a tale in the formulaic style of traditional song’, which means that there is no need for a fixed set of works, but a grouping of ideas.¹¹³ In conclusion, an ‘oral text’ is was identified by the presence of clearly demonstrable formulas, while a ‘literary text’ shows a predominance of non-formulaic expressions, and ultimately the presence of non-formulaic expressions in an oral composition evidences literary style influence, and conversely, formulas in a ‘literary text’ imply its oral origin.¹¹⁴

The theory was also based on the idea of flexibility or variability in oral transmission, as there is no need to use the same words every time an idea is expressed, but alternatives that have been developed over generations. Lord argues that the concept of variability is present in varying degrees in all types of oral discourse, as it is inherent in sound itself.¹¹⁵ Within recent scholarship, Lord’s theory has been equally supported and criticised, but the notion of variability is widely accepted.¹¹⁶ Walter Ong, critic

¹¹¹ Finnegan, *Oral poetry*, p. 17.

¹¹² As quoted in Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, p. 30.

¹¹³ Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, pp. 68-9.

¹¹⁴ Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, p. 130.

¹¹⁵ Lord, *The Merging*, p. 20.

¹¹⁶ For instance, Minna Skafte Jensen maintains that the theory has been confirmed without exception in four decades of fieldwork (including her work about the Indian and Egyptian traditions) despite the

about some of Lord's theories, claimed that even in cultures which know and depend on writing but still keep contact with 'pristine' orality, ritual utterance is not typically verbatim.¹¹⁷ In a similar way, Ruth Finnegan considers that no version is more authentic, since every performance is unique and original with its own validity.¹¹⁸

In a general survey, Gísli Sigurðsson concluded that the oral-formulaic theory is a useful tool to explain Old Icelandic tradition and it should not be discarded even if it does not apply exactly in the same fashion as in other traditions, clearly addressing the multiple critics about the applicability of this theory.¹¹⁹ In fact, the theory developed by Parry and Lord has not been absent in recent Old Norse scholarship, though sometimes endorsed or rejected in a very rigid manner.¹²⁰ Scott Mellor recently applied the oral-formulaic theory to ten Eddic poems in strict observance of Lord's categories in order to find evidence for actual composition during live performance, which requires a high percentage of formulas in order to be demonstrated, yet he concluded that there is only about twenty percent of these structures contained in the *Codex Regius*, much less than what Parry and Lord found in Greek and South Slavic material.¹²¹ Even so, Paul Acker has suggested that formulas do not necessarily have to arise amid rapid improvisation, arguing that 'stock formulas can appeal to poets working under many sorts of conditions',¹²² after which we could suggest that it is not adequate to expect the same structures found in other periods or traditions while analysing oral formulae in Icelandic compositions.

It is precisely Acker who offers a brief but comprehensive survey about the development of oral theory and its relation with Old Germanic literature and especially Old Icelandic literature.¹²³ In reality, it was Robert Kellogg who first compiled a formulaic concordance of Eddic poetry,¹²⁴ and soon after this Paul Taylor found a

general reluctance to consider the transmission of oral epic of considerable length. See Jensen, *The Oral-Formulaic Theory*, p. 49-50.

¹¹⁷ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 65.

¹¹⁸ Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, p. 65.

¹¹⁹ Gísli Sigurðsson, *Orality and literacy*, p. 290.

¹²⁰ For instance, Alaric Hall has claimed that orality and literacy should be regarded as more similar cognitive means of communication than usually thought, concluding that 'the orality-literacy axis has to some extent facilitated the perpetuation of an earlier contrast between primitivity and modernity'. However, Hall apparently discards the theories about the oral-written continuum that reject his criticism, which, in turn, seems to be mainly based on the scope of the oral-formulaic theory. See Alaric Hall, *The Orality of a Silent Age*, p. 284.

¹²¹ Mellor, *Analyzing Ten Poems*, pp. 152-3.

¹²² Acker, *Revising Oral Theory*, p. 86.

¹²³ See Acker, *Revising Oral Theory*, pp. 86-108.

¹²⁴ See Kellogg, *A Concordance of Eddic Poetry* (1958).

significant proportion of formulas in Eddic poetry after an analysis of *Völundarkviða*.¹²⁵ Kellogg applied the theory to Old Icelandic prose compositions and concluded that they are uniform and formulaic, attributing their coincidences to orality rather than literary causes, yet he underlined that obscure Eddic compositions must be explained by a corrupt transmission into the manuscript form.¹²⁶ Quite the opposite, Lönnroth has rejected any oral improvisation in Eddic poetry by arguing that formulas are not as decisive in Eddic poetry as they are in other epic traditions, and it is more likely that formulas work as refrains in a very literary fashion, given that Eddic poetry is closer to the ballad than to the epic,¹²⁷ and suggested that performance occurred in connection with *prosimetrum* so that only some especially dramatic speeches and dialogues were highlighted in verse form.¹²⁸ Without a doubt, Kellogg and Lönnroth represent the old-school extreme positions around the applicability of oral theory described in the beginning of this chapter, which essentially increased the tension between sheer orality and literacy defended by Parry and Lord.

Nonetheless, Finnegan observed that oralness is a much more complicated matter than usually admitted and consequently defines three ways in which a poem can be called oral: (1) in terms of its composition, (2) in terms of its performance and (3) in terms of its mode of transmission.¹²⁹ Unlike Lord and his followers, Finnegan believes that composition-in-performance is not the only kind of oral composition, although oral composition is relative, as it is difficult to demonstrate whether it was composed over a long or a short period. Similarly, the transmission of oral poetry offers multiple problems that have been studied from three approaches: (1) the romantic view of ancient communal origins, (2) the theory of oral transmission as memorization and (3) the theory of transmission as a process of recreation, the latter in line with the oral-formulaic theory.¹³⁰ Performance, on the other hand, is viewed as a less speculative mark, though it entails the problem of a written composition that is performed orally,

¹²⁵ See Taylor, *Old Norse Heroic Poetry* (1961).

¹²⁶ Kellogg, *The Nature*, p. 23.

¹²⁷ Lönnroth, *Hjálmar's*, p. 2.

¹²⁸ An assumption mainly based on *Norna-Gests þátr* and the *fornaldarsögur*. See Lönnroth, *Hjálmar's*, p. 6, and *The Old Norse Analogue*, pp. 76-9. Such theories, however, did not reject an earlier period of authentically improvised performance of Eddic poetry. From that point, Kellogg defended his view about improvisational compositions in close relation with Lord's studies about Serbo-Croatian folk poems against Lönnroth and other scholars such as Joseph Harris and Jónas Kristjánsson, who still maintain that Eddic poetry is not comparable to the Serbo-Croatian traditional poems. See Kellogg, *The Prehistory*, p. 190, Harris, *Eddic Poetry as Oral Poetry*, p. 213, and Jónas Kristjánsson, *Stages*, p. 202.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹³⁰ Lord, *The Singer*, p. 139.

which is solved by considering as oral poetry any performative poetry regardless of the lacking evidence about its actual oral composition.

Recent approaches toward Eddic poetry tend to assume its oral character under these widened criteria, given that especially the dialogic poems offer strong evidence of performative activities, an assumption that often leads to the more speculative arena of myth and epic interpretation,¹³¹ issues that are further discussed in Chapter 4. Relevant here is to acknowledge the multiple features and degrees of orality against the narrow conceptions brought by the oral-formulaic theory. What is more, this suggests an interplay scenario where literacy and orality coexist along with each other, which is very likely to have happened in medieval Europe and particularly in Scandinavia, rising the question about the possible transitional character of medieval literature: neither purely oral nor entirely derived from a literate mind.

3.2 From oral knowledge to written knowledge

In the field of medieval literature, the oral-formulaic theory was introduced for the study of the Old English *Beowulf* by Albert Lord himself and subsequently developed by Francis P. Magoun, who performed the respective search for formulaic evidence and after exhaustive analysis concluded that the poem was indeed composed orally. Lord stressed that *Beowulf* contains themes that support his conclusion such as repeated assemblies with speeches, repetition of journeying and the repeated scenes of monster slaying.¹³² From this point view, such elements could easily suggest an extrapolation to several Eddic poems, further aided by the problematic aspects identified in *Beowulf* itself: the unity of the poem and the possible 'transitional' character of the text. It is possible to assume that some parts of the poem could have been sung separately, although the single-poem structure is the only one available for analysis, just as in Eddic poetry. The transitional character of the text, however, was strongly rejected by Lord as he believed that a text was only possible as a literary product and under no circumstances a blend of both oral and textual traditions. To support this, Lord argued that the size and variety of the corpus in a given tradition is a significant condition to

¹³¹ See Gunnell, *The Origins*, pp. 203-11.

¹³² Lord, *The Singer*, pp. 198-9.

prove the ‘transitional’ character of any composition, for instance in the Corpus of Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry, and thus it must be regarded as orally dictated.¹³³

Although quite reasonable, this argument does not seem enough to reject the possibility of intersections between oral and literate traditions. Additionally, it does not necessarily apply to the Old Norse-Icelandic Corpus by reason of its volume and variety. Lord believed that there was no transition period between the oral and the written, or between illiteracy and literacy, but a fixed text produced by a creative mind. What Lord was having in mind was that a composer of epic is not able to think in these two ways or combine them while composing.¹³⁴ In the same fashion, Kellogg ascertained that a transitional text consisting of a combination of oral and written composition is not a possibility ‘much as some Homerists, medievalists and others would like to believe in it’, and suggested that genuine oral performances and performances of written texts combined rather developed into a quasi-literary tradition,¹³⁵ a statement that Kellogg sees to have nuanced in more recent publications.¹³⁶

It is certainly adequate to argue that both ways are different enough so that they can be consciously mixed, yet to ascertain that this separation is total makes little sense in a milieu as the European Middle Ages where oral lore has not vanished at all and at the same time learned tradition fosters literature developments but literacy is still not wide-spread. It seems to me more appropriate to consider Eddic Poetry –and to some extent *Beowulf* too– as transitional compositions rather than sheer textual creations or oral transcriptions. In fact, there have been comprehensible reactions to Lord’s initial negative stance on transitional texts. In the 1970s Finnegan suggested the idea of a continuum between orality and literacy by arguing that detailed evidence shows that interaction between oral and written forms is extremely common, and thus writing does not automatically entail the extinction of oral literary forms.¹³⁷ Similarly and following previous ideas by István Hajnal,¹³⁸ Ong also challenged Lord’s assumption by

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

¹³⁵ Kellogg and Scholes, *The Nature of Narrative*, p. 31.

¹³⁶ Kellogg also suggested that a spectrum of possibilities existed between orality at one extreme and literacy at the other in northern Europe for several hundred years after the introduction of writing. Moreover, he acknowledged that writing must be gradually introduced into the oral culture so that the older, aristocratic epic synthesis does not collapse, which would leave unaccomplished the work of converting oral tradition into a new permanent medium. See Kellogg, *Literacy and Orality*, p. 90. and *The Prehistory of Eddic Poetry*, pp. 187-90.

¹³⁷ Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, p. 160.

¹³⁸ See Hajnal, *L’enseignement de l’écriture aux universités médiévales* (1954).

considering that medieval literature –interestingly not only epic but also learned Christian literature– is particularly intriguing in its relation to orality because of the pressures of literacy on the medieval psyche derived from the biblical text but also by the new mixture of orality and textuality in medieval academia.¹³⁹ But the central input in Ong’s work is that there is no way to fix discourse, even by writing or printing it, since putting an utterance into script can only interrupt and string out the discourse in time and space but not ‘fix’ it.¹⁴⁰

The transition between orality and literacy, considered as a sustained process rather than a break, brings consequences to the preservation of ‘oral literature’, yet the transitional character of a text might reflect features from both worlds. In fact, Iceland has been regarded as a particular case with no parallels elsewhere in Europe, as orality and literacy formed a unity that defies modern theories about the alleged incompatibility of both traditions.¹⁴¹ Else Mundal has accurately insisted that the introduction of literacy seems to have been an even more gradual process that initially enriched oral literature instead of suppressing it, given that Old Norse orality was quite healthy in the Middle Ages as attested by testimonies in Old Norse texts, ranging from the oral story-telling during the Icelandic *kvöldvaka* to the popularity of oral literature and oral performance among the upper strait of society.¹⁴² Hence Judy Quinn has agreed that a rich cultural tradition –including skaldic and Eddic poetry, mnemonic lists and genealogies, narrative *prosimetra* and oral sagas– preceded and accompanied the literary genres of medieval Scandinavia.¹⁴³ In fact, Judith Jesch maintains that skaldic verse should be regarded as a transitional channel and a form of proto-literacy, i.e. orality with some characteristics of literacy,¹⁴⁴ with preoccupations similar to those of medieval written genres (e.g. the chronicle, the charter, the peace treaty and the letter). To my mind, Eddic poetry also offers this interaction despite being composed anonymously and out of the court environment, not only because both forms of poetry lived together for centuries but also because both survived until literate times.

It is equally important to bear in mind that literacy remained largely restricted to few people until the thirteenth century. According to Gísli Pálsson, only ‘particular classes of men’, chieftains and the wealthiest farmers had access to literacy by the end

¹³⁹ Ong, *Text as Interpretation*, p. 157.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 148.

¹⁴¹ Wolf, *Vox intexta*, p. 83.

¹⁴² Mundal, *How did the Arrival*, pp. 180-1

¹⁴³ Quinn, *From Orality*, p. 31.

¹⁴⁴ See Jesch, *Skaldic Verse*, pp. 192-3 and 206-7.

of the Commonwealth period, and thus even prose compositions such as sagas were written for public performances, not for individual consumption.¹⁴⁵ Other scholars maintain that literacy might have been even more restricted, mainly to the clergy –given that the medieval aristocracy was military rather than literary–¹⁴⁶ or to administrative purposes, at least until the second half of the fourteenth century.¹⁴⁷ But one thing is that oral tradition was still functioning in medieval society and another very different to assume that such a tradition actually preserved accounts untouched. As Mundal observes, the Church not only introduced learned literature, liturgical texts and sermons but also legends, and the motifs from these legends enriched the oral culture. Of course, the introduction of literacy might have also caused the extinction of some genres such as the mourning songs called *grátr* and the ritual songs described by Adam of Bremen in his *Gesta Hammaburgensis*.¹⁴⁸ It is then reasonable to assume that performance was not really affected at this stage of the written-oral continuum, simply because the performer was not yet used to manuscripts and abbreviations and could not be fluent.¹⁴⁹ Of course, the transition between orality and textuality would eventually get more and more literate reaching what Gísli Sigurðsson compares with the folktales written down in a clearly literary style by the nineteenth-century romantic collectors in order to be enjoyed in silent reading altering the oral way of storytelling seeing which only sounded well in performance.¹⁵⁰

It is evidently impossible to skip six hundred years of literary development in the western world to apply this model to Old Icelandic literature, a model that could undoubtedly fit the composition of the Finnish *Kalevala* by Elias Lönnroth in the nineteenth century better than the composition of Eddic poetry.¹⁵¹ The fact is, however, that written versions of such poems in the thirteenth century suggest the attendance of an author and a certain degree of adaptation, i.e. there was a literary procedure involved regardless of how much the scribe was concerned with preserving the utmost ‘original’ version, since writing was being linked to the idea of literature already in the thirteenth-

¹⁴⁵ Gísli Pálsson, *Textual Life*, p. 18.

¹⁴⁶ See Brink, *Verba Volant*, p. 78.

¹⁴⁷ See Nedkvitne, *Administrative Literacy*, pp. 288-90.

¹⁴⁸ Mundal, *How did the Arrival*, pp. 164-5.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

¹⁵⁰ Gísli Sigurðsson, *Orality and Literacy*, pp. 290-1.

¹⁵¹ See Lönnroth, *The Old Norse Analogue: Eddic Poetry and Foraldarsaga*, pp. 73-4, for a comparison between the Eddic poems and the *Kalevala* as well as possible influences.

century Icelandic society.¹⁵² On this basis, I believe that during the twelfth and especially the thirteenth century the transition between orality and literacy had reached its highest point, a time where a long-lasting and strong oral tradition occurred hand-in-hand rather than face-to-face in connection with an adopted literacy in full development at least in a small sector of the society. Therefore, we need to establish valid cognitive differences between oral and written forms of communication in order to understand how they determine the creative outcome in question.

Eric Havelock first studied the implications of literacy in Ancient Greece suggesting that the formulaic style of oral compositions represented not only verbal and metrical habits but also a mental condition, which was subsequently altered by the adoption of literacy.¹⁵³ Soon after, Jack Goody and Ian Watt noted that the introduction of literacy brings along significant cognitive and social alterations carrying along deeper changes in the function of memory and the socialisation of experience and learning: in a literate culture words can accumulate successive layers of historically validated meanings, whereas in oral cultures the meaning of each word is ratified in a succession of concrete situations including vocal inflections and physical gestures.¹⁵⁴ Hence Walter Ong defined oral communication in opposition to written communication as additive rather than subordinative, aggregative rather than analytic, redundant or ‘copious’, conservative or traditionalist, close to the human life world, agonistically toned, with knowledge being within a context of struggle. However, in an oral milieu the knower is not separated from the known as in the written tradition, it is empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced. Moreover, it is homeostatic, since the meaning of words comes from real life present situations, here and now, not sheer abstract conceptualisations, given that the oral mind is uninterested in definitions. Therefore, it is situational rather than abstract, where the concepts act in operational frames, close to the living human world.¹⁵⁵

Considering all these characteristics, we can suggest orality-based conceptualisations in many passages in the Eddic poems, on the one hand, but also the difficulties to accurately place a poem structured in the versions in which *Hávamál* and

¹⁵² According to Torfi Tulinius, the rich Icelandic medieval literature should not be regarded as an isolated phenomenon; quite the opposite, it could be compared with thirteenth-century literature in France, particularly the *foraldarsögur* but also many *Íslendingasögur*, as they are literary-crafted products and thus enjoyable regardless of their strict origins and historical background. See Torfi Tulinius, *The Matter*, p. 46.

¹⁵³ Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, p. x.

¹⁵⁴ See Goody, *The Consequences*, pp. 28-30.

¹⁵⁵ See Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, pp. 37-49.

Sigrdrífumál have been preserved, on the other. Despite containing pre-Christian accounts and motifs, it is evident that the preserved *Hávamál* is far from being an ancient pagan composition that survived untouched through centuries but a construction. No oral composition shows a structure fragmented in such a manner due to the organic features of oral tradition, it is agglutinative, of course, but apparently in a classification of motifs and themes rather than in a flowing oral pattern, which suggests a reconstruction either out of purely oral sources or oral elements that had already become written sources. In a similar way, *Sigrdrífumál* also seems agglutinated, even closer to the natural world but basically another fragmentary arrangement from scattered sources, which is even clearer if analysed as part of *Reginismál* and *Fáfnismál*. Therefore, any association between gnomic or wisdom poetry and the natural world would be better explained by the oral, performative features of these poems rather than by sheer aesthetic reasons.¹⁵⁶

Viewed from performance, both *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál* are markedly first-person monologues (just like *Völuspá* and *Grimnismál*) rather than dialogic poems or narrative poems, considering *Sigrdrífumál* as a ‘framed monologue’ performed by Sigrdrífa/Brynhildr in relation with Sigurðr given the limited dialogue speech.¹⁵⁷ The dialogue poems offer more signs of performative activities, yet from a structural point of view, both *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál* are also entirely made of direct speech, yet they might not have been performed as a whole but partially. What is for certain is that the plot is permanently built on an oral representation within the plot, which evidences the still prevalent meaningfulness of orality in that society.¹⁵⁸ In conclusion, even if the grouping of fragmentary sources in writing required a literate mind, traces from both oral and written origin are not to be excluded from any of them. Both poems were written down carrying along inalienable oral features such as direct speech and natural scenarios, and removing them would imply suppressing the poem and creating a new one, which did not happen, but the inherited single catalogue poems required to be interlaced together and this was done in an eminently literate way.

3.2.1 Runic literacy

¹⁵⁶ Briefly mentioned by Larrington, anthropological theories suggest that gnomic poetry may have its origin in the magico-religious, which could explain the depicted scenarios. See Larrington, *A Store*, p.161.

¹⁵⁷ See Gunnell, *The Origins*, p. 189, fn. 1.

¹⁵⁸ As a parallel, Havelock has suggested that Plato’s *Dialogues* were bound to represent the oral environment still dominant in the ancient Greek society in a sort of orality-literacy continuum despite Plato’s intention to move away from oral performance. See Havelock, *The Muse Learns*, p. 111.

There has naturally emerged some debate about the literate role that runes played in medieval Scandinavia, both before and after Christian conversion. Despite the difficulties to evidence a wide-spread use of runes for literate purposes, they have been viewed as a previous kind of literacy. Both of communication may have coexisted in what Ruth Finnegan has called a ‘mixture of communication media’,¹⁵⁹ but runes seem to have been primarily used for memorial purposes and eventually for magical purposes in a complementary function to that of oral practices rather than a transforming extension of them. Ritual use for runes derived from an originally oral society can be explained by the relevance of words themselves when isolated or grouped in certain ways. In fact, Walter Ong has argued for the greater relevance of spoken word in oral societies as intrinsically loaded with magical force, and the sense of the word as necessarily spoken, sounded, and power-driven.¹⁶⁰

However, this magical potency is to be related not to everyday speech but to the composition of patterned or specific structures. In this sense, the magical character of runes could be regarded as an extension of the oral practice. This coexistence and influence from orality in runic practices may be actually represented in the metaphor of drinking (knowledge), particularly regarding the emulsion made of mead of poetry and runes which is offered to Sigurðr in *Sigrdrífumál*.¹⁶¹ In any case, it is not sufficient to establish a wide-spread literate function of runes among medieval Scandinavians. The interpretation of runes as a form of literacy has had supporters and detractors within scholarship. Judith Jesch maintains that informal or provincial rune verses were composed to be written thus representing a form of vernacular literacy,¹⁶² an idea supported by rune expert Terje Spurkland, who argues for the so-called ‘runacy’ or runic literacy, alternative to the Latin tradition, despite the acknowledged impossibility to know how widespread the competence of carving and reading runes was during the runic script period.¹⁶³ On the contrary, Joseph Harris believes that the only way to compose poetry would have been orally, ‘probably in contemplation’, considering runes as a means of literacy merely commemorative and funeral, similar in style to the commemorative genre of poetry known as *erfíkvæði*. Although there is little evidence for an influence from transcribed runestones on *erfíkvæði*, I largely agree with Harris’s

¹⁵⁹ Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, p. 22.

¹⁶⁰ *Idem*, p. 32.

¹⁶¹ Quinn, *Liquid Knowledge*, p. 209.

¹⁶² Jesch, *Memorials*, p. 97.

¹⁶³ See Spurkland, *Viking Age Literacy*, pp. 137 and 148-9.

suggestion that there is an ‘oral residue’ (in Walter Ong’s terms) in the language of the rune stones.¹⁶⁴ Moreover, runes are evidently part of the natural world, after which Kristel Zilmer has showed the relation between runes and orality given that the runestone monument moves the audience beyond the level of the text, as an event still connected to the original setting, which can even be considered as a materialised form of speech.¹⁶⁵

From this perspective, runes are clearly not to be considered as a previous form of literacy properly, since they do not fulfil the same function as manuscripts did in England and continental Europe during that time or in Scandinavia at a later stage. The influence of runes on orality is lesser, or at least less demonstrable, than the influence of orality on runes. Despite being written, rather than considering runes as a previous form of literacy it seems more appropriate to view them as a complementary tool to the oral tradition. What is more, this assumption seems to be confirmed by the continued use of runes within the Scandinavian society for purposes different from sheer textual practice after the literate tradition took roots, though they would eventually become an alternative form of textual communication.¹⁶⁶

3.3 Composition and influence between *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál*

On account of the difficulties to trace back an oral composer, it is necessary to focus on the hands responsible for writing down the manuscript versions we have inherited. It is a general assumption that writing down any poem contained in manuscript form supposed the editorial work of one or more editors or compilers, ranging from opinions that consider such an activity as a scarcely influential procedure to those considering it as a sign of artistically shaped works of literature that break considerably from the oral sources. Moreover, the task of a guiding and unifying mind behind the written composition does not necessarily presuppose a single stage composition, since many layers might have been added with the passing of time differing from the first written

¹⁶⁴ See Harris, *Old Norse Memorial*, pp. 129-31.

¹⁶⁵ Zilmer, *Viking Age Rune Stones*, p. 161.

¹⁶⁶ For instance, the numerous runic inscriptions carved on wooden sticks and animal bones that were found in Bergen in the 1950s date from twelfth century into the fifteenth (though mainly dated in the period 1250-1330). As observed by Terje Spurkland in *Norwegian Runes* (p. 174), they contain religious and secular texts in Latin to Old Norse poetry, commercial correspondence, writing exercises, indecipherable hocus-pocus, everyday messages and intimate communication including pornography and obscenities.

version. As discussed in the former chapter, the process of textualisation of oral versions –most likely from different sources– is a process of adaptation that has an unavoidable influence on the overall outcome, since structuring knowledge implies structuring its perception. In this sense, John Miles Foley stresses the idea that ‘instead of asking what is meant by a work of art or its parts, we should ask how that work or part conveys a meaning’ in what he calls ‘referentiality’,¹⁶⁷ a structural view that clearly moves along the role of the means –oral or written– by which a message is communicated.

There is a general consensus among scholars on the idea that the *Codex Regius* would not have been possible at all without an editorial work, which is particularly evidenced by the occurrence of external comments and prose passages, predominantly common from *Sigrdrífumál* onwards.¹⁶⁸ But that commentary was indeed a secondary stage in the task of the ‘editor’, as the grouping and selection of material must have taken its time. Regarding *Hávamál*, Lindblad suggested that at some point the poem existed in written form separate from other mythological poems,¹⁶⁹ which has led to claim that not only *Hávamál* but also *Alvíssmá*, and *Völundarkviða* were late additions to the mythological collection, despite having a pre-Christian origin.¹⁷⁰ In a similar way, it has been suggested that the poems related to Sigurðr –unlike other heroic poems such as *Atlakviða*, *Hamðismál*, or *Hloðskviða*– are younger compositions, reflecting both ancient motifs rooted in a common Germanic tradition and the imprint of the Christian milieu in which they were composed.

3.3.1 *Hávamál*

Without a doubt, the length, structure and content of *Hávamál* make it the favourite subject of speculation in terms of an editorial activity. As a result of this, some theories highlight the literary value of the composition and the creative mind responsible for the final textual product and the degree to which such an editor influenced the resulting manuscript, ranging from sheer editorial influence to creative and literary intervention.

¹⁶⁷ Foley, *Immanent Art*, p. 5.

¹⁶⁸ As observed by Gunnell echoing Sijmons, Finnur Jónsson, Heusler and Wessen See Gunnell, *The Origins*, p. 199.

¹⁶⁹ Lindblad, *Studier i Codex Regius*, pp. 263-4.

¹⁷⁰ Vésteinn Ólason, *The Poetic Edda*, pp. 251-2.

Klaus von See has been a representative voice of this idea by arguing for the decisive task of the *Redaktor* responsible not only of the shape of the poem but also of its creation. What is more, von See rejects the idea about a pagan cult transmitted through its stanzas, such as the Óðinn's self-hanging, the acquisition of the mead of poetry, the utterance of charms, etc., suggesting that it was produced not only out of medieval literacy but under the influence of Latin tradition itself.¹⁷¹

Above all, von See infers the Latin influence on *Hávamál* from the Latin didactic work *Disticha Catonis*.¹⁷² According to von See, *Hugsvinnsmál*, the Old Norse translation of *Disticha Catonis*, should be placed between the original Latin composition and *Hávamál*, a suggestion that has naturally found an extensive opposition and very few supporters.¹⁷³ First David Evans and then Carolyne Larrington discussed the complex relationship between *Hávamál*, *Disticha Catonis* and its Old Icelandic translation *Hugsvinnsmál*, demonstrating that Von See's assumption about *Disticha Catonis* and *Hugsvinnsmál* as sources for *Hávamál* is rather unlikely taking into account his thematic, terminological and structural evidences, concluding that the previous view of the Gnostic Poem as essentially pagan, Norwegian and archaic is correct and the poem owes nothing to the *Disticha Catonis* or to *Hugsvinnsmál*.¹⁷⁴

In fact, echoes from *Hávamál* have been found in *Sonatorrek* by Egill Skallagrímsson, and *Hákonarmál*¹⁷⁵ by Eyvindr skáldaspillir, which suggests a date before 960 AD, when *Hákonarmál* is believed to have been composed.¹⁷⁶ In addition, Joseph Harris has observed that Von See's claim toward a Latin influence on the genre does not suit *Sigrdrífumál*, since this heroic lay seems to deal with feud, unlike *Hávamál*. Furthermore, Harris goes back to the idea of polygenesis, or the multiple-source origin of ideas, being these general precepts that anyone could elaborate based on common sense.¹⁷⁷ It has also been argued that it is very unlikely that *Hugsvinnsmál* was composed before *Hávamál*, and thus it would seem more probable, as it was maintained before Von See's suggestion, that *Hugsvinnsmál* is not prior to *Hávamál* but

¹⁷¹ Von See, *Die Gestalt*, p. 65

¹⁷² First suggested in *Die Gestalt der Hávamál* (p. 66) and comprehensively developed in *Disticha Catonis und Hávamál*, both in 1972.

¹⁷³ On the contrary, Rudolf Simek has endorsed both the idea of a *Redaktor* and the Latin influence on *Hávamál* suggested by von See. See Simek, *Edda*, pp. 53-9.

¹⁷⁴ See Evans, *Hávamál*, pp. 16-9 and Larrington, *A Store*, pp. 97-108.

¹⁷⁵ This elegy composed for the king Hákon góði also includes the verse 'deyr fǣ, deyr frændr'.

¹⁷⁶ Evans, *Hávamál*, p. 14.

¹⁷⁷ Harris, *Eddic Poetry*, pp. 107-10.

it must have been composed under the influence of *Hávamál*.¹⁷⁸ Still, von See insists on the *Disticha Catonis* influence against his critics.¹⁷⁹

All the same, even if we put aside von See's *Disticha Catonis-Hávamál* theory, his assumption on the significant work of the *Redaktor* is not new at all, though the most admitted idea is the existence of a *Sammler* rather than a *Redaktor*, as originally proposed by Hermann Schneider.¹⁸⁰ It is evident that the surviving structure of the poem is the result of an effort to organise a decidedly heterogenous content, the poet or the collector tried to group the strophes according to subject matter, yet, as Jónas Kristjánsson points out, the lessons in *Hávamál* are so manifold that it is hard to find any precise organisation in the poem.¹⁸¹ In actual fact, stanzas on various subjects are found in *Hávamál* before the list of runes and charms, which can be further subdivided.¹⁸²

Considering the main gnomic poem (1-79) as a single unit, we could agree with Larrington that *Hávamál* is a coherent wisdom poem, since wisdom poetry is characterised by not having a prescribed form or a narrative or chronological principle; yet Larrington goes as far as considering that *Rúnatal* and *Ljóðatal* are 'deliberate obscurities' that belong to the whole. Furthermore, Larrington argues that the poet assumes the voice of Óðinn because the main purpose of the poetic synthesis of *Hávamál* is to display the range of wisdom from the poet's culture.¹⁸³ To my mind, this assumption would credit the poet with an enormous literary responsibility on the whole product from the beginning, which does not make much sense if we consider that all these kinds of knowledge are not found together in any other poem, except for *Sigrífumál*. It seems to me that, taking *Hávamál* as a whole (comprising the second half and its mixed information), it is very difficult to ascertain that it was composed by a

¹⁷⁸ For example, John McKinnell concluded in a recent survey that none of the similarities of wording or image between *Hávamál* and *Hugsvinnsmál* can be shown to derive from *Disticha Catonis*, and the deviation of *Hugsvinnsmál* from *Disticha Catonis* where it resembles *Hávamál* can be explained by the traditional theory that *Hugsvinnsmál* used *Hávamál* as a minor source. See McKinnell, *The Making*, pp. 88-9.

¹⁷⁹ See von See, *Europa*, pp. 373-96.

¹⁸⁰ See *Eine Uredda: Untersuchungen und Texte zur Frühgeschichte der eddischen Götterdichtung* (1948).

¹⁸¹ Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, p. 45.

¹⁸² Larrington has suitably identified and titled the diverse subjects as follows: The Opening Moment (1-5), In the Hall (6-9), Drunkenness (11-14), Some Kinds of Folly (15-18), Moderation in Food and Drink (19-21), The Foolish Man's Behaviour in Society (22-29), Mockery (30-32), Friendship (34-52), The Limitations of Wisdom (53-6), Energy and Preparation (58-62), A Casual Sequence of General Observations (63-65), Experiences While Journeying (66-67), The Good Things of Life (68-72), Uncertain things: Wealth, Women (73-89), Men versus Women (90-110), Gunnlöð and the mead of poetry (104-110), Starts Loddfáfnismál (111), Friendship (117-131), Guests and Hospitality (132-136).

¹⁸³ See Larrington, *A Store*, p. 65-6.

single ruling idea from the origin. It is precisely due to the inconsistencies in the sequence that it has been suggested that different sections have come together from different sources or fragments. Hence I mainly subscribe to Richard North's emphasis on a 'rationalisation' through different generations of poets before a final author organized and integrated the diverse inherited fragments into the current structure, which endorses the older hypothesis about reconstructed patterns of cumulative composition on a traditional theme.¹⁸⁴

As a matter of fact, the diverse subjects and styles presented in *Hávamál* have resulted in different structures. Following Schneider's idea of a *Sammler* and his assumption that *Billings mær* and the mead of poetry are remnants of one older poem, North suggests that the acquisition of the mead of poetry is the underlying theme, and this myth, its connection with the runes, and the leading role of Óðinn must be more than an embellishment in *Hávamál*.¹⁸⁵ This theory is further supported by the initiation ritual implications in *Hávamál* discussed in Chapter 4.2. For similar reasons, Karl Müllenhof¹⁸⁶ suggested already in the nineteenth century that *Hávamál* could be regarded as six different poems, including one for the acquisition of the mead of poetry: *The Gnostic poem* (1-79), *Óðinn's adventure with Bilings mær* (95 [or earlier]-102), *Óðinn's adventure with Gunnlöð* (103 [or 104]-110), *Loddfáfnismál* (111 [or 112]-137), *Rúnatal* (138-45) and *Ljóðatal* (146-63),¹⁸⁷ whereas Elizabeth Jackson has considered that *Hávamál* was composed in this form possibly from the beginning, arguing that it makes sense to divide it in only two parts, the gnomic poem (1-110) and the rest as a single poem (111-64), though structured around three subjects: gnomic advice (112-36), runes and sacrifice (138-44) and magic spells (146-63), with stanza 111 as a frame stanza to introduce Óðinn as the main speaker and stanzas 137 and 145 as transition stanzas between subjects.¹⁸⁸

Another arrangement was suggested by Bjarne Fidjestøl after palaeographical evidence, namely the large capitals letters placed by the scribe in the *Codex Regius*: *Hávamál I* (1-110), *Hávamál II* (111-37) and *Hávamál III* (138-64).¹⁸⁹ More recently, McKinnell has studied *Hávamál* from the viewpoint of a long-lasting process of composition and has divided the poem in three different periods or 'archaeological

¹⁸⁴ North, *Pagan Words*, p. 123.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹⁸⁶ See Müllenhof, *Deutsches Altertumskunde* (1891).

¹⁸⁷ McKinnell, *The Making*, p. 75.

¹⁸⁸ Jackson, *A New Perspective*, pp. 36-8.

¹⁸⁹ Fidjestøl, *The Dating*, p. 218.

strata'. At the first level, 'the work of the editor', McKinnell notes that some lines and stanzas (e.g. 80, 111/1-3 and 9-10, stanza 162/4-9, and stanza 164) seem designed to impose an apparent unity on the poem, while emphasizing Óðinn as the main speaker and adding context for the recitation of the whole composition. At another level, 'the encyclopaedic stratum', there are some 'scraps of verse' (e.g. stanzas 81-83, 85-90, 137, and 142-45) interpolated in a sort of encyclopaedic way to add mundane detail, characteristic of the twelfth and thirteenth century. Finally, beneath all this lie 'the main poems', which might have been grouped in a previous manuscript containing additional capital letters to those preserved in the *Codex Regius*.¹⁹⁰ Ultimately, the remaining four original poems in this analysis are defined as *The Gnostic Poem* (1-79), *The Poem of Sexual Intrigue* (84, 91-110), *Loddfáfnismál* (111/4 and 11, 112-36) and *Ljóðatal* (138-41, 146-61, 162/1-3, 163).¹⁹¹

Beyond this, I agree with Lindblad and Evans as to consider *Hávamál* a late addition in the *Codex Regius* after a separate evolution.¹⁹² Moreover, I find very likely that the gnostic poem was attributed to Óðinn at a later period, as North and McKinnell maintain,¹⁹³ against the idea that the synthesis of social wisdom and Óðinn myths in *Hávamál* occurred in the pagan period.¹⁹⁴ Moreover, the layered construction described by McKinnell suggests that the poem was structured under an epistemological division of different kinds of knowledge, which were put to work through linking passages toward the idea of Óðinn's speech. In conclusion, to assume a long-lasting process of composition is not only suitable but necessary to understand the variety of perspectives featured in this extensive and long-lasting poem. Subsequently, *Sigrdrífumál*, the most similar structure to *Hávamál*, needs to be studied taking into account the progression that gave birth to *Hávamál* but also the sequence in which it is inserted together with the previous poems *Reginismál* and *Fáfnismál*, two poems that, however, may have been composed at a different stage than *Sigrdrífumál*.

¹⁹⁰ McKinnell, *The Making*, pp. 100-1.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

¹⁹² See Evans, *Hávamál*, p. 3.

¹⁹³ North also suggests that first *Ljóðatal* and *Loddfáfnismál* were built on to *Rúnatal* by a time the gnostic poems could be fathered on Óðinn, and then a form of the main gnostic poem (1-79), from before 960 AD, was added to this compilation, a task that was carried out by a sequence of authors probably in the eleventh or twelfth centuries in Iceland, while the two love-narratives were added by the last poet between a 'gnomic preface' and *Hávamál* properly. See North, *Pagan Words*, p. 139.

¹⁹⁴ This is the view of Larrington. See Larrington, *A Store*, p. 19.

3.3.2 *Sigrdrífumál*

Sigrdrífumál is located in a sequence dedicated to the life of the mythic hero *Sigurðr* that begins with the small introduction *Grípisspá* and continues in *Reginismál* and *Fáfnismál* in the *Codex Regius*. In fact, according to Elias Wessén¹⁹⁵ and Einar Ólafur Sveinsson¹⁹⁶, *Grípisspá* would be the only poem that was composed directly in writing, what Finnur Jónsson¹⁹⁷ believed to be a summarizing preface for the poems about Brynhildr and *Sigurðr*. Moreover, as it has been previously stressed through this work, *Sigrdrífumál* cannot be disassociated from the two previous poems, i.e. *Reginismál* and *Fáfnismál*, bearing in mind that they are not divided in the *Codex Regius*, where only the title *Sigurðarkviða Fáfnisbana II* is recorded right before *Reginismál*. From this point of view, and considering other titles in the manuscript, we could assume that the main poems or *kviður* dedicated to the heroic accounts were originally and conveniently labelled in a similar way by the editor(s).¹⁹⁸

Despite being originated in a common Germanic tradition, as Andreas Heusler insistently maintained, even the *Germanisten* like him agreed that the *Sigurðr* poems were younger compositions, though the motifs featured seem based on an ancient Germanic tradition. As observed by Vésteinn Ólason, Old Icelandic poetry does not indicate that there was a fixed form in the Norse tradition for the legend about *Sigurðr* as a dragon killer and the owner of a treasure.¹⁹⁹ On the contrary, it seems that a deep antiquarian interest developed in the second half of the twelfth century, which stimulated a rush of new poems on the same subjects with a different perspective.²⁰⁰ Moreover, many scholars have confirmed that the prose passages in the heroic poems aim at organising the material and giving it some coherence,²⁰¹ but it is also likely that the editor(s) allowed the old poems to retain the repetitions and irregularities expected

¹⁹⁵ Wessén, *Den isländska eddadiktningen*, p. 7.

¹⁹⁶ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Íslenzkar bókmenntir*, p. 195.

¹⁹⁷ Finnur Jónsson, *Litteraturs historie I*, p. 268.

¹⁹⁸ Namely *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, *Helga kviða Hundingsbana II* and *Helga kviða Hjörvarðssonar*, *Sigurðarkviða Fáfnisbana I* (also known as *Grípisspá*) and *Sigurðarkviða Fáfnisbana II* (including *Reginismál*, *Fáfnismál* and *Sigrdrífumál*), *Brot af Sigurðarkviðu*, *Guðrúnarkviða I*, *Guðrúnarkviða II* and *Guðrúnarkviða III*, *Sigurðarkviða hin skamma* and *Atlakviða*.

¹⁹⁹ Vésteinn Ólason, *Old Icelandic Poetry*, p. 20.

²⁰⁰ Jónas Kristjánsson, *Stages*, p. 157.

²⁰¹ See notes 168, 169, 170 and 171.

from the process of grouping,²⁰² reaching a final phase in the thirteenth century legendary sagas, especially *Hervarar saga* and *Völsunga saga*.²⁰³

Nonetheless, the cycle *Reginismál-Fáfnismál-Sigrdrífumál* contains sections composed in different metres, after which Heusler suggested that at least the *ljóðaháttir* stanzas of *Reginismál* and *Fáfnismál* must have been an original poem, named by him *Hortlied*, while the *fornyrðislag* stanzas, mostly dealing with revenge, constituted the so-called *Vaterrachelied*.²⁰⁴ The subsequent debate on which specific *ljóðaháttir* stanzas are to be considered part of the original poem was continued by Heusler and other scholars such as de Vries, Müllenhof and Finnur Jónsson, who added and removed stanzas under different criteria.²⁰⁵ Nevertheless, *Sigrdrífumál* is believed to have been a subsequent composition as a whole, as maintained by Erik Noreen²⁰⁶ and Einar Ólafur Sveinsson.²⁰⁷

Although the Sigurðr cycle (particularly *Sigrdrífumál*) is often considered a latter creation, the similarities between *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál* have served as a basis to suggest a number of theories about the heroic poem. It is clear that, even if in different order, the poem displays the same kinds of knowledge as *Hávamál*. The structure of *Sigrdrífumál* clearly resembles the second half of *Hávamál*, where the gnomic component is also featured but to a lesser extent than in the first half. Moreover, there are similarities in the spells, runes and pieces of advice themselves in both compositions, explicitly for instance in *Sigrdrífumál* 24 and *Hávamál* 122-3, *Sigrdrífumál* 26-7 and *Hávamál* 113-4, *Sigrdrífumál* 28, 32 and *Hávamál* 115, *Sigrdrífumál* 29-30 and *Hávamál* 131,7, similarities that, as suggested by McKinnell, have found three main explanations.²⁰⁸ Firstly, there is the vague idea that the editor of the *Codex Regius* similarly combined different fragments twice on an aesthetic basis, although this does not explain the verbal similarities. Another explanation is that supported by Elizabeth Jackson, who argues that *Hávamál* 111-64 and *Sigrdrífumál* are the only surviving exemplars of a poetic genre which featured this content and structure.

²⁰² This view about an antiquarian process of preservation is maintained by Vésteinn Ólason. See Vésteinn Ólason, *Old Icelandic Poetry*, p. 18.

²⁰³ As noted by Torfí Tulinius, these two sagas are based on pre-existing Eddic poetry, although ‘for some reason’ they were produced in prose. In this sense, Tulinius argues that it is legitimate to speak of an author regarding *Völsunga saga*, since it is ‘considerably more than just a prose rendering of a story already existing in verse’. See Torfí Tulinius, *Sagas of Icelandic Prehistory*, p. 454.

²⁰⁴ Heusler, *Jung Sigurd*, p. 165.

²⁰⁵ On the different theories about the ‘original’ *ljóðaháttir* stanzas, see Gunnell, *The Origins*, pp. 257-9.

²⁰⁶ See Noreen, *Studier*, pp. 26-32.

²⁰⁷ See Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Íslenzkar bókmenntir*, pp. 466-7.

²⁰⁸ McKinnell, *Meeting The Other*, p. 210.

Jackson points at one poet behind *Hávamál* 111-64 given the similarities along its sections and *Sigrdrífumál*. To begin with, Jackson considers the second half of *Hávamál* as a coherent unit, which could be called an ‘extended *Loddfáfnismál*’. Then she establishes a verbal and conceptual association between the terms *ástráð* and *ræð*, which link the second and third lists in *Sigrdrífumál* and the second and third lists of ‘the extended *Loddfáfnismál*’. Also, she observes the multiple content similarities: counsel against adultery (*Hávamál* 115; *Sigrdrífumál* 32), against exchanging words with a foolish man (*Hávamál* 122; *Sigrdrífumál* 24), about friendship (*Hávamál* 119–21; *Sigrdrífumál* 37) and about avoiding ill-luck in battle (*Hávamál* 129; *Sigrdrífumál* 26–27). Finally, she stresses that both lists of counsels include one sub-list providing practical information, a list of remedies in *Hávamál* 137 and a list concerning the preparation of corpses for burial in *Sigrdrífumál* 33–34.²⁰⁹

I would not consider the occurrence of all these coincidences in both poems as sufficient evidence to consider that a whole genre with these features existed in medieval Iceland, but it is clear that one of them was written down taking under the influence of the other one, a theory also endorsed by McKinnell to a large extent.²¹⁰ McKinnell’s first premise to support this theory is that *Sigrdrífumál* was composed after the current structure of *Hávamál*, helped by the fact that *Sigrdrífumál* features signs of later composition such as replacing the sacred number ‘nine’ with ‘seven’ (e.g. ‘seven runes’), ‘seven’ being a more Christian number. In addition, McKinnell accurately observes that Óðinn’s charms in *Hávamál* are oral and increasingly mysterious whereas *Sigrdrífumál* features them rather mechanically, and the role of the phrases ‘*fölvar nauðir*’ and ‘*Hrafns hrælundir*’ suggest that Sigrdrífa was waken from the dead and not from sleep, an image that, according to Mundal²¹¹ and Myhren,²¹² shows that the plot was nuanced in order to fit Christian sensibilities. Yet another evidence proposed by McKinnell is the exclusive occurrence of the term *gamanrúnar* in both *Hávamál* (120/6 and 130/6) and *Sigrdrífumál* (5/8), although the poet of *Sigrdrífumál* seems to have misunderstood the term as a ‘literal piece of runic magic’.²¹³

In summary, the similarities between *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál* are too many to consider them a mere coincidence. Yet, it seems too much to place them as archetypes

²⁰⁹ Jackson, *A New Perspective*, p. 47.

²¹⁰ McKinnell, *Meeting The Other*, p. 210.

²¹¹ See Myhren, Magne, ‘*Hrafns hrælundir*’, *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 87, 1972, pp. 119–21.

²¹² See Mundal, Else, ‘*Sigrdrífumál* strofe 1’, *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 87, 1972, pp. 122–9.

²¹³ See McKinnell, *The Making*, pp. 93-4 and McKinnell, *Meeting The Other*, 210-1.

of a lost genre, as Jackson claims. It is more likely that *Sigrdrífumál* was composed after *Hávamál* but in somewhat different circumstances. As already suggested, *Hávamál* was the result of a long process of rationalisation out of different fragments (different kinds of knowledge), though preserving or emulating the ancient oral character of this poetry. On the contrary, it seems to me that *Sigrdrífumál* was a composition based on *Hávamál*, though without the enormous responsibility of making sense from diverse old sources to the same extent as *Hávamál*, i.e. *Sigrdrífumál* was deliberately composed under that structure, especially considering that it is only a part of the whole cycle started with *Reginismál* –or *Gríspissþá* if regarded as an introduction–, whereas *Hávamál* does not present a plot itself nor is directly linked to any external poems. Also, the latter composition of *Sigrdrífumál* as a whole implies that the sequence about Sigurðr's youth was also a literate creation from fragments originated in different periods. Evidently, the similarities between these poems have no parallel in the Eddic Corpus,²¹⁴ but despite featuring the same kinds of knowledge, the way in which knowledge is acquired within the narrative and transferred to the audience differs in each poem, a matter that will be further discussed in the following chapter.

4. Acquisition and transfer of knowledge

The similarities between *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál* are in terms of the different kinds of knowledge depicted and their structure; hence the lessons contained confer a didactic character both at the level of the text and beyond it. Inside the narrative, the characters involved are giving or receiving a lesson, while the external audience of these poems is also participant of the knowledge transmitted through them, and it is not relevant whether they are readers or spectators, as Larrington suggests.²¹⁵ Nevertheless, the difference between an oral milieu and a written one has consequences on the intelligibility of the message transmitted. Even if orality is not demonstrable through formulaic composition or transmission, speech itself and knowledge acquisition are not a mere motif, as performance is initially implied by the *ljóðaháttir* metre and the

²¹⁴ Ursula Dronke has suggested that the poet of *Atlamál* was acquainted with *Atlakviða*. See Dronke, *The Poetic Edda I*, p. 99, and further discussion about this in Acker, *Revising Oral Theory*, pp. 77-83.

²¹⁵ When Larrington argues that '*Hávamál* would have spoken to the anxious men and women of the Sturlung Age with the same relevance as when it was first put into metrical form' she seems to refer to the gnomic advice only. See Larrington, *A Store*, p. 19.

enormous amount of speech featured in these poems. Additionally, both poems are extremely didactic in nature, and traditional learning relies on orality.

Still, Old Norse-Icelandic literature has also been attributed a didactic character in a more Christian sense, particularly in the prose accounts, by arguing that Christian morals can be identified even in a composition with many apparent pagan elements.²¹⁶ I find impossible to claim that all the statements and depictions originated or changed in the Christian tradition. On the contrary, such depictions allow and require a more thorough interpretation of the knowledge portrayed, e.g. sacral kingship, rites of passage and initiation rituals. Therefore, taking into account theories about orality and rites of passage, it is rather clumsy to admit that *Hávamál*, as a whole, had the same meaning through different generations,²¹⁷ as it will be discussed in the second part of this chapter. There are numerous examples of compositions such as psalms, prayers, poems, songs, and hymns being used with didactic purposes in different traditions since antiquity. Matthew Gordley has studied these compositions among Greeks, Romans, Jews and Christians and has found that, even if crafted with the goal of communicating with a deity, which in many cases is their main purpose, they can also take on a didactic function which may even be their primary purpose.²¹⁸ In the Old Norse-Icelandic Corpus, Jónas Kristjánsson has pointed out that there is nothing comparable to Christian hymns or liturgical compositions but rather ‘didactic and dramatic works of mythological or cosmological import’.²¹⁹ These didactic works he refers to, however, are poems and lays that very well can be considered within the didactic sphere described by Gordley, even if they are not panegyrics in strict sense.

Even if there is no divine veneration involved, there is a didactic purpose in Old Norse poems such as *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál*, and thus Gordley’s description makes sense for many reasons. First of all, it is obvious that didactic hymns address the audience and make the teaching explicit to different degrees, yet Gordley suggests that a number of factors indicate the priority of a hymn’s didactic purpose even if there is no language of instruction: (1) a human audience is directly addressed, (2) claims about the deity, powers and characteristics that reveal something of the theology, and (3) a narrative that recounts events of the mythic past or recent past. Finally, Gordley notes that it is important to take into account that some compositions, whose original purpose

²¹⁶ See Hermann Pálsson, *Art and Ethics*, Introduction.

²¹⁷ See Larrington, *A Store*, p. 19.

²¹⁸ Gordley, *Teaching through Song*, p. 6.

²¹⁹ Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, p. 36.

may not have been primarily didactic, become didactic when they are preserved and used by later generations in new contexts, when the recent, distant or mythic past relates to the present concerns of the community from which the composition comes.²²⁰

Therefore, didactic compositions –comprising not only hymns but also psalms, prayers, poems and songs– are intended to teach –explicitly or implicitly– a human audience a lesson, e.g. theological, historical, moral, political, etc.²²¹ In the case of our two Eddic poems, it is understandable that *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál* are considered among the most didactic compositions in the Eddic Corpus, since they provide marked moral advice and address the audience, explicitly in the case of *Hávamál* and implicitly in *Sigrdrífumál*, and both poems relate events from the mythic past. To some extent, we can also notice that *Hávamál*, attributed to Óðinn, features him as the god of wisdom possibly in the most comprehensive way found in any Eddic poem. It is also worth noting that, despite the medieval origin of *Hávamál*, it is believed to have a pre-Christian origin (at least partially), which takes us back to the rationalisation process described by McKinnell and North. In this sense, *Hávamál* can also be regarded as didactic both in its origin and in its latter medieval form. It is clear that the social wisdom in both poems was linked to the present concerns of the community, yet it is not so simple to reach this conclusion regarding the other kinds of knowledge.

Also relevant is the medieval context in which most Old Icelandic compositions were recorded: during the twelfth and especially thirteenth centuries. In fact, the twelfth century has been called ‘the age of learning’ in Iceland, characterised by Jónas Kristjánsson as devoted not only to historical recording and Christian edification but also to the production of knowledge of various kinds, e.g. grammatical treatises (The First Grammatical Treatise), scientific and religious translations, mainly in geography and natural and human history. But on the other hand, he stressed that foreign learning and devotional literature decreased in the thirteen century, ‘partly because the early works provided a sufficient stock and partly because other literary kinds, particularly sagas, were more in demand’.²²² Hence we can say that learning –beyond the restrictive sphere of Christian knowledge– was a part of this society in many aspects and the composition of native literature occurred in a context originated in an ‘age of learning’. Knowledge acquisition occurs in the poem but also through it as a construction of

²²⁰ Gordley, *Teaching through Song*, pp. 9-10.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11

²²² Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, pp. 131-2.

reflexive minds, be it pre-Christian, Christian or a combination of both traditions, since common knowledge is after all the organic development of a society and not the accumulated culture of a single author or editor.

4.1 Didactic motif in *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál*: advice, drinking, runes

Apart from the already indicated signs of didactic purpose, the elements featured in the plot of these Eddic poems clearly depict the acquisition of knowledge. Given its character of god of wisdom, Óðinn is the protagonist of several of them, including *Hávamál*, and in the heroic poems dedicated to Sigurðr, he is the one who acquires knowledge from different characters, including Óðinn himself. However, the most recognisable among the multiple elements suggesting a didactic purpose is perhaps the occurrence of ethical advice. Óðinn dispenses social wisdom for the everyday life to his audience in *Hávamál*, while Sigrdrífa does the same with Sigurðr in *Sigrdrífumál*. As already noted, the nature of this advice is quite similar in both poems, yet its concern about human behaviour expresses restraint and good manners that have often been considered characteristic of Christian ethics.

Although it is very reasonable to acknowledge the widespread Christian influence during the Middle Ages, I personally consider that it has been bestowed a huge credit upon Christian morality and learning as the only possible morality and learning, especially regarding moderation and self-control. As discussed in Chapter 2.3.2, it is not possible to ascertain that common sense is restricted to any patterns or traditions, even if certain ideas overlap. For a good example, Hermann Pálsson particularly attributed the didactic character of *Hávamál* to Christian morals by arguing that despite its heterogeneous nature and obscure passages, its main parts are related to a deep understanding of the problems of human life and must have had a didactic purpose from its origins, which he believed were not pre-Christian at all.²²³

Without a doubt, what Hermann Pálsson means is that we must be aware that the context in which these verses were composed or recorded influenced the resulting product. However, to reject any pre-Christian lore preserved in them claiming that those

²²³ ‘Þeir fræðimenn sem rekja rætur *Hávamála* einkum til norrænna víkinga hafa auðsæilega ekki áttað sig á eðli kvæðisins; þeir gera það langtum einfaldara en það er í raun og veru og auka veg víkinga að sama skapi. *Hávamál* voru sköpuð af hugsanda manni í því skyni að skemmta hugsanda fólki, og fræða það um leið.’ Hermann Pálsson, *Hávamál*, p. 34.

Norse Vikings could not have been thoughtful people interested in learning at all is also in doubt. The main reasons for suggesting that *Hávamál* is influenced by Latin or Christian morals are usually the restraint toward eating and drinking, the absence of feud and in general the lacking heroic ethos, albeit contradictory along the poem. Furthermore, Larrington has noted that the analysis of relations between sexes is unparalleled in Germanic wisdom literature.²²⁴

The poem seems to link the advice given on this topic with the subsequent stories experienced by Óðinn, and narrated by him in first person: his affairs with Gunnlöð, whom he deceived to obtain the mead of poetry, and with Billings mær, who deceived Óðinn after promising to meet him. Both stories can be considered didactic in the sense that they are complementary examples to the advice, but also because they narrate events from the mythic past. The Billings mær account could be strictly linked to the advice given on women in the previous gnomic part, and also the Gunnlöð account as it shows how Óðinn is untruthful to her, which supports the idea that both men and women are unreliable.²²⁵ Still, the Gunnlöð myth seems much more related to the allegorical acquisition of wisdom in the form of the mead of poetry, which confirms the relation between wisdom and drinking that is defined in the myths of Kvasir and Mímir's well (*Mímisbrunnr*). In addition, this episode is clearly connected with *Sigrdrífumál*, where Sigrdrífa offers beer to Sigurðr before the lessons: *Biór fori ec þér, brynþings apaldr* (*Sigrdrífumál* 5). In the Gunnlöð myth, it also depicts Óðinn as a superior being after he becomes drunk of the mead while retaining his faculties, as already observed by Judy Quinn.²²⁶

Up to this point, the voice of Óðinn shares advice and stories that mainly support his advice; however, there is a change of tone in stanza 111 marking a time for chant: *Mál er at þylia þular stóli á*, and in stanza 112 where a character named Loddfáfnir is addressed for the first time and asked to take advice: *Ráðomc þér, Loddfáfnir at þú ráð nemir*. As a matter of fact, the figure of Loddfáfnir in *Hávamál* is uncertain and open to many interpretations. David Evans called attention to some differences between this gnomic part and the first one (*Gestapáttur*): *Loddfáfnismál* deliberately presents

²²⁴ Larrington, *A Store*, p. 67.

²²⁵ On the sexual intrigue depicted in *Hávamál* as well as the gnomic advice that supports it, see McKinnell, *Hávamál B*, pp. 90-2 and Dronke, *Poetic Edda* III, pp. 41-3.

²²⁶ Quinn also notes that Óðinn is drunk of wisdom, and even though this fact seems to contradict the advice against too much drinking, his drunkenness is supernatural as he has a non-human metabolism. See Quinn, *Liquid Knowledge*, 198-9. A parallel could be found, for instance, in the drinking contest celebrated at Útgarða-Loki, described in *Gylfaginning*, where Þórr exhibits his supernatural drinking skills, though he does not acquire any knowledge through it.

imperative verbs, which makes it ‘admonitory’ rather than ‘contemplative’.²²⁷ Evans also indicates that these counsels belong to a different world and portray an Óðinn very distant from the usual mystical, magical and mythological knowledge; hence he concludes that the association of the gnomic poem with Óðinn is ‘almost certainly’ not original, arguing that the Loddfáfnir formula was added in an attempt to endow the advice with the solemnity of ritual even if causing disruption in the original poem.²²⁸ According to Larrington, who defends a largely coherent structure of *Hávamál*, it serves to recapitulate and explore further the themes of the gnomic poem but also indicates that the *mannvit* is not enough to face all circumstances in human life, which supports the idea of a didactic construction.²²⁹

The ritual character described by Evans would be indeed required considering the break in the type of knowledge that is portrayed in the following sections of *Hávamál*, namely *Rúnatal* (138-46) and *Ljóðatal* (147-63). *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál*, and to some extent *Rígsþula*, are the main Eddic sources that feature a section dedicated to runes, their origin and their functions. The divine origin of runes is attested in the first gnomic section of *Hávamál* (st. 80) before it describes how Óðinn performed the much discussed self-hanging in order to obtain the runes and the carving of them in the section known as *Rúnatal* (138). Moreover, this divine attribution is actually confirmed by two runestones in Västergötland: the Noleby runestone, dated in the sixth century (before 600, possibly before 575),²³⁰ and the Sparlösa runestone, dated in the eighth century (c. 775-80).²³¹ Also, the account on the acquisition of runes substantially differs from the wisdom presented up to this point in the poem, though we can consider it didactic as an account of the mythic past. Furthermore, runic wisdom related to the sacrifice performed by Óðinn, often viewed as influenced by Christianity, has been widely studied from the viewpoint of initiation ritual, which will be further discussed in the following chapter. Then *Ljóðatal* comes as a final demonstration of extremely esoteric wisdom as it moves along the list of eighteen magic songs/spells learned by Óðinn, who starts by stressing that magic songs are ignored by most beings,²³² and consequently keeps them for himself, naming them without disclosing them. In spite of the ambiguous information provided by Óðinn as first-person narrator, some of these

²²⁷ Evans, *Hávamál*, p. 25.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 22-4.

²²⁹ Larrington, *A Store*, p. 59.

²³⁰ Birkmann, *Von Ágedal*, pp. 17 and 158.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

²³² *Lióð ec þau kann, er kannat þjóðans kona / oc manncis mögr (Hávamál 146).*

spells also suggest ritual implications, including water sprinkling and arrow casting, and even paralleling his own sacrifice in the tree.²³³ Here too, *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál*, and to some extent *Svipdagsmál*, are the only Eddic poems that dedicate a section to a list of magical spells.

As maintained so far, *Sigrdrífumál* is to be regarded in relation with the previous poems in the manuscript, since Sigurðr starts acquiring knowledge from his early years and even after he achieves the deed for which he receives his nickname *fáfnisbani*, namely killing the dragon Fáfnir. It is also worth noting that *Reginismál* and *Fáfnismál* have been usually thought to be earlier also in terms of their date of composition.²³⁴ In the first part of the three-lay cycle, *Reginismál*, Sigurðr receives instruction from his foster-father Reginn and victory omens from Óðinn, who appears before him disguised as Hnikarr, and then mixes gnomic advice resembling *Hávamál*. In *Fáfnismál* he receives counsel from Fáfnir, with whom he establishes a dialogue and anonymously questions him before the slaying. Fáfnir's speech could be viewed, to some extent, as analogous to other underworld creatures, for instance Óðinn's inquiries about the future at the *völur* in *Völuspá* and *Baldrs draumar*. Moreover, the especial qualities of Fáfnir's blood once Sigurðr drinks it confirm the liquid character of wisdom suggested in the myth of the mead of poetry, which is obviously connected with the mead he receives from Sigrdrífa in *Sigrdrífumál*,²³⁵ yet mixed with runes symbolising and confirming that knowledge in its different types can be prepared as an all-inclusive emulsion.²³⁶

In this poem, Sigurðr evidently learns in a less dynamic but at the same time more comprehensive way while he passively receives instruction from Sigrdrífa, which stresses the fact that Óðinn and Sigurðr is repeatedly acquired through or in relation with female figures, a situation attested in other poems such as *Völuspá*, *Baldrs draumar* and *Hynndluljóð*. Paradoxically, the poem also advises caution with women skilled in sorcery or *fjölkkunnig* (*Hávamál* st. 113). The female relevance of the advisor or transmitter of knowledge is even more significant in *Sigrdrífumál*. Here the tutor and the learner, Sigrdrífa and Sigurðr, are clearly exposed, and the knowledge transferred also includes ethical advice, magical knowledge and mythical narrative.

²³³ *Þat kann ec iþ tólpta, ef ec sé á tré uppi / váfa virgílná* (*Hávamál* 157).

²³⁴ See Clarke, *The Hávamál*, p. 16.

²³⁵ This has been often associated with the numerous Viking Age finds that show a female figure bearing a drinking horn, particularly the image stones from Gotland.

²³⁶ On the multiple interpretations for this mixed drink, see Quinn, *Liquid Knowledge*, pp. 208-10.

Clearly resembling Óðinn, Sigrdrífa provides esoteric knowledge in strict sense, as she never unveils the charms and victory runes she lists.²³⁷ It is also worth noting that Sigurðr, as a son of Sigmundr, is a descendant of Óðinn, which places a direct connection between them, but Sigurðr also obtains knowledge from other sources: from Reginn (runes, games, languages), from Grípir (information about the future), from Óðinn himself (omens and help for the battle), from Fáfñir (information about the future) and from Sigrdrífa (magic, mead, runes). Here it is possible to observe a progressive acquisition of knowledge which goes along and in accordance with the progress of the poem more markedly than in *Hávamál*. In the end, both poems show signs of didactic functions, but the implications of ritual performance take the discussion to the anthropological field, which is the subject discussed in the following chapter as a complementary view to the philological considerations exposed so far.

4.2 Didactic purpose in *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál*: initiation

The lack of formulaic evidence to ascertain the absolute oral origin of Eddic poetry does not keep us from approaching it as influenced by the oral tradition; on the contrary, it is appropriate due to the medieval transitional milieu in which they were finally preserved in writing. It is clear to this point that the knowledge contained and allegorically represented in Eddic poetry appeals to a certain pre-existing knowledge in order to be successfully deciphered, more detailed information is lacking and the references to nature and other elements are found in locations different from the medieval Icelandic writing spot. As summed up by Margaret Clunies Ross, the editorial activity in the *Codex Regius* suggests that Eddic poetry may have become difficult and somewhat unintelligible to thirteenth-century Icelanders, since the poems take for granted that the audience knows the ‘special knowledge’ and underlying stories upon which they depend to be understood.²³⁸

As matter of fact, not only the lacking background but also the multiple vehicles of acquiring and transferring knowledge and the potential audience become transcendental questions when considering their ritual implications. Many literary analyses overlook the mythical knowledge transmitted to the outer apprentice, the

²³⁷ McKinnell has noted that the victory runes (*sigrúnar*) featured in *Sigrdrífumál* are not found in any other poem. McKinnell, *Meeting the Other*, p. 211.

²³⁸ Clunies Ross, *The Conservation*, p. 125.

reader or audience out of the poem that is instructed by the multilevel contents of the poem. This might also serve the purpose of an initiation model through the performance of ritual acts suggested in several Eddic poems, including the two analysed in this dissertation. Ritual implications have been suggested through the performative character of poems such as *Skírnismál*, *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Grímnismál*, *Fáfnismál*, *Sigrdrífumál*, and the last sections of *Hávamál*. For instance, *Fáfnismál* involves fire and the ritualistic roasting of Fáfnir's heart and the tasting of blood, *Sigrdrífumál* portrays the waking of the *valkyrja* and the drinking of knowledge by Sigurðr and *Hávamál* features the self-hanging of Óðinn and carving of runes. Additionally, Gunnell points out that the gnomic knowledge often plays a central role in religious ritual and especially in those rituals related to initiation ceremonies.²³⁹

Contrasting the case of Óðinn in *Hávamál*, Jens Peter Schjødt has pointed at the lack of analysis on Sigurðr from the perspective of initiation.²⁴⁰ According to Schjødt's distinction between cult poetry (recited in connection with rituals) and frame poetry (general descriptions to understand rituals), *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál* are both cult poems with minor framework myths, since those are provided in other compositions.²⁴¹ The mythical narrative is part of the ritual by including the phenomenon of 'The Other World',²⁴² which represents something meaningful for the culture in which it functioned. Based on the concepts of 'rite of passage', 'liminality' and 'initiation' developed by Arnold van Gennep²⁴³ and Victor Turner, Schjødt defines the characteristics of initiation as follows: (1) irreversibility, (2) tripartite sequence, (3) oppositional pairs that are analogues to the liminal vs. the non-liminal, and (4) the object that is acquired in the liminal phase, which always consist of a form of numinous knowledge or numinous power,²⁴⁴ where the object granted to the initiants is the reason for the initiation ritual. It is also accurate from Schjødt to stress that knowledge is

²³⁹ See Gunnell, *The Origins*, pp. 354-6.

²⁴⁰ Apart from his own article from 1994, Schjødt mentions Lotte Motz (1983), who has suggested *Reginismál* where Reginn plays the role of the initiator and Sigurðr is the initiate, and Terry Gunnell the observations by Gunnell already exposed in relation to *Fáfnismál*. See Schjødt, *Initiation*, pp. 288-9.

²⁴¹ See Schjødt, *Initiation*, p. 96.

²⁴² Turville-Petre (*Myth and Religion*, p. 4) also observed that the stories on Sigurðr and Óðinn contain some of the same elements, namely: 'in all of them the god or hero wrests his wisdom from a god or demon of the Other World'.

²⁴³ Van Gennep originally divided rites into preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition) and post-liminal rites (rites of incorporation) depending on whether they are executed before, during or after the transitional stage. Yet he discarded any rigid classification, since 'in specific instances these three types are not always equally important or equally elaborated'. See Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, p. 11.

²⁴⁴ In this sense, Van Gennep stressed that after the ritual the initiate retains special qualities depending on the ritual, e.g. a magico-religious quality. See Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, p. 82.

usually acquired in the liminal phase but it can also be acquired in the separation phase or in the reintegration phase. Finally, I find Schjødts discussion about Mircea Eliade's theories quite useful, since Eliade was mainly restricted to connect ritual knowledge with ancient times and with the sacred.²⁴⁵

For the purpose of studying *Sigrdrífumál* it is also relevant to consider Schjødts depiction of knowledge acquisition in initiation and in folktales: in initiation, knowledge acquisition is essential for the transformation of the subject in the final phase, whereas in the folktales it is only a means to win the sought-after object, after which its importance disappears, as it is of a more limited nature than the knowledge obtained in initiation, where knowledge creates a new status for the subject.²⁴⁶ Strictly considering Schjødts statement, however, the Sigurðr cycle would create a conflict between folktale and initiation ritual if regarded as a folktale rather than as a myth. It is more likely then –and it is the general assumption in this dissertation too– that the Sigurðr tale functions as a myth, as the rest of accounts in the Eddic compilation.

Sigurðr starts his way to the consummation of the deed for which he is going to be nicknamed and remembered already in *Reginismál* and after the climax experienced in *Fáfnismál* he ends this slaying adventure right before in *Sigrdrífumál*. Quite suitably, this somewhat artificial division of the account started with the title *Sigurðarkviða Fáfnisbana II* could represent a three-phase ritual originally described by van Gennepe, being *Reginismál* the preliminal phase, *Fáfnismál* the liminal phase and *Sigrdrífumál* the post-liminal phase, although the sequence initiated in *Sigrdrífumál* continues in *Brot af Sigurðarkviðu*, where the death of Sigurðr is described.²⁴⁷ We first see Sigurðr being immature and manipulated to end up being strong and wise, acquiring all possible kinds of knowledge through experience, drinking and speech.²⁴⁸ Also, as already mentioned, the mead he drinks contains a condensed blend of knowledge prepared for such an

²⁴⁵ Eliade stated in *Mythes, rêves et mystères* (1957) that myth was the foundation of social life and culture in the archaic societies, a sacred history on the deeds of supernatural beings. Accordingly, the profane man is able to enter again the primordial time by imitating or retelling the foundational myths, a procedure that Eliade called *l'éternel retour* ('the eternal return'). In other words, myth and ritual can be considered as vehicles of 'eternal return' to reach a mythical age in which the traditional individual is constantly united with a sacred time that gives value to his existence. The concept of 'eternal return' is primarily discussed in his work *Le Mythe de l'éternel retour. Archétypes et répétition* (1949).

²⁴⁶ Schjødts, *Initiation*, pp. 81-2.

²⁴⁷ According to Schjødts, however, the existing account about Sigurðr is not as easily reduced to a version of van Gennepe's three stage sequence as is the case of Óðinn's acquisition of knowledge. See Schjødts, *Initiation*, p. 289.

²⁴⁸ According to Victor Turner, 'liminal entities, such as neophytes in initiation or puberty rites, may be represented as possessing nothing. They may be disguised as monsters, wear only a strip of clothing, or even go naked, to demonstrate that as liminal beings they have no status' (Turner, *The Ritual Process*, p. 95.).

occasion. In this sense, Meletinsky has suggested that the magic drink (mead of poetry) can be broken into several paradigms such as sacred-profane, content-container, internal-external and liquid-solid, which stresses its transitive character.²⁴⁹

In addition, the mountain where Sígurðr finds Sigrdrífa could be viewed as an initiation/liminal scenario. However, there is a contradiction among the sources as to the identity of Sigrdrífa as the *valkyrja* Brynhldr. Here I agree with Schjødt (and Kamenskij),²⁵⁰ as to consider that both ideas have coexisted reflecting the identification of *valkyrjur* as both divine and human.²⁵¹ Einar Haugen, in contrast, has claimed that Sigrdrífa is another mask of Óðinn, as she talks exactly like him, being simply Óðinn's 'mouthpiece', since it resembles the preparation of Sígurðr to become a king, just as it did Agnar in *Grímnismál*.²⁵² In the end, Haugen's assumption confirms Schjødt's theory: Sígurðr as a descendant of Óðinn reflects more the initiation of a legendary and prototypical king rather than a warrior, a consecration of a very high level,²⁵³ echoing the concept of a demi-god already attributed to Sígurðr by Turville-Petre.²⁵⁴ The debate on Sigrdrífa, however, must not overlook the ritual sexual implications of Sigrdrífa in connection with Sígurðr, even if the sexual intercourse is not as explicit as in Óðinn's adventure with Gunnlöð. In fact, *Hávamál* 104-10 has been viewed as a *hieros gamos*, which suggests initiation into sacral kingship, even though there is no offspring from the union between the god and the giantess.²⁵⁵

In the case of Óðinn's episode in the tree, certainly much more discussed than Sígurðr's ritual activities, it is clear that Óðinn is the one who hangs himself in the tree thought to be Yggdrasil, yet some speculation has emerged as to the voice that appears in stanza 143 (*ec reist siálfir sumar*) marking a distance from Óðinn, who wrote runes for the gods, and Dáinn, who did it for the elves. This context has been interpreted as

²⁴⁹ See Meletinsky, *Scandinavian Mythology*, p. 259. Schjødt also notes that the mead represents all forms of numinous knowledge brought together for the initiated. See Schjødt, *Initiation*, p. 295.

²⁵⁰ See Kamenskij, Mikhail Ívanovítsj, *Myth*, critical introduction by Edmund Leach, epilogue by Anatoly Liberman; translated by Mary P. Coote with the assistance of Frederic Amory, Karoma, (Ann Arbor, MI, 1982).

²⁵¹ Schjødt, *Initiation*, p. 294.

²⁵² Haugen, *The Edda as Ritual*, p 16.

²⁵³ Schjødt, *Initiation*, p. 298.

²⁵⁴ Turville-Petre concluded that Sígurðr was originally a god, or at least a *demi-god*. See Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, p 205.

²⁵⁵ Based on Gísli Sigurðsson's discussion about Gaelic influence on Eddic poetry, Dorian Knight has argued that the Old Irish tradition permeated the Old Norse-Icelandic oral tradition about sacral kings, and *Hávamál* 104-110 is a parody of *hieros gamos*. See Gísli Sigurðsson, *Gaelic Influence in Iceland*, University of Iceland Press (Reykjavík, 2000) and Dorian Knight, *A Giantess Deceived, A Re-Investigation into the Origins and Functions of Hávamál Stanzas 104-110 in the Light of Sacral Kingship*, Master's Dissertation, University of Iceland (Reykjavík, 2012). Available online at <http://skemman.is/en/stream/get/1946/11405/28294/1/MAtesis.pdf>

the performance by a shaman in search for a mystic union with the deity,²⁵⁶ which has been rejected arguing that this religious idea is more related to Christian mysticism.²⁵⁷ In any case, despite being a god, Óðinn goes through a sacrifice by hanging himself nine nights in the tree of life (Yggdrasil) in order to acquire the knowledge of runes. As Sigurðr, he initially seems vulnerable and immature to some degree, but by the time we reach *Ljóðatal* he seems triumphant and proud of the wisdom he owns alone but not ‘the men that are sons of men’.²⁵⁸ Here Schjødt has accurately noted that, beyond the debate between martyrdom and sacrifice respectively defended by van Hamel²⁵⁹ and Sauvé,²⁶⁰ both approaches agree that Óðinn gains numinous power: the runes which give the ability to communicate with the dead and the underworld. Therefore, Schjødt believes that his initiation can be understood as a symbolic sacrifice (destruction) to gain knowledge and achieve another phase, though in this case Óðinn is both the sender and the object, as he receives the benefit.²⁶¹

In conclusion, studies from an initiation perspective suggest that these accounts are linked to the idea of sacral kingship, a ruler directly related to the divine. As portrayed by Snorri Sturluson, Óðinn is both the ruler and the sorcerer among the gods,²⁶² and therefore the knowledge of runes is essential for the duties of the ruler. According to Schjødt, Óðinn gives certain social categories a range of numinous knowledge which makes them suitable to assume their positions, as clearly occurs with Sigurðr, yet this does not occur in the myths related to Þórr.²⁶³ Hence, Schjødt suggests that Þórr is linked to warrior initiation and Óðinn to shaman initiation, although Óðinn

²⁵⁶ See Grønvik, *Hávamál* 138.

²⁵⁷ McKinnell, *The Making*, p. 105.

²⁵⁸ *Lióð ec þau kann, er kannat þjóðans kona oc manncis mögr* (*Hávamál* 146)

²⁵⁹ See Hamel, A. G. von, ‘Óðinn Hanging on the Tree’, in *Acta Philologica Scandinavica* 7, 1932, pp. 260-88.

²⁶⁰ See Sauvé, James L., ‘The Divine Victim: Aspects of Human Sacrifice in Viking Scandinavia and Vedic India’, in *Myth and Law among the Indo-Europeans*, ed. J. Puhvel, University of California Press (Berkeley CA, 1970), pp. 173-91.

²⁶¹ Schjødt considers sacrifice as an indirect communication with the ‘Other World’, whereas initiation means that the initiate himself is being placed in the ‘Other World’ in the form of a symbolic space, and the communication can be therefore regarded as direct. See Schjødt, *Initiation*, pp. 184-202.

²⁶² Saxo Grammaticus also emphasises the magical skills of Óðinn and how he was worshiped as a ‘sorcerer’ in a rather Christian-influenced depiction.

²⁶³ According to Schjødt, Þórr myths do not qualify as initiation because there is no numinous knowledge or underworld, and the liminal scenario is depicted but not a clear initiation, which also occurs in *Völuspá* and *Baldur* dramas. Similarly, Gunnell has observed that works like *Völuspá*, *Helgakviður* or *Þrymskviða* do not qualify as drama even if they echo aspects of seasonal ritual and/or have large dialogue passages. Compare Schjødt, *Initiation*, p. 454 and Gunnell, *The Origins*, p. 17.

also plays a role in warrior initiations,²⁶⁴ for instance in association with Sigurðr if we consider the transitional episode in *Fáfnismál*.

This clearly connects with the concern expressed throughout this dissertation on the importance of the potential audiences addressed by these poems.²⁶⁵ Considering the initiation described by Schjødt, we could originally think of high-rank individuals in search for legitimisation, but this is of course open to question. Supporting this idea, Robert Kellogg argued that tradition gives oral literature its authority within an oral society, being a narrative mode suited to the entertainment and instruction of aristocratic leaders and their courts (e.g. *Beowulf* and Homeric epics), since epic depends on an oral tradition that is supported by an aristocratic and heroic culture.²⁶⁶ It is, of course, difficult to define the public expected for these poems as a whole or their individual parts. What we know is that both *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál* depict the arrival of a traveller/adventurer to an enclosed location.²⁶⁷ Here it is worth considering the idea of a high-rank audience defended by Ellis Davidson by judging the purpose and context of *Hávamál*, namely the hall of a Norwegian king or jarl where the well-educated men might be expected to have available a series of proverbial or gnomic utterances or be capable of producing ridding speeches to try out his host.²⁶⁸

As observed in the previous chapter (4.1), the centrality of gnomic knowledge regarding sacral kingship and high status has been also stressed by Gunnell,²⁶⁹ which would suggest that not only esoteric or hidden knowledge is to be linked with a superior (social) level. Hence we could find a parallel, for instance, in the good manners traditionally taught to noble people in monarchical societies, though this assumption is to be contrasted at the same time with the general idea that gnomic wisdom is destined to function among ordinary people. Following a similar assumption and based on Heusler's classification,²⁷⁰ Karl Reichl has claimed that proverbs, riddles, and short lyrics might be the common property of society as a whole, whereas ritual poetry, charms, and memorial verse (including genealogies), are the property of special groups

²⁶⁴ After the three-function model of Georges Dumézil. Schjødt, *Initiation*, p. 249.

²⁶⁵ Finnegan has even suggested that a performance does not necessarily require an audience (e.g. Nilotes of the Sudan). See Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, pp. 18-21.

²⁶⁶ See Kellogg, *The Prehistory of Eddic Poetry* (1990).

²⁶⁷ It has been suggested that at least *Grimnismál*, *Lokasenna*, *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Hávamál* occur inside, within a hall. Sigurðr meets Sigrdrífa on a mountain. However, Gunnell observes that in a dramatic performance the costume, the scenery, and the stage are not as fundamental as the performer and his audience. See Gunnell, *The Origins*, p. 11.

²⁶⁸ Davidson, *Insults and Riddles*, p. 42.

²⁶⁹ See Gunnell, *The Origins*, p. 356.

²⁷⁰ See Chapter 2.1.

such as shamans or public orators.²⁷¹ Quite the opposite, Torfi Tulinius has stressed the ideological character of any literature, given that literature expresses a certain worldview, a fact illustrated by the aristocratic customs that flourished elsewhere in Europe and were not as far as usually maintained from the ruling class in medieval Iceland.²⁷²

A similar idea has been defended by Lars Lönnroth for a long time, who studied the performance context and ideological function of the poem in a possible thirteenth-century audience and suggested the concept of ‘the double scene’ (*den dubbla scenen*), which implies that both the performer and the audience share a context that is identical to that of the subject of the composition while it is performed (e.g. court skalds), which would lead to a two-way communication (*tvåvägskommunikation*) or feedback instead of a mass communication (*masskommunikation*).²⁷³ Thus, in medieval performance, an ‘original’ performance scene would result in a text from which some information about the ‘original’ performance scene could be collected. Nevertheless, Lönnroth’s theory has been unpersuasive.²⁷⁴ But beyond this, I find very reasonable to assume that the performance and the content were appealing in one or many ways to a medieval audience. As noticed by Meulengracht Sørensen, the thirteenth century society must have felt identified with these poems, since it is improbable that a poet would remember something so old –two or three centuries– that he no longer understands at all.²⁷⁵ Hence we are again bound to acknowledge that the long-lasting existence of Eddic poems (especially *Hávamál*) implied some degree of rationalisation. Among the different types of knowledge preserved in *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál*, some of them must have evidently been more immediately intelligible or at least more appealing to the thirteenth-century audience than others. Accordingly, in the following chapter are summarised the types of knowledge contained in both poems as well as the relation between them and their implications.

²⁷¹ Reichl, *Plotting the Map*, p. 33.

²⁷² See Torfi Tulinius, *The Matter*, pp. 40-5.

²⁷³ See Lönnroth, *Den dubbla scenen*, pp. 10-1.

²⁷⁴ Scholars like Harris and Reichl have found Lönnroth’s cyclic hypothesis unconvincing, adding that Lönnroth’s theories have moved toward ‘the vaguer realm of ideological projections’. See Harris and Reichl, *Performance and Performers*, p. 150.

²⁷⁵ Meulengracht Sørensen also supported the theory that the *Codex Regius* poems were recorded from performing professional skalds. See Sørensen, *Saga og samfund*, pp. 80-3.

5. Kinds of knowledge

So far, I have underlined that wisdom is a many-sided concept that has caused considerable dilemmas in the study of the so-called wisdom poetry, since common sense or gnomic wisdom is only a part of the wisdom contained and transmitted. I have also suggested that the different kinds of knowledge that take part in this poetry are clearly differentiated from each other from an epistemological point of view but also through common sense itself, since human mind distinguishes and classifies, yet not in the same manner in oral tradition as in writing. The multiplicity of qualities in the transmitted information is a subject in itself, and it is also subject to be classified, even if from our literate perspective, which might be closer to the literate viewpoint of the editor (or editors) responsible for the manuscript version of the resulting poems than the people immersed in oral tradition.

As already noted, the encyclopaedic construction in layers of different kinds of information achieved in *Hávamál* must have served as a model for the composition of *Sigrdrífumál*, which would reveal that the compiler or editor was aware of the differences between these types of knowledge and decided to bring them together and link them with some meaning or purpose. Thus it is quite logical to assume that the literate people responsible for writing down the gnomic knowledge must have been aware of the uniqueness of it within the corpus and thus it might have represented an important editorial challenge to merge it with the rest. Considering that mythological knowledge plays a more discrete role than in other poems and gnomic knowledge is more easily intelligible and meaningful regardless of the historical periods, it is very reasonable to suggest that gnomic knowledge had a greater importance for the literate Christian compilers than the esoteric or magical knowledge due to their own nature. However, it also seems likely that all kinds of knowledge were put together considering that all of them had their own significance and purpose, even if some of them were not as immediately intelligible as gnomic advice.

5.1 Knowledge in *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál*

Although there is no terminological consistency on wisdom in Old Icelandic (which is common in modern languages, too), there is a recognizable differentiation within

knowledge, particularly visible in the didactic Eddic poetry. Several scholars have stressed the variety of knowledge available in Eddic poetry, and especially in *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál*,²⁷⁶ but it is Judy Quinn who has called attention to a possible classification in the levels of knowledge available in *Hávamál* (and thus *Sigrdrífumál*), which also leads to establish different receivers: (1) *Ráð*, directed to the attentive, (2) *Rúnar*, directed to the favoured and (3) *Ljóð*, directed to the very few, or perhaps no one.²⁷⁷ This kind of classification patently follows the course of *Hávamál* as it has been preserved, considering it as *in crescendo* going from general, abundant ethical advice to very few, jealously kept runes and incantations. In this sense, Larrington agrees that the last level of knowledge is presented in *Hávamál* as exclusive, only accessible to some initiated in the knowledge of runes, as this progression evidences Óðinn's complete mastery of wisdom and his superiority over the audience.²⁷⁸ In other terms, we could say that this confirms his superiority over mankind. In these classifications, however, the mythical narrative that provides reference to the whole composition seems to be rather omitted.

Viewed from the exposure grade of knowledge in Eddic compositions as a whole, there are three levels ranging from the concrete to the abstract, and so we can propose yet another arrangement: (1) reference: mythical narrative as background knowledge that supports both the competence and the sapience acquired, (2) competence: knowledge to reach practical purposes,²⁷⁹ including *seiðr*, *galdr* and *rúnar*, and (3) sapience: ethical advice that provides common sense for the correct use of knowledge. In light of this classification, the ethical advice that leads towards sapience is a feature almost exclusively exposed in these two poems, at least in such a degree, and its role among other kinds of knowledge is rather puzzling, since it remains unclear whether the composers or the scribes intended to transmit their message in this way.

At a different level, it is clear that *Hávamál* does not emphasise the referential mythical knowledge, which is better exposed in *Völuspá*, *Vafþrúðnismál* and

²⁷⁶ For instance, Larrington has noted that we can find different types of wisdom, rune-knowledge and maxims in both poems, yet apparently Larrington does not consider the mythical narrative as a type of transmitted knowledge in itself. Similarly, Gunnell has noted that the four initial poems of the Poetic Edda present three kinds of knowledge: gnomic, mythological and magical. See Larrington, *A Store*, p. 86, and Gunnell, *Eddic Poetry*, p. 85.

²⁷⁷ Quinn, *Liquid Knowledge*, p. 220.

²⁷⁸ Larrington, *A Store*, pp. 61-4.

²⁷⁹ Even if magic is destined to fulfil practical purposes, this does not necessarily mean that the magical knowledge, as presented in the poems, has a practical purpose. As pointed out by Larrington, the magical information given in both *Hávamál* (*Ljóðatal*) and *Sigrdrífumál* is insufficient to be regarded as practical. See Larrington, *A Store*, p. 88.

Grímnismál, but even if this is not the subject taught to the learner, the poem (viewed as a whole) still remains linked to the accounts of the gods, some of which otherwise would be unknown, such as Billings mæ or Óðinn hanging in the Yggdrasil, as it is not preserved in any other account, or obscure, as the Gunnlöð narrative, only available in Snorri's *Edda*, albeit with significant variations.²⁸⁰ Therefore, the mythic knowledge that acts as reference is implicit, whereas the competence or magical knowledge as well as the sapience or ethical knowledge are explicit, yet all the different kinds of learning complement each other more or less encyclopaedically, with the purpose of giving a (non-Christian) man what he needs to know in life, a conclusion inferred from the last and closing stanza of *Hávamál*, because only the 'sons of men' who attended Hár's speech might profit from his words, and not the 'sons of giants'.²⁸¹

In *Sigrdrífumál* the mythical account is consistent but closely connected with the previous poems, *Reginismál* and *Fáfnismál*, which provide other kinds of knowledge from different sources. Hence we could suggest that the previous accounts allow *Sigrdrífumál* to concentrate on the ethical and magical knowledge. Moreover, the position of the learner and the tutor are clearly established since the beginning of the poem as well as the specific sought knowledge. As already observed by Larrington, the *valkyrja* Sigrdrífa asks for specific kinds of knowledge in the fourth strophe: *mál, mannvit* and *læknishendr*.²⁸² Any scale in knowledge types, however, must not be confused with the different means of knowledge transfer. Such multiple elements functioning as transmitters of knowledge are evidently represented by the runes (*rúnar*), the incantations (*ljóð*), the mead of poetry (*mjöð*) and the beer (*bjórr*), but it is still to be demonstrated whether they correspond to a specific kind of knowledge, particularly when it comes to drinking. Here the mixture of different kinds of knowledge is clearly emphasised by the occurrence of runes and the mead of poetry, and similarly to *Hávamál*'s last stanza, *Sigrdrífumál* 18 makes clear that wisdom (here the wisdom of

²⁸⁰ Snorri does not mention the golden chair or the ring oath sworn by Óðinn.

²⁸¹ *Nú ero Háva mál qveðin, Háva höllo í,
allþörf ýta sonom,
öþörf iotna sonom;
heill, sá er qvað, heill, sá er kann!
níóti, sá er nam,
heilir, þeirs hlýddo!*
(*Hávamál* 164)

²⁸² Larrington, *A Store*, p. 86.

runes mixed with mead) was acquired only by the gods (including the *æsir*, the *vanir* and even the *álfar*) and the mortals.²⁸³

In fact, the metaphorical value of knowledge as a liquid is clear in *Sigrdrífumál* and *Hávamál*, as it is in *Hyndluljóð* and *Grímnismál*. Judy Quinn accurately notes that behind the metaphor of knowledge transfer through drinking resides the oral transmission of knowledge, already attested by the recitation of Eddic poetry to an audience. Moreover, the characterisation of multiple learning motifs in *Sigrdrífumál* is summed up by Quinn considering that the acquisition of knowledge parallels the different modes of communication: chanted genres (*ljóð* and *galdrar*) and inscribed symbols (*stafir* and *rúnar*).²⁸⁴ Drinking is emphasised along with magical knowledge and ethical advice: *Bjór færi ek þér / brynþings apaldr / magni blandinn / ok megingintíri* (*Sigrdrífumál* st. 5).

Finally, the initiation of Sigurðr resembles that of Óðinn acquiring knowledge and wisdom in *Hávamál*. Rather than thinking of an everyman public, it seems more likely that different levels within knowledge might be directed to different social agents. The poem provides ethical advice, magical knowledge and a mythical narrative about the acquisition of such wisdom to support the entire didactic character of the poem. The narrative on Gunnlöð and Billings mær and some advice to Loddfáfnir support the section on women, while the *Rúnatal* and the narrative on the mead of poetry –although related to Gunnlöð– seem to support the origins of all wisdom, included those transferred throughout *Gestapáttir* and to *Loddfáfnismál*. Moreover, the audience seems to be made up solely by men, most probably rulers or high-status people who needed to have possession of the wisdom to legitimise and preserve their status.

Therefore it is necessary to bear in mind that by merging gnomic advice with other types of knowledge, gnomic knowledge acquires a different status from the one it would acquire regarded as a separate element. Unlike wisdom poetry in other traditions, gnomic advice is loaded with esoteric implications and far from a reflexive discussion about the mind by the mind itself. In *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál* the gnomic component is useful by being rooted in experience but also regarded as a complementary

²⁸³ *Allar vóro af scafnar, þær er vóro á ristnar,
oc hverfðar við inn helga mið,
oc sendar á víða vega.*

*Þær ro með ásom, þær ro með álfom,
sumar með visom vönom,
sumar hafa mennzcir menn.*
(*Sigrdrífumál* 18)

²⁸⁴ Quinn, *Liquid Knowledge*, p. 223.

knowledge to that provided by magic and runes. In the end, the insistent occurrence of beer and mead establishes a direct relation between oral channels and knowledge, which reinforces not the popularity of drinking alone but the prevalence of oral communication and instruction in medieval Scandinavia.

6 Conclusions

Even though the Eddic poems *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál* have been usually studied as wisdom poems from a literary point of view due to their gnomic knowledge, it has been extensively demonstrated that such a component cannot be considered as their most relevant feature since they also present other types of information (mythological and esoteric knowledge) which are to be considered as wisdom in a wide-ranging sense. Unlike Old English wisdom poetry, common sense in Eddic poems is not focused on the mind itself, but on the experience/advice and ideal behaviour in everyday situations combined with esoteric formulas. Moreover, a division between universal common sense (*mannvit*) and particular kinds of knowledge (*fræði*) is possible even through common sense itself and not only through pure philosophical (epistemological) reasoning, which makes clear that a combination of statements without close relation between each other can be perceived by any audience or reader. Consequently, taking into account the surviving mythological and esoteric knowledge it is necessary to analyse these poems from a multidisciplinary approach, given that some of the questions that philological studies leave open to question are also addressed by anthropological theories.

In this sense, it has been pointed out that the oral character of Eddic poetry should be regarded from a wider perspective. First of all, runic literacy or ‘runacy’ is not comparable to the role of literacy in post-Christian Scandinavia, and secondly, the formulaic theory of oral composition is not the only way to demonstrate the oral origins of a composition. On the contrary, the oral-written continuum theory and the conditions of transmission and performance should be taken into account in order to evaluate the oral components preserved in a composition, especially when it was recorded in a period of transition between the oral and written forms of communication. As a matter of fact, oral tradition is not a mnemonic device in the sense of a mechanical repository

of knowledge, it is rather marked by an organic selection of knowledge depending on its meaningfulness to the society that preserves it and/or adapts it (i.e. rationalise it). The construction of *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál* as catalogue compositions is possible in an oral setting, yet a separate encyclopaedic classification is more likely to have happened in a written milieu. Ethic, magical, runic and mythological information are agglutinated in *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál* as in no other poem, which constitutes itself a reason to consider the literate mind in charge of grouping and/or making sense of the old accumulated data rooted to some extent in the oral tradition.

Furthermore, the literate construction of *Hávamál* as a previous model for *Sigrdrífumál* is supported by the theories that place *Hávamál* as a latter addition to the manuscript collection and the theories that consider *Sigrdrífumál* a latter composition in the Sigurðr cycle. The combination of different types of knowledge (or different poems) is then to be regarded as a deliberate stage in the process of rationalising the inherited information despite the contradictions or inconsistencies detected in the different sections. In this sense, it is not possible to determine whether the gnomic component was originally designed as a sheer preface considering the size and location of the gnomic sections. Finally, the resulting didactic character of both compositions suggests additional interpretations to those suggested by literary motifs, as occurs with knowledge acquisition, which can be regarded as numinous power in a liminal process of initiation that in turn draws a parallel with the possible audiences addressed by these didactic compositions. Óðinn and Sigurðr in their role of initiated god and hero respectively can provide a legitimate model for a human audience, most likely rulers and warriors. In addition, a new didactic purpose emerges when these poems are transmitted to future audiences, to the point of eventually reaching modern literate societies where the oral character of poetry is overlooked together with several implications and meanings.

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