

Old Norse language and literature, 2011-12

ANGLO-SAXON, NORSE AND CELTIC TRIPOS, PRELIM, PAPER 6
ANGLO-SAXON, NORSE AND CELTIC TRIPOS, PART I, PAPER 6

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Course description

The aim of this course is for students to acquire knowledge of the Old Norse/Old Icelandic language of the thirteenth century, the period in which many of the classic texts of Old Norse literature were preserved, and to become acquainted with the literature of the period. Knowledge of the language is developed through the study of a selection of literary and historical texts – including examples of sagas and poetry – and extended through intensive study of grammar and syntax. The broad cultural context of the emergence of medieval Icelandic literary genres is an important focus of the course.

Set texts are studied in the original and students are encouraged to broaden their knowledge of the subject through wide reading in the critical literature and in the recommended translations. No previous knowledge of Old Icelandic is required.

Mode of teaching

In the first year, elementary instruction in the language is given in Michaelmas and Lent terms with revision supervisions on unseen translation in Easter term. During Michaelmas and Lent, three short prose texts are studied: extracts from *Hrólfs saga kraka* (a legendary saga), *Skáldskaparmál* (one of the parts of Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*, a treatise on mythology and poetics) and *Íslendinga saga* (a contemporary political saga). All the texts are studied in the edited versions in *A New Introduction to Old Norse* (volume II: Reader, excerpts I, II and III), copies of which will be available for sale at the beginning of term. In the second year, the study of prose genres is extended by close readings of embedded poetry in extracts from *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (Reader excerpt VIIA), *Kormaks saga* (excerpt IV), *Bjarnar saga Hítadalakappa* (excerpt V) and the *Prologue* and *Gylfaginning* (further parts of Snorri's *Edda*).

In both years, language classes are supplemented by two series of weekly lectures on Old Norse literature, given over a two-year cycle, on Skaldic Poetry, Saga Literature, Eddic Poetry and *Snorra Edda*. The lecture series for Michaelmas term 2011 is Skaldic Poetry and for Lent term 2012, Saga Literature. You should discuss the timing of your supervisions for Part I Paper 6 with your College Director of Studies; supervisions will be organised by the Lecturers for the Paper. In addition to the formal lectures and classes in Old Norse, a course in Modern Icelandic is offered by the Department and all students are encouraged to attend it.

Assessment

The course is examined in Preliminary and Tripos examinations, the question-papers for which contain compulsory seen and unseen translations and grammatical questions, and a choice of two literary or linguistic essays chosen from typically ten further questions. The translation and grammar questions give half the marks for the paper, and the two essays, weighted equally, the other half. Formative feedback will be given throughout the course by in-class translation and grammar work and through the evaluation of practice essays in supervisions.

For those students not sitting the Preliminary examination, a Preliminary Assessment Test will be set at the end of Lent term. Preparation for the PAT, which includes an unseen translation, short segments of seen translation and grammatical commentary, is through work in the language class each week; it is not expected that students sitting a PAT will have had any supervisions for the paper.

Course outcomes

By the end of the course, students should have acquired a good reading knowledge of Old Icelandic prose and be able to read and interpret eddic and skaldic poetry. They should also have an understanding of the literary, cultural and historical context of this literature and be able to contextualise their readings of particular texts within the interpretive framework they have acquired. Students should also have acquired an elementary knowledge of Norse philology.

Lecture Programme for Michaelmas Term 2011

Skaldic Poetry

Week 2 (13 October)

Introduction to skaldic poetry

In this lecture we will look at the general characteristics of skaldic poetry and the range of genres in the extant corpus.

Week 3 (20 October)

Narrative poetry

The relationship of skaldic composition to story-telling will be explored in this lecture, along with the way in which the poet's voice is inscribed in different kinds of skaldic verse.

Week 4 (27 October)

No lecture this week. Read *Skáldskaparmál* (translated by Anthony Faulkes in his *Snorri Sturluson Edda*), available in paperback and held by most college libraries.

Week 5 (3 November)

Battle kennings

Conventional ways of referring to battle and weapons will be our topic this week, with special reference to the mythology underpinning death, Valhalla and the intervention of valkyries in warriors' lives.

Week 6 (10 November)

Slander and Praise

The use of skaldic verse for slander as well as praise will be studied this week, in the context of social relations in a culture only partially dependent on writing.

Week 7 (17 November)

Shield poetry

Poetry composed in response to the gift of a shield or other decorated objects will be studied this week. The visual nature of skaldic description will be investigated, along with the way in which many kennings encode mythological narratives.

Week 8 (24 November)

Skáldatal and the lives of skaldic poets

In the final lecture in the series, we will explore what is known about the lives of Icelandic poets and the circumstances in which skaldic poetry has been preserved.

Resources

*Searchable dictionary of Old Norse:

www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/collection?collection=Perseus:collection:Germanic

*Website for the international skaldic editing project: skaldic.arts.usyd.edu.au/

*The first two volumes of the new edition have been published and are in the English Faculty Library. Volume II: *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 2: From c. 1035 to c. 1300* (2009) and Volume VII: *Poetry on Christian Subjects* (2007)

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Reading List

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