Advanced medieval Scandinavian language and literature

ANGLO-SAXON, NORSE AND CELTIC TRIPOS, PART II, PAPER 6

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Course description

During this course, a deeper understanding of saga genres and poetics will be developed through the study of a range of Old Norse texts. In Michaelmas term, the text to be studied in language classes will be *Ágríp af Nóregskonungasögum* (ed. Driscoll), and in Lent term, the legendary saga *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* (ed. Turville-Petre), both in the editions published by the Viking Society for Northern Research and available for purchase in class. Both texts represent forms of saga prosimetry that challenge modern generic categories and require careful contextualisation in terms of contemporary ideas about the value of poetic quotation, the use of traditional and learned narrative practices and the social purpose of writing about the past.

In Michaelmas term, the seminars for this paper will focus on the prosimetric form of much Old Norse literature. A range of saga genres will be examined during the course of weekly seminars and the issue of narratorial authority will be explored in each of these. The relationship of verse to prose (and the authenticity of verse quotation) is frequently debated in the critical literature and towards the end of the seminar series we will return to the question of the origin of prosimetric form in medieval Icelandic literary compositions.

In Lent term, the seminar series will focus on Old Norse poetics. We will begin with an enquiry into the myth of the origin of poetry, and then explore topics such as the oral transmission of eddic and skaldic poetry, the poet as Odinic persona, the role of court poets, as well as the interplay of native traditions and foreign influences.

Mode of teaching

Students will prepare translations of portions of the set texts each week for the language classes in Michaelmas and Lent terms and work will be done in class on grammatical and syntactic analysis of the text, as well as on the translation of difficult passages. In Easter term, revision supervisions will be organised for students to practise unseen translation and to revise points of grammar.

All students will make two seminar presentations, one in Michaelmas term and one in Lent term. Guidance on appropriate preparatory reading for each seminar topic will be provided by the Lecturer, as well as suggestions for follow-up reading from the reading lists distributed at the beginning of each term.
In addition to the formal lectures and classes in Old Norse, a course in Modern Icelandic is provided by the Department during term time and all students are encouraged to attend it.

Assessment
The course is examined in the Part II Tripos examinations, the question-papers for which contain compulsory seen and unseen translations and grammatical questions, and a choice of two essays chosen from typically ten literary questions. Formative feedback will be given throughout the course by in-class translation and grammar work and through seminar presentations each term. Students may write up their seminar presentations as essays if they wish, or they may write practice examination questions in Lent or Easter terms for marking and feedback. Please email me for an appointment if you want me to look at your written work or if you would like advice about preparing for the examination.

Learning outcomes
By the end of Michaelmas term, students should have acquired a deeper understanding of the relationship of verse to prose in Old Norse prosimetrum and have developed an ability to debate questions of poetic authenticity and narratorial authority in particular texts. They should also have a sound knowledge of the range of prosimetric forms in the extant corpus of Old Norse literature and the complex historical development of saga genres during the twelfth to fourteenth centuries.

By the end of the course, students should have acquired an understanding of the nature of the corpus of extant poetic texts and the cultural attitudes to poetry expressed in traditional myths, kennings, law-codes, and by the practices of medieval manuscript compilers. They should also have a sound knowledge of the range of poetic forms in the extant corpus of Old Norse literature and the historical development of poetic theorisation from the twelfth to fourteenth centuries.

Students’ knowledge of the language of both poetry and prose should be extended through their own wide reading of texts in the original and detailed work in language classes.