

Kate Heslop. 2022. *Viking Mediologies: A New History of Skaldic Poetics*. Fordham Series in Medieval Studies. New York: Fordham University Press. 288 pages. ISBN: 9780823298259.

Skaldic poetry has a well-deserved reputation as the most inaccessible form of Old Norse-Icelandic literature. For the uninitiated, scholarship on skaldic poetics can feel nearly as intimidating as the poetry itself, even if the Skaldic Project (<https://skaldic.org/>) has made the corpus far more approachable for the present generation of students and researchers. *Viking Mediologies* is a welcome book that strikes the balance between breaking new ground and providing an entry point for newcomers to the field.

The word “Viking” can be used freely in book titles, but those specifically interested in skaldic poetry as it flourished in the centuries before the introduction of book technologies will not be disappointed. *Viking Mediologies* lives up to its name, being deeply embedded in the sensory experience of poetry composed, performed, and chiselled into stone in the Viking Age. However, given that our present-day knowledge of the media landscape of the skalds is primarily mediated by the written manuscript page (for the majority of readers, one re-mediated by a digital device), Heslop’s book is no less concerned with what changes when *dróttkvætt* (court metre) encounters animal skin, the Latin alphabet, and the performance traditions and music theory of the western European mainstream.

*Viking Mediologies* presents an exploratory framework for the study of skaldic poetics that replaces the idea of a transition from skaldic orality to scribal literacy with one of constant mediation and re-mediation, embodiment, and sensory perception. As Heslop demonstrates, there is no singular Viking orality that makes way for a singular Christian literacy. There are many ways of seeing, hearing, speaking, inscribing, and remembering skaldic poetry. The book grapples with “the ecstatic, agonizing, memory-erasing, poetic-trance-inducing me(a)dium of poetry, wrested by the god Óðinn from the giants” (4) and its transformations as it passes in and out of bodies, flowing sometimes freely, sometimes violently. In working to disentangle Viking and late medieval mediologies, the volume takes a non-linear approach to media and the pre-modern corpus (12), shifting backwards and forwards in time and space between poems as outwardly dissimilar as *Ynglingatal* (List of the Ynglingar) and *Líknarbraut* (Way of Grace).

Although the book opens with Egill Skallagrímsson heaping up a praise-cairn in words to his friend, *Viking Mediologies* pays very little attention to skalds as authors. Regardless of one’s attitude towards author-centric approaches, skaldic biography is a powerful tool for organizing poetry, with the life of the skald serving as an anchor point for a body of poems that takes on an afterlife of its own. *Viking Mediologies* offers a very different unifying force, namely that of the body itself—whether corporeal or imagined.

Commemoration of the body, and the role of commemorated bodies in constructing landscapes of remembrance, becomes the focus of the first chapter, “Death in Place.” Heslop argues in the following chapter, “Forging the Chain,” that changes in medium (i.e., the introduction of the manuscript) and religion (the introduction of Christianity) brought subtle changes in how links between royal bodies are organized in poetry and prose. In her view, use of

genealogy as a linear structural device is a feature of younger poetry by skalds influenced by Christian thought. Comparing Old Norse with other literatures, she suggests that “an interest in genealogy and chronology is associated with Christian learning and the growing importance of writing” (63), reflected in the changing ways in which kings are remembered.

From themes of memory, including close analysis of *Ynglingatal* and the inscription on the Rök runestone, the volume turns to mental images and visuality. In the book’s second section, Heslop continues to develop the argument that contact with book technologies fundamentally changed the way in which pre-modern Scandinavian audiences interacted with words, but she contends that one can also discern earlier layers of skaldic production and reception in surviving material. In analyzing the visuality of the skaldic picture poems, she suggests that older skaldic ekphrasis bears an affinity to the picture puzzles seen in Viking Age art. Interwoven into an extended exploration of the mediality of *Haustlong* (Autumn-Long), *Húsdrápa* (House Poem), and *Ragnarsdrápa* (Ragnarr’s Poem) are insights into the importance of sight, visuality, and the “mind’s eye” for medieval Christian audiences. Drawing on Michael Baxandall’s concept of the period eye, Heslop makes a strong case that the “Viking eye” is not the medieval Christian eye and that awareness of the different cultural conditions in the Viking Age and twelfth- and thirteenth-century Iceland can lead to a deeper understanding of how skaldic poetry developed.

From the eyes and seeing, *Viking Mediologies* moves to the voice and hearing. Chapter 5, “The Noise of Poetry,” contains a fascinating discussion of what battle sounds like in a skaldic poem and what techniques the skalds might employ when memorializing a ruler’s achievements. Skalds go beyond simple descriptions of the din of war to mediate the phenomenal experience of standing on the field, surrounded by the incantations of swords (142–43, 147–48). Seizing on the moment of battle and mediating it through verbal performance, poetry becomes a space in which to reanimate the fallen, only to have them fight to the death again—a metrical island that hosts an unending *Hjaðningavíg* (Battle of the Hjaðningar). While comparisons with the sounds of mechanized warfare (139–40, 148) can at first seem incongruous, they help to situate skaldic encomium as a literary and cultural practice. These are not poems that seek to impress the horror of battle on the audience, like survivors describing the agony of trench warfare in the First World War. Instead, Heslop suggests, the skald acts as an indispensable “eye- or ear-witness” to the glorious performance of the warrior, without much consideration of the justness of the fight (137).

Chapter 6 leaps forward to the thirteenth century and the *Second Grammatical Treatise* (SGT). By this time, a Christian warrior had put an end to the cycle of the *Hjaðningavíg*, and skaldic encomium was rubbing shoulders with hurdy-gurdies and medieval music theory. Although the chapter’s title, “A Poetry Machine,” refers to the grid diagram on f. 46r of SGT in Codex Upsalienis (DG 11 4to), reproduced on Plate 7, Heslop takes no less interest in the final passage of SGT in Codex Wormianus (AM 242 fol.), which imagines the tongue as a helm for speech and song. The former, she proposes, is preoccupied with the technological mediation of sound, while the latter reveals a fascination with “the hidden intellectual and physical processes within the body that give rise to the event of vocal sound” (162). Both fourteenth-century codices are deeply

rooted in the underlying desire to capture sound in writing, whether chopped into syllables or expanded into complex analogies. Skaldic poetics have moved into the era of performance from written books.

A minor complaint is that while skaldic poetry takes front and centre on the page, most long quotations of Latin and Old Norse prose are relegated to the endnotes at the back of the book, together with any discussion of ambiguity in their translation. In a book that places rich emphasis on the noise of language and lexical nuances of meaning, placing words at such a distance from their translations can become awkward, particularly in Chapter 6 (e.g., 168). Frustratingly, modern scholarship in languages other than English has been silently translated in the main body, without translations being marked as such (e.g., 76, 174, and 182). While English may be a dominant academic language in the twenty-first century, masking the presence of contributions in other languages is an unfortunate decision in an otherwise well-crafted book. *Viking Mediologies* makes plain the impossibility of the neutrality of any medium, and even good translations are no exception.

*Viking Mediologies* delivers on its own promise to avoid a straight developmental trajectory (12), rejecting the impulse to organize the body and its senses into a hierarchical structure. Its many insights into the world of skaldic poetics, such as the extrasemantic importance of the kenning in supporting intricate rhyme structures (153) and the many nuances and meanings of the verb *að kenna* (94–97), which can refer to everything from teaching to recognition, are thus scattered throughout its pages. If its non-linear style might not appeal to readers seeking a quick skim of the highlights, it proves an exceptionally rich and rewarding book for anyone interested in skaldic poetry and its performance.

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