ANTHONY FAULKES

EDDA

The word ‘Edda’ is found as the name of a book in two medieval manuscripts. Uppsala University Library DG 11, written about 1300, has the heading ‘Bók þessi heitir Edda’. The words that follow in this manuscript (‘hana hefir saman setta Snorri Sturlu sonr’) indicate that the scribe meant the name to apply to the work he was copying rather than to the manuscript. AM 757 4to, written about 1400, contains parts of Skáldskaparmál and other material, but neither Gylfaginning nor Háttatal. In this manuscript one of the extracts from Skáldskaparmál is introduced with the words ‘svá segir í bök þeirri sem Edda heitir at . . .’ What follows was not derived from the Uppsala manuscript. A few lines later 757 refers to the contents of the prologue to Snorra Edda with the words ‘svá sem skrifat finnz í fyrsta capitula greindrar bókar’, and again the reference is not to the text of the Uppsala manuscript.

The name ‘Edda’ also appears in sixteenth- to seventeenth-century marginalia in the Codex Regius of Snorra Edda (Gks 2367 4to), and a seventeenth-century hand has added the heading ‘Bókin Edda er fletta’ in Utrecht University Library MS no. 1374 (the text in this manuscript was written about the end of the sixteenth century, but is thought to have been copied directly from a thirteenth-century manuscript). The earliest mention of the name of the work outside manuscripts that contain it seems to be that in the late sixteenth-century Oddverjaannáll, which has under the report of Snorri Sturluson’s death in 1241 the words ‘hann samsetti Eddu og margar aðrar fræðibækur íslenzkar sögur’. In the seventeenth century the work is commonly referred to by this name, though the title ‘Skálda’

1 Edda Snorra Sturlusonar, Hafniæ 1848-87, II 250. The spelling of Icelandic quotations in this article is normalised.
2 Ibid. II 532.
3 Edda Snorra Sturlusonar, ed. Finnur Jónsson, København 1931, pp. iv and vi.
is sometimes found; but this is most often applied to "Skáldskaparmál" or the Grammatical Treatises on their own.5

The word ‘Edda’ is found in two other contexts in medieval Icelandic; in both cases it appears in the text in manuscripts that contain Snorra Edda. Rígspula is preserved only in AM 242 fol. (Codex Wormianus), written in the middle of the fourteenth century, though the poem itself may be much older. In this poem Edda is the name of the woman on whom Rígr begot the race of thralls.6 Since the poem goes on to tell how Rígr begot free men on Amma (‘grandmother’) and noblemen on Móðir (‘mother’), it would seem that the poet took Edda to mean ‘great-grandmother’ (and Ái, the name of her husband, to mean ‘great-grandfather’). Secondly, edda appears in some manuscripts of Skáldskaparmál among the heiti for woman.7 The Utrecht manuscript, AM 748 I 4to (written in the early fourteenth century), and AM 757 4to read ‘heitir ok móðir, amma, þriðja edda’. AM 748 II 4to (written about 1400) does not have the first four words, the Codex Regius does not have the first three, and the sentence is entirely lacking in the Uppsala manuscript and Codex Wormianus (the quotation in Guðmundur Andrésson’s dictionary, ‘Móðir heitir eða, amma þennur, edda en þriðja’, is unreliable;8 it is possible that he took it from a part of Codex Wormianus that is now lost, but the words are not in Magnús Ólafsson’s Edda, which reproduces a lot of the material from that manuscript). In the account of the descriptions of man in Skáldskaparmál, it is stated that one may describe a man as someone’s ‘fóður eða afa; ái er hinn þriði’ (thus the Codex Regius and the Utrecht manuscript; AM 748 I and II both have ‘heitir’ instead of ‘er’; 757 omits the last three words, and in Codex Wormianus and the Uppsala manuscript ái begins the list of heiti for son).9 Thus it is likely (in spite of the unsatisfactory preservation of these passages) that the compiler of this

7 Edda Snorra Sturlusonar 1931, p. 190.
8 Lexicon Islandicum, ed. P. H. Resen, Havniae 1683, p. 57. Resen prints eina for eíða, but the manuscript copy of the dictionary (Junius 120 in the Bodleian Library, Oxford) has eída.
9 Edda Snorra Sturlusonar 1931, p. 188; Edda Snorra Sturlusonar, Codex Wormianus, ed. Finnur Jónsson, København og Kristiania 1924, p. 104. Ái appears also in the þula of heiti for man in Edda Snorra Sturlusonar 1931, p. 199.
part of Skáldskaparmál understood ái and edda to be words for great-grandfather and great-grandmother, though it may be that he only knew the words from Rígsþula and there is no independent confirmation of the meaning of either word in other sources. None of the texts that have the word edda as a heiti for woman indicates any connection with the name of the book, and this may mean that the name was only applied to it later, or that there was not felt to be any etymological connection between the two usages. Edda is used as a personal name in Bósa saga (probably written in the fourteenth century) without there being any association either with the name of the book or with the words in Skáldskaparmál and Rígsþula.10

In medieval Iceland, therefore, Edda could be used as a personal name in stories of legendary times, and also as a common noun meaning great-grandmother, though neither usage seems to have had very wide currency. By the end of the thirteenth century it had also come to be used as the name of Snorri Sturluson’s treatise on poetics. Then in poems from the fourteenth century and later phrases such as ‘reglur eddu’, ‘eddu list’ are used, and appear quite frequently.11 In the first phrase edda could still mean Snorri’s treatise, but in the second it must mean ‘poetry’ or ‘poetics’ in general. It is clear that for these writers, edda meant ‘ars poetica’, and when it was used as the name of Snorri’s book must have been understood to relate principally to Skáldskaparmál and Háttatal, which are accounts of poetic diction and metre, rather than to the mythology of Gylfaginning.12

11 Arngrímur ábóti Brandsson, Guðmundar kvæði (1345), verse 2: ‘Rædda ek lít d við reglur eddu’ (Den norsk-islandske Skjaldedigtning, ed. Finnur Jónsson, København og Kristiania 1912–15, A II 348); Árni ábóti Jónsson, Guðmundur drápa (fourteenth century), verse 78: ‘Yfirimæistur mun eddu listar allstirðr sjá hróðr virðast’ (Skjaldedigtning A II 429); Eysteinn Ægrismann (died 1361), Lilja verse 97: ‘Eigi er glógt þó at eddu regla undan hljóti at víkja stundum’ (Skjalde digtning A II 394); Hallr prestr, Nikulásdrápa verse 4: ‘Skil vegligra(r) eddlu (sic) reglu’ (Íslenzk miðaldakvæði II, ed. Jón Helgason, Kaupmannahöfn 1938, p. 418). There are many further examples from rímur in Corpus Poeticum Boreale, ed. G. Vigfusson and F. York Powell, Oxford 1883, II 560-61 (see also I xxvi–xxvii).
12 If it is correct that in the Middle Ages edda was understood to mean ‘ars poetica’, the application of the name to the collection of poems in GKS 2365 4to after its rediscovery by scholars about 1643 is clearly as inappropriate semantically as it is historically, and the customary modern distinction of eddic or eddaic poetry from scaldic is also unfortunate, since the term edd(a)ic ought properly to refer to the sort of poetry dealt with in Snorra Edda; and the word skáld in Old Icelandic meant ‘poet’ without any restriction based on style or subject-matter. But it is a
There are many Icelandic books that have acquired nicknames; some originally related to particular manuscripts and were later applied to the works they contain. Examples are Grýla, Syrpa, Rímbeğla, Grágás, Hungrvaka, Njála, Grettla, Landnáma, Hulda, Hrokkĭnskinna, Morkinskinna, Vatnshyrna.13 They originate from various periods, and as is the nature of nicknames, the meaning of some appears transparent, others are obscure; some of them, like Edda, are in the form of feminine diminutives. Often they must have been applied as the result of some now forgotten anecdote or remote association of ideas that it is now only possible to guess at. The name Edda may be of this last kind. Many attempts have been made to explain it from the seventeenth century onwards, but none is without difficulty. Explanations have been of two kinds, either that the name of the book is a special use of the word edda meaning great-grandmother, or that it is a homonym of that word, derived from a different root and coined in the thirteenth century specifically to apply to Snorri’s work. Nowadays it is generally assumed that there is some association with the word edda meaning great-grandmother, since it is at least certain that this word existed, though the nature of the association has never been satisfactorily explained; the ancient traditional lore the book contains is hardly such as a great-grandmother might be expected to tell of, since there is no association in Icelandic culture between old women and scaldic verse, unless the reference is to some of the traditional tales in Gylfaginning.14 But in the Middle Ages (and later) it was Skáldskaparmál that was most often copied and adapted, and it was this part of the work that was evidently considered the most important (it is also the longest part). The name of the work ought to apply primarily to that. The other etymologies that have in modern times been thought possible are derivation from the place-name

13 Björn of Skarðsá, in ‘Nockorar malsgreinar um þat hvaðan bokinn Edda hefr sitt heiti’ (preserved in Sth. Papp. fol. nr 38, foll. 100 f. and elsewhere), lists the names Skálda, Rímbeğla, Hungrvaka, Rómferla, Grænspjald ‘og aðrar fleiri’.
14 My attention has been drawn to the title ‘Ribe Oldemoder (Avia Ripensis)’, which was given to a ‘Samling af Adkomster, Indtægtsangivelser og kirkelige Vedtægter for Ribe Domkapitel og Bispestol, nedskrevet 1290–1518’ (see B. Erichsen and A. Krarup, Dansk Historisk Bibliografi I, København 1918–21, p. 636, no. 11195); but this does not seem to be any more than an interesting though insignificant coincidence.
Oddi, where Snorri received his early education, and derivation from the word öðr 'poetry'. It requires some ingenuity to explain why a book written long after the author left Oddi should be called 'the book of Oddi' (though there is a parallel in the similar misnomer 'Laufás Edda'). Derivation from öðr at least gives a plausible semantic development, but even if it were accepted that the phonological development were possible, it would have had to have taken place gradually. It is unlikely that the word edda could have been coined in the thirteenth century on the basis of öðr, and it does not seem likely that edda in the sense 'poetics' existed in the preliterary period.

Snorri’s Edda is the first book of its kind extant from medieval Scandinavia, and it is unlikely that it had any predecessors either written or oral that dealt theoretically with the art of scaldic poetry (the twelfth-century Háttalykill and the pulur can scarcely be said to do this). Until it was written, therefore, there would have been no Norse word to describe it, though as soon as it was written one would be required; Icelanders were not in the habit of giving their books foreign titles. It is probable that Snorri (and his first audience) knew at least a little Latin, and most of the treatises that could have inspired him to write his were in Latin. When he came to devise a title for his book, it is far from improbable that he might coin a word that had the form of an Icelandic feminine diminutive but was derived from a Latin word that had to do with composing poetry. He might choose a Latin root because his work was a learned one and had Latin models; an Icelandic form because he wrote in the vernacular about vernacular poetry; and a diminutive because it was customary for authors, especially when publishing a new kind of work, to assume at least the appearance of humility.

Such an etymology of the name Edda is in fact the oldest extant, and was proposed by the priest Magnús Ólafsson in his preface to his version of Snorra Edda which he compiled in 1609: ‘Edda dregst af orði latinsku edo, i.e. ég yrki eður dikta’. Although this is not the commonest meaning of edo, which more often means ‘publish’, the word is frequently used

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15 All three etymologies are old ones (like the one defended below), and were already discussed by Jón Ólafsson of Grunnavík in British Library MS Egerton 642 (written 1735), fol. 13.

16 Ari, however, seems to have entitled his only extant work Libellus Islandorum (see Íslendingabók, Landnámabók, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, Reykjavík 1968, p. 4). In the present context, though, it is interesting that Ari used the diminutive form libellus.

17 See Edda Islandorum, ed. P. H. Resen, Havniæ 1665 A1r.
with reference to poetry, and it would not have required very profound
learning in Latin to coin the word Edda from it. The first two lines of
Ovid’s *Amores* read:

Arma gravi numero violentaque bella parabam
edere, materia conveniente modis.

Here the word might well be understood to mean ‘compose (poetry) about’,
‘treat in verse’, and in *Tristia* 2, 541 (*carminaque edideram*) it could be
Note also Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 9, 4, 74, where the word is used
to distinguish what a poet wrote (*edidit*) from a later emendation.

This derivation would remain entirely unconvincing, however,18 if there
were not another Icelandic abstract noun formed in an exactly parallel
way from a Latin verb of the same type as *edo*, with the connection between
the Icelandic and Latin words (which cannot be doubted) actually made
explicit in a medieval Icelandic text that was certainly known to Snorri.
*Færeyinga saga*, which was one of Snorri’s sources in *Heimskringla*, tells
an amusing story of how Péóra questioned Sigmundr about his religious
education at the hands of Prándr í Gótu. He said he had learned ‘Pater
noster ok kredduna’. This ‘kredda’ turns out to be a version of a widespread
popular prayer, but not a very exact account of the Christian faith. ‘Pyikki
mér engi mynd á, segir hon (i.e. Péóra), á kredo.’ Prandr’s defence is that
there are many variants of the faith that have equal validity: ‘eru margar
kreddur, ok er slíkt, segir hann, eigi á eina lund rétt.’19

From this anecdote it is apparent, not only that the modern Icelandic
word *kredda*, which means ‘superstition, illogically held belief’ is a
hypocoristic form of the Latin word *credo* as used substantivally to mean
‘affirmation of faith’, but that this derivation was known and understood
in thirteenth-century Iceland.20 This parallel makes it possible to imagine
Snorri, or one of his small circle of interested friends who must have
constituted the first readership of his book, coining the word *edda* from

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18 Cf. Árni Magnússon’s comment: ‘Magni Olai, viri alias eruditissimi, sententia,
de Edda ab edo derivanda, refutari non eget’ (‘Vita Sæmundi Multiscii’, p. xxii, in *Edda Sæmundar hinns Fróða* I, Hafniae 1787). This view is repeated by Jón Ólafsson
of Grunnvík in Egerton 642 (see note 15 above).
19 *Færeyinga saga*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, Reykjavík 1967, pp. 110–11; *Flateyjar-
20 *Kredda* probably came into Icelandic via the Old English loan-word *creda*,
but this makes no difference to the present argument, since it is the ultimate
etymology of the word and the fact that this was known that is significant.
edo in conscious imitation of the word kredda, which he knew was derived from credo, as a half-humorous description of his treatise, thus implying that the Edda stood in a similar relation to Latin artes poeticae as Práñdr’s kredda to the official credo. There may also at the same time have been an awareness of the pun on the other word edda, which might have been taken to reflect the fact that the treatise dealt with a kind of poetry that in the thirteenth century must have been thought by many rather old-fashioned.

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Not until I had written the above did I see Stefán Karlsson’s lively defence of the same etymology of edda on very much the same lines as mine in ‘Eddukredda’, Bríarí á sextugsafmæli Halldórs Halldórssonar 13. júlí 1971, pp. 25–33, published in a single typewritten copy in Reykjavík in that year. The main difference in his argument is that he takes edda to be derived from edo in the sense ‘edit, compile, relate’ with reference principally to Snorri’s activity in compiling Gylfaginning. It seems to me that edda (as a title) must have had the sense ‘ars poetica’ from the beginning, and that it can only be derived from edo if that verb was taken to mean ‘compose (poetry)’. Nevertheless, the fact that two people have independently come to revive this etymology is itself a testimony to its plausibility, and I hope that scholars will reconsider it and perhaps add it to the list of possible or likely explanations of the word edda; though no doubt on this as on other subjects it is probable that each will continue to stand by his own kredda.


21 I have incorporated some corrections and additional remarks suggested by Stefán Karlsson in comments on what I had written, which were offered in a splendid spirit of academic detachment.