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## Calling Attention to the Past

### The Decorated Initial of Gamle kongelige Samling 2365 4to, 20r

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For all the riches of its poetry and its all but invisible framing of ancient traditions, the provenance of the Codex Regius collection of eddic poems (GkS 2365 4to) remains an enigma. There is no prologue; no indication of precisely where in Iceland the manuscript was produced or exactly when during the latter half of the thirteenth century it was written; not enough comparative evidence to enable identification of the scribe; no way of knowing for sure to what extent the overall design was the scribe's work or that of antecedent compilers; and no clue as to who might have commissioned or encouraged the manuscript's production beyond the general impetus assumed to have come from Snorri's enterprise in composing his *Edda* some generations before.

The manuscript is no deluxe production: there are holes (a large one on leaf 41 and smaller ones on leaves 35 and 45) and a damaged patch of skin (leaf 23), which forced the scribe to reroute lines of text. A substantial tear across leaf 28 has been carefully sewn together with a green thread (silk, according to the description at [handrit.is/en/manuscript/view/is/GKS04-2365](http://handrit.is/en/manuscript/view/is/GKS04-2365)), the scar nonetheless interrupting the flow of Grípir's explanation to Sigurðr of his future treachery (*Grp.* 37-39) and the prose account overleaf of Sigurðr's encounter with Reginn.

Throughout, the text appears to have been conscientiously written, "with tasteful spacing" as Andreas Heusler observed, the arrangement of the whole "less pompous though equally well formed" compared to other manuscripts produced at the time (1937: 15). The extant artifact does occasionally provide an indication of the attitude of the scribe (or possibly one of his predecessors), such as within a prose passage on leaf 23v where the substance of tradition is clearly filtered through thirteenth-century values: *Þat var trúa í forneskju, at menn væri endrbornir, enn þat er nú kǫlluð kerlingavilla* ("That was the belief in ancient times that people were reincarnated, but nowadays we call that old women's craziness").<sup>1</sup> Otherwise that lack of pomp, which Heusler remarked on, makes detection of the compiler's sensibility a subtle procedure. Spaces were left in the manuscript for rubrics, many of which are now faded beyond certain identification of the hand, though it seems likely they were probably the work of the same writer. If so, the occasional appearance of a *capitulum* among the rubrics (on leaf 8r, for instance) gestures towards the learned

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations are expanded and normalised from the manuscript; translations are the author's own.



tradition in which he must have been trained. Notation indicating the alternation of speakers – now only sporadically visible in margins cut down from their original width (on leaves 8, 13, 15, 16 and 22 for example) – promotes a reading of dialogues as interactions between sparring partners rather than as disembodied information.

The scribe was not beyond distraction, however, as the casual drawings in the bottom margin of many leaves attest, apparently drawn using the same ink as that used for the text: still visible are the head of a man (16r, in profile on 23r and with someone else on 44v); the rearing head of a beast (16v, 35r and 43v), as well as the prow of a ship (27r), the last possibly responding to the account on that leaf of Sigmundr placing his son Sinfjötli's dead body in a ship (*Frá dauði Sinfjötla*). Even more frequent are doodles of stylised foliage (7v, 11r, 14r, 18r, 21r, 25r, 30r and 32r), possibly sketched in preparation for the decoration of initials, which appear at the start of some poems in now faded red and green ink.

It is through these decorated initials, one of the few modulations in the presentation of the text, that an invitation is extended into the textual world of ancient anonymous poetry. Leaf 1r begins with a perfunctory capital H (further blunted as the upper margin of 1r has been eroded over time), its decoration pale and the green of its ink now barely detectable. The initial heralds the first lines of *Völuspá*: *Hljóðs bið ek allar kindir, meiri ok minni mögu Heimdalar; vildu at ek, Valföðr, vel fyrtelja forn spjöll fira, þau er fremst um man* (“A hearing I ask from all kin, greater and lesser descendants of Heimdallr [> people]; Father of the Slain [> Óðinn], you wish that I recount well the ancient stories of people, those which I remember from furthest ago”). This arresting demand works to implicate readers past and present among the text's audience and transports us immediately to a mythological scene. The unheard demand by the god Óðinn, that the *völva* give voice to what she remembers, triggers the recitation of prophecy that fills the following leaves. (The technique of launching into speech in response to an unheard question is not unique to *Völuspá* – it is also found at the beginning of the second *Guðrúnarkviða* and *Helreið Brynhildar* – but its impact is greatest here, at the top of the first extant leaf.) The call to attention is coupled with the use of kennings to engage the audience by inscribing their purported kinship to the gods: just as Óðinn is the father of fallen warriors, readers are all, by extension, descendants of Heimdallr, two points of connection between humans and the divine, between the audience and the addressee of the poem. This dual addressee broadens the scope of the *völva*'s amphitheatre, the phrasing *meiri ok minni* suggesting serried ranks, further expanding the space into which the *spá* resonates.

As the memories of the *völva* tumble onto parchment, the imagined world is anchored by the temporal clause *ár var alda* (“early was the age”, *Vsp.* 3), phrasing that is used in other poems to establish the setting in ancient times: at the beginning of *Guðrúnarkviða I* (33v) and *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* (34v). In both cases, a large initial A marks the transition, the vertical staves of the A on 33v drawn in green ink that is still luminous. The phrasing *ár var alda* is also found at the beginning of the first poem about Helgi Hundingsbani (referred to as *Völsungakviða* in the introduc-

tory rubric) and it is to this decorated initial on 20r that the manuscript's producer wishes to draw the most attention. Whereas the initial H which introduced the text of *Völuspá* on the first leaf of the manuscript abutted just three lines of text (as do the initial A's on 33v and 34v), the curved flourish of the A on folio 20r tumbles down the margin of the text, extending the reach of the initial for eleven lines, and its vertical staves abut a full five lines of text (four lines of the poem below the line of the rubric).

There is no doubt that this textscape is a new beginning, signaling that we are leaving behind Þórr and the recently fossilised dwarf Alvíss to embark on a new story about Helgi and the *Völsungar*. Once again, the audience is oriented through the phrasing *ár var alda*, reminded we are going back into the distant past: *Ár var alda, þat er arar gullu, hnígu heilög vötn af Himinfjöllum; þá hafði Helga, inn hugumstóra, Borghildr borit í Brálundi* ("Early was that age when eagles shrieked, sacred waterfalls plunged down from Himinfjöll; when Borghildr gave birth to Helgi the great-hearted"). In our era of computer-generated imagery in cinema it is easy to sense ourselves hurtling through this landscape, down through the raucous air to where the nativity scene takes place. But that three-dimensional journey is invited by the text itself and reinforced by the manuscript layout, with its extravagant initial A marking not just the beginning of a new cycle of poems about human heroes but the reader's transportation to the crucible of heroic culture. Transitioning from the mythological era (which, as we saw, was also marked as *ár*) to the early days of human society requires more than an observation about the distance of the past however; it requires a textscape that announces a new moment.

The visual impact of this initial – the closest the compiler gets to pomp in his design – enables the reader's passage into this new scene, where the aerial perspective is maintained by the text as we hover among the norns in the "middle of the moon's hall" (*mána sal miðjan*, *HHI* 3) before overhearing the first conversation of the poem, between two ravens, perched high up in a tree (*HHI* 5). Just as eddic poets excelled in the artful negotiation of space to provide an illusion of intimacy enabling their audiences to overhear ancient conversations, so too the design of this leaf of GkS 2365 4to reveals the compiler's careful modulation of visual effect. Within his modest means he provided a graphic fanfare to accompany the birth of Helgi, to herald the telling of ancient legends in relation to which his society was still defining itself.

## References

[www.handrit.is](http://www.handrit.is)

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