

NAMES IN THE MYTHOLOGICAL LAY RÍGSPULA

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In the Old Icelandic literature, there are two works which have the title of Edda, the one in verse, the other in prose. The Poetic or Elder Edda consists of thirty nine poems, which were collected by Saemund Sigfusson (1057-1131), surnamed the Learned, toward the end of the eleventh or the beginning of the twelfth century. Some scholars maintain that Saemund merely transcribed the Eddaic poems from Runic manuscripts or Runic staves; but the most probable conjecture seems to be that he collected them from oral tradition, though he may possibly have found some of the most important amongst them in manuscripts written in Roman letters, shortly after the introduction of Christianity.

The Eddaic poems may be classified as follows: 1) The Mythic-cosmogonic poems 2) The Mythic-ethnologic poems 3) The Ethic poems 4) The Mythological poems 5) The Mythic-heroic poems 6) The Miscellaneous poems. All the poems have internal evidence that entitles them to the claim of a much higher antiquity than the eleventh century.

The Mythic-ethnologic class contains only one poem, the Rígsþula (i.e. the enumerated verses of Rígr). In an allegorical manner, it explains the origins of social classes in Scandinavia at the period it was composed. Heimdal -- who, as the warder of heaven, is here a symbol of the sun -- wanders, under the name of Rígr, over the earth, then but thinly peopled,

probably, according to the notions of the Skald, only with the immediate offspring of Ask and Embla. In the Prose Edda (chapter 9) we find information concerning the names Ask and Embla. One day, as the gods Odin, Vili, and Ve were walking along the sea-beach, they found two stems of wood, out of which they shaped a man and a woman. Odin infused into them life and spirit; Vili endowed them with reason and power of motion; Ve gave them speech and features, hearing and vision. The man they called Ask, and the woman, Embla. The Old Icelandic word askr has the English meaning "the ash-tree." Finn Magnusen changed by metathesis the Greek word melia, an ash-tree, into emlia, which he transformed into Embla, and hence concluded that the ash furnished the materials for both man and woman.

Heimdal, the diety, is received and entertained with great hospitality, first by Ai (Great Grandfather) and Edda (Great Grandmother), living in a hut, where food is husk-filled bread and broth. The housewife gives birth to a son after Rigr's visit. The child is sprinkled with water at the moment of birth. Edda's son is called Thrall:

Ióð ól Edda,
hgrundsvartan,

ióso yatni¹
héto Præl.

Then Rigr visits a well-built house, where the well dressed master is making a loom, while his wife sits spinning, in fine smock and jewels. There Rigr eats stewed calf and good foods, and there is the home of Afi (Grandfather) and Amma (Grandmother). The deity, by his beneficent presence, infuses a vital energy into Amma. Nine months after Heimdal's departure, Amma gives birth to a son with rosy cheeks and red hair. He is

sprinkled with water at the moment of his birth and is called Karl ("freeman"):

Iðð ól Amma,
kollodo Karl,
raudan ok riðan,

iðso vatni,
kona sveip ripti,
riðodo augo.²

Lastly Rigr is received by Faðir ("Father") and Moðir ("Mother"), who have a mansion. Rigr is served with roast pork and game-birds in silver dishes. Nine months after Rigr's departure, Moðir gives birth to a son. Her son is called Jarl ("Noble"). He has fair hair, a clear complexion and fine piercing eyes:

Svein ól Moðir
iðso vatni,
bleikt var hár,
otol vóro augo

silki vafði,
Iarl létu heita;
biartir vangar,
sem yrmlingi.³

Jarl proceeds to bend the bow, ride horses, swim the sea and swing the sword. Rigr himself reappears to teach this youth wisdom, calls him his son, and urges him to win land to be a domain for his heirs. Jarl goes to war, wins land, and obtains wealth.

The Rígsþula Skald tells us that Thrall, Karl, and Jarl have each of them a numerous offspring. We have thus an explanation of the three social classes that appear, at a very early period, to have formed the framework of Scandinavian society: the thralls or slaves, the churls or free peasants - boedur or odalsmen, as they were afterwards called - and the nobles. The Skald describes the thralls as having black hair, and an unsightly countenance, thick ankles, coarse fingers, and as being of a low and deformed stature; these are physiological traits characteristic of the Lapps, who were probably reduced to a state of vassalage by their Scandinavian

conquerors. The destiny of the thrall is to toil. He digs peat, manures the fields, and feeds the pigs. The thralls toil in order that, by their labour, the churls may obtain sufficient produce from the earth to enable the nobles to live with splendour. The Skald shows his contempt for the social class by giving Thrall's sons such names as Stumpy, Plumpy, and Slowpace, and calling his daughters Lazybody, Cranefoot, and Smokynose.

The churls are described as having red hair and florid complexion. Among the sons of Karl we find Stiffbeard, Husbandman, Holder of land, and Smith.

The Skald reserves his admiration for the nobles, who have blond hair, bright cheeks, eyes as fierce as a young serpent's; they chase the deer and have elegant amusements. The Skald marries Jarl to Erna ("the Lively"), the daughter of Hersir ("Baron"), but only gives us the names of their sons, which generally denote relationships, as Cousin and Nephew.

The Rígsþula furnishes a proof of the aristocratic spirit that prevailed in Scandinavia at a very early period of its history.

Some scholars maintain that Rígsþula does not belong to Scandinavian but to Celtic mythology. Rig is the ancient great king (Rig - Mor) of the Irish, the god Dagde, from whom the three classes of society take their origin, and who also is the source of all human wisdom. The double paternity - an earthly and a heavenly father - is a favorite theme in Irish heroic poetry. The contest of wisdom with the subsequent change of name is a genuine trait of Celtic social life. On the other hand, the human characters in Rígsþula are examples of pure Scandinavian types. The

division into social classes is purely Scandinavian. Kon the Young ("the king") is as pronounced a type of the viking life as can be imagined. It is the viking life, but it is not the picture of berserkers that we find presented in the chronicles of the West; it is the Northern view of royal aims. There is an idea that not strength and readiness with arms constitute a great leader, but powers of mind and domination over nature. The poem Rígsþula reveals to us the view of life and of kingship held at the climax of the Viking Age. The dynasty founded by Kon the Young traces its origin back partly to Erna (Erin, Ireland) and partly to Dana, King Dan's daughter. It has been suggested that the home of the poem Rígsþula was the Isle of Man, where the ruling dynasty had a dual origin, being partly from Denmark and partly from Ireland.

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NOTES

¹ Edda. Die Lieder des Codex Regius, ed. Gustav Neckel (Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1914), p. 277.

The most important manuscript of the Poetic Edda is in Codex Regius, MS. No. 2365 quarto in the Old Royal Collection in the Royal Library of Copenhagen (Copenhagen, 1937).

² Edda, ed. Gustav Neckel, p. 279.

³ Edda, ed. Gustav Neckel, p. 281.