

part of that period. In spite of a long and learned controversy it has never been definitely settled which of these lays were composed in Iceland and which may have originated in Norway or in the Norse colonies "West of the Main". But however this may be, it is certain that they have been the exclusive property of the Icelanders as far back as written records go and that they bear a close affinity to other Old-Icelandic poetical compositions.

These lays reflect the life of the Viking Age in its varied manifestations. We are made acquainted with our forefathers' conception of the world, of this life, of life to come, of the fates of gods and men; they show us their moral ideas and their philosophy of life, their character and their customs. In them are preserved old stories of the gods and heroes, not only of the Scandinavian peoples, but of the whole Teutonic race as well. They are composed in simple metres; the language is vigorous; the sentences are short, the words expressive and often pregnant with inspiration.

*The Dróttkvæði* (Poems in Court-Metre) are for the most part composed on kings, earls or other great men and their exploits, and were one of the surest ways to gain the favour of foreign princes. By way of reward the poet was granted a place at court, some post of honour, gold and costly presents. It is therefore not altogether without reason to say, as has sometimes been done, that court-poetry was an Icelandic export article; for, from the second half of the tenth century and down to the end of the thirteenth, all the court-poets, whose names have come down to us, are of Icelandic birth. The poets praise the kings, especially for their munificence and bravery in war; and in enumerating their warlike expeditions, their *drapas* (*drápur*, Burden-Lays) are often nothing but descriptions of battles and bloodshed. But though not chary of his praises, the poet does not lack frankness either, as shown by *Sigvatr Thordarson* (ca. 995—1045) who had the courage to address to king Magnús Ólafsson a very out-spoken admonitory poem, giving him advice which the king thought it proper to follow. Sometimes a poet who had fallen into disfavour with a king would compose an encomium on him to save his own neck (*höfuðlausn*, i. e. Head-Ransom). There are genealogical lays; funeral poems or verses made on old stories of the gods, the occasion sometimes being a picture of these painted on a shield (shield poems) or carved on the walls of a hall for the sake of ornament. Lastly there are in the eleventh century and later made *drapas* on Christ and the Saints, besides a great number of occasional verses called forth by particular