

# The Rhyme of the Valkyries:

## An Exploration of Translation and Interpretation of the Darraðarljóð in *Njál's Saga*

Lairde Hextilda Corbett (MKA Emily Gaudier, Esq.)  
Kingdom of Ansteorra  
Gulf Wars Arts & Sciences War Point, A.S. LX (2026 CE)

### Table of Contents

I. MY INTERPRETATION.....	2
II. INTRODUCTION.....	3
III. TRANSLATION INSPIRATION.....	3
IV. ON FORNYRÐISLAG .....	4
V. TROCHAIC AND IAMBIC TETRAMETERS.....	5
VI. FORNYRÐISLAG VS. TETRAMETER: A QUICK GUIDE.....	6
VII. FURTHER ANALYSIS .....	6
VIII. LINGUISTIC CHALLENGES.....	7
IX. SIDE-BY-SIDE ANALYSIS – LITERAL TRANSLATION VERSUS MY VERSION .....	8
X. EARLY DRAFT TO FINAL DRAFT COMPARISON .....	14
XI. CONCLUSION .....	17
GLOSSARY.....	18
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	19
APPENDICES .....	20
A. WARP-WEIGHTED LOOM DIAGRAM .....	20
B. EXTANT WEAVING SWORD.....	21
C. 13 <sup>TH</sup> -CENTURY EXTANT COPY IN OLD NORSE.....	22
D. TYPED COPY OF THE DARRAÐARLJÓÐ IN OLD NORSE.....	23

## I. My Interpretation

### **The Valkyries' Warp**

An interpretation of the *Darraðarljóð* from *Njál's Saga*

By Hextilda Corbett

Stretch we tight the warp of war  
O'er beam so wet, and slick with blood  
Guts pulled long, with braids on floor  
Weft dripping, turning dirt to mud

Foes' entrails serve well as weft  
Their heads keep warp properly taut  
Loom filled 'til no room is left  
We swiftly work ere blood can clot

Sinew heddles, rent from flesh  
With spearhead shuttle, sword for sword  
Firmly beat the bloody weft  
The Valkyr prep to ride to war

Hild, Hjorthrimul go to weave  
We're fit to fight upon the field  
Sangrith, Svipul's swords shall cleave  
Sharp helmet's-bane they both shall wield

Swiftly weave the weft of war  
Eternal battle to behold  
Thickest fighting, forge we forth  
With Gunn and Gondul, as foretold

Swift, we weave the weft of war  
When banners fall, the slain lie dead  
Vict'ry nears, as does the gore  
We Valkyr walk where few dare tread

Grisly fabric now is set  
With battle's waste laid cold and bare  
Clothes we dye with battle-sweat  
War-winning songs now fill the air

Needed is our work gruesome  
We fight until the king's secure  
Warriors go, and Valkyr come  
Their fallen souls we do procure.

Forth we ride on bare-back steeds  
Our naked brands are used to slay  
War still calls the Valkyries  
Ride hard we maidens far away

## II. Introduction

*Njál's Saga* is a 13<sup>th</sup>-century Icelandic saga that describes events between 960 and 1020 CE. (Leksikon 2019). The *Darraðarljóð* – lit. *The Lay of the Spearman* – is a skaldic poem found in chapter 157 of the saga (Anonymous 2025). Its eleven stanzas detail the work of twelve Valkyries as they choose who is to be slain at the Battle of Clontarf<sup>1</sup>, which occurred in 1014 CE. The tone is dark and grisly, as the Valkyries weave with human viscera on their looms.

This passage is unique for a variety of reasons. Most skaldic or eddic poetry is preserved in poetic collections such as the *Poetic Edda* or quoted as individual stanzas in sagas; the *Darraðarljóð* is one of the few extended eddic-style poems placed wholesale inside a saga narrative (Clunies Ross 2005). Unlike many eddic lays, it is relatively short (12 stanzas), highly repetitive, and chant-like, giving it a ritual or incantatory quality. It appears at a climactic historical moment and is presented almost like a supernatural prophecy. The refrain-like repetition (“*vindum, vindum vef darraðar*” — “wind we, wind we the web of spears”) is rare in eddic poetry, making it feel closer to a spell or charm (ibid.).

My purpose is to explore the main translation and interpretation challenges faced when rendering the *Darraðarljóð* from Old Norse into modern English, particularly when intended for performance.

In my efforts to find an English-language version of the poem to perform, I was wholly dissatisfied. Some versions are word-for-word translations that do not flow well for spoken performance. Others are overly floral and fail, in my opinion, to capture the grim and unsettling quality of the scene.

I have opted, instead, to craft my own interpretation based on my knowledge of English poetry and Old Norse skaldic traditions. My goal was to create a piece suitable for SCA performances while honoring the essence of the original poem.

As I delved further into the work, I realized that the *Darraðarljóð* presents translators with an interesting set of challenges: its dense wordplay, delightfully grotesque imagery, and terse alliterative style resist easy rendering into modern English.

## III. Translation Inspiration

This process was inspired by Dr. Emily Wilson’s translation of *The Odyssey* (Homer 2017) in which she used clear, modern English set to the familiar pace of iambic pentameter. Her translation philosophy is one of responsibility. She asserts “that involves being as conscious as possible about our biases and preferences, as well as being informed as possible about the material at hand” (Brady 2018).

A similar set of challenges are at play in the *Darraðarljóð*: I had to negotiate between literal fidelity to Old Norse kennings and syntax, the poetic resonance of alliteration and rhythm, and the cultural unfamiliarity at play. In addition, I also had to keep in mind my particular audience: SCA members who are likely to be more familiar with both battle and weaving than the average person.

---

<sup>1</sup> Near Dublin, Ireland. Between 7,000 and 10,000 men were killed. It marked the beginning of the end of the Norse hold on the island.

As with Wilson’s interpretation of Homer’s *The Odyssey*, every English version of the *Darraðarljóð* reflects a particular philosophy of translation, balancing accessibility with fidelity and inevitably interpreting the original for a new audience.

## IV. On Fornyrðislag

The *Darraðarljóð* is written in *fornyrðislag*, lit. “old story meter.” It is the most common Old Norse verse form used in the Poetic Edda and in epic or lore-related sections of the sagas (Tolley 2014, 63). The form itself is alliterative, rather than rhymed (Dronke 1969).

Each stanza has 8 short (or “half”) lines, often arranged as four couplets. A couplet is a pair of successive verse lines, usually in the same meter and often linked by rhyme, which together form a unit of meaning (Abrams 2012, 78).

There are normally two stressed syllables per half-line. Alliteration links the half-lines; the first stressed syllable in the second half-line – i.e. the head-stave – alliterates with one or both of the stressed syllables in the first half-line (Gunnell 1995).

An example of *fornyrðislag* from verse 1 of the *Darraðarljóð*:

### Old Norse:

Vítt er orpinn	fyrir valfalli
rifs reiði,	rignir blóði.

### Literal (modern English):

Widely is woven,	before the slaughter of the slain,
the loom’s rigging;	it rains with blood.

Here, alliteration with V ties the first two half-lines together (*Vítt, valfalli*) and R ties the second two (*rifs, reiði, rignir*) (Gunnell 1995). There is also incidental final-syllable rhyming (*valfalli, reiði, blóði*).

Fornyrðislag is formulaic, gnomic<sup>2</sup>, and terse; the lines can read like proverbs or fragments and are designed for oral performance (Turville-Petre 1976). Parallelism and repetition are common. It uses kennings<sup>3</sup> and heiti<sup>4</sup>. For example, “battle-sweat” is a kenning for *blood*, while “steed” is a heiti for *horse*.

The mode also employs an economy of words; there is a heavy reliance on imagery, leaving gaps for the audience to fill in with their imagination.

---

<sup>2</sup> **Gnomic**: meaningful sayings, maxims, or adages put into verse for ease of memorization.

<sup>3</sup> **Kenning**: a metaphorical compound word or phrase (Merriam-Webster 2019)

<sup>4</sup> **Heiti**: special poetic vocabulary (Faulkes 1998)

## V. Trochaic and Iambic Tetrameters

Poetry has its own specialized lexicon, typically rooted in Ancient Greek. Historically, both trochaic and iambic tetrameter are meters first found in Ancient Greek and Latin poetry.

Tetrameter consists of four poetic feet. A foot is two syllables. In modern English, a trochee (or trochaic foot) is a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable. An iamb (or iambic foot) is an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one. Feet in a poem can be either complete (i.e., two syllables) or incomplete (one syllable). When the final foot is missing a syllable, it is called “catalexis.”

While William Shakespeare is, perhaps, best known for his use of iambic pentameter (five feet: e.g. “Shall **I** **compare** thee **to** a **summer’s** **day**?” stressed syllables bolded), he also used trochaic tetrameter in his works. The opening scene of Act IV in *Macbeth* (Shakespeare 1998), in which three witches stoop over a cauldron, are in this meter.

*Sweltered venom, sleeping got.*  
*Boil thou first i' the charmed pot.*  
*Double, double, toil and trouble;*  
*Fire burn, and cauldron bubble.*

The first two lines are catalectic, while the final two lines are complete.

Trochaic tetrameter was rare in continuous use in English poetry before the seventeenth century; when it was used, it was “favored for choruses, songs, and passages of incantatory force” (Attridge 1995, 89)

Using alternating lines of catalectic trochaic and complete iambic tetrameter permitted me to mirror the couplets found in *fornyrðislag*, specifically, paralleling the two stressed syllables per half-line (four per full line). I was able to echo the original’s chant-like, oral function while making it accessible to speakers of modern English familiar with ballad and song rhythms. I used English’s natural mnemonic form (tetrameter with rhyme) to replicate Old Norse’s natural mnemonic form (alliterative *fornyrðislag*).

## VI. Fornyrðislag vs. Tetrameter: A Quick Guide

Below is a table with a side-by-side comparison of Old Norse Fornyrðislag and English Tetrameter

Feature	Fornyrðislag (Old Norse)	Tetrameter (English)
Origin / Use	Dominant Eddic verse form (myth, heroic legend, visionary chants). Oral, mnemonic.	Common in medieval English romances, ballads, and Elizabethan songs/incantations.
Line Length	2 stressed syllables per half-line; unstressed syllables flexible (often 2–3).	4 iambic (unstressed + stressed) or trochaic (stressed + unstressed) feet = 8 syllables per line (more fixed).
Stanzaic Form	8 half-lines = 1 stanza (usually arranged in 4 pairs).	Quatrains or couplets common; stanza length more flexible.
Linking Device	<b>Alliteration</b> : head-stave in second half-line ties lines together.	<b>Rhyme</b> (end rhyme, often couplets or quatrains).
Rhythm / Sound	Driving, percussive, irregular — fits oral delivery and memorization.	Songlike, regular beat — easier for modern ears to follow as “poetic.”
Imagery & Style	Kennings, heiti, gnomic compression, terseness.	Narrative flow, melodic refrains, smoother diction.
Cultural Function	Recitation of myth/heroic lore; chants of seers and Valkyries ( <i>Darraðarljóð</i> ).	Storytelling (romance), communal song (ballads), incantation (supernatural scenes).
Effect on Audience	Stark, ominous, archaic — emphasizes weight of words and gaps of meaning.	Catchy, chant-like, memorable — emphasizes rhythm and forward drive.

## VII. Further Analysis

In rendering the *Darraðarljóð* into tetrameter, I aimed to preserve the chant-like force of its original *fornyrðislag*, even as the mechanics of the two meters differ. The Old Norse in stanza 2 exemplifies the terse, incantation-like qualities of *fornyrðislag*: “Vindum, vindum / vef darraðar, / þars vé vaða / vígdróttir,” where the repeated imperative *vindum* (“let us wind”) and the dense *v*-alliteration bind the half-lines into a rhythmic spell. My English rendering, “Stretch we tight the warp of war / O’er beam so wet, and slick with blood,” instead relies on tetrameter and rhyme, producing a steadier, ballad-like rhythm while still including alliteration in *warp*, *war*, and *wet*.

The Old Norse stanza compresses its horror into gnomic fragments, while the English version expands the imagery into narrative motion, but both achieve a ritualistic cadence suitable for oral performance.

Stanza 6 underscores this contrast. In Old Norse, “þar er vegg skelfr, / blóð fá vallir” (“where the wall trembles, blood stains the fields”) delivers its vision with stark brevity, the alliteration on *v* driving home the violence. My rendering, “When banners fall, the slain lie dead / Vict’ry nears, as does the gore,” heightens the dramatic march toward battle. Thus, while the original meter relies on stress and alliteration to evoke a spell-like atmosphere, my English translation adopts rhyme and tetrameter to approximate a similar oral immediacy, echoing the cultural function of the verse even as its form is transformed.

## VIII. Linguistic Challenges

As with most languages, Old Norse is rife with polysemy<sup>5</sup>. This means that oftentimes, the wordplay or double entendre in the original does not translate well – or at all – to the target language. For example, *hjör* = sword (Vigfusson n.d.) but it’s also used poetically for the “fire of battle” (Wills 2022). Translators are often forced to choose between literal and poetic fidelity.

There is also the added complication of specialized vocabulary for weaving, weapons, and war. I am a weaver; I have attempted to bring my deep knowledge of fiber arts into my word choice. The word “sword” can *also* refer to a beating tool used on warp-weighted looms. Beating swords used in weaving are long and skinny, as they must reach across the entire length of the weft. They have often been mistaken as actual weapons in grave finds (McClellan 2015).

Kennings and heiti also present challenges, as they are condensed metaphorical expressions or aphorisms that often lack direct English equivalents. While literal translation certainly has its uses, it does not necessarily lend itself to a performance-minded piece. In a paper, explanatory gloss – a note placed in the margin or between the lines of a text – can be an ideal middle ground, offering cultural context, symbolism, and why the term or phrase matters (Minkova 2014). However, it is even less ideal for performance, as pausing to explain cultural context or wordplay interrupts the flow of a piece and yanks the audience out of the immersion. This is why I have opted for an interpretive rendering; I kept many of the original kennings and heiti while using more archaic turns of phrase in an effort to mirror the original’s otherworldly feel.

Old Norse has flexible word order for metrical purposes, as it uses grammatical cases to indicate the function of a word in a sentence (Árnason 1991). Moving words for emphasis was common and the initial position carries the most emphasis (ibid.).

---

<sup>5</sup> *Polysemy: words that have multiple meanings.* English examples: “set,” “brand.”

## IX. Side-by-Side Analysis – Literal Translation Versus My Version

George Dasent’s version is one of the more literal translations of the work (Dasent 1861). I have included it to compare alongside my own. I had originally intended to put the Old Norse beside my version, but quickly realized that very few people would be able to read it in any meaningful way. Instead, I have opted to include the original Old Norse as an appendix. I have chosen the Dasent version because it is the most readily available, as it is now in the public domain.

Unfortunately, many of the other English translations are either out of print, prohibitively expensive to acquire, or unavailable for interlibrary loans. More than once, I waited for interlibrary loans (such as for the Magnússon and Pálsson version) only to receive the Dasent version with a different cover.

Stanza	Dasent’s Version	My Version	Verse
1	See! warp is stretched For warriors' fall, Lo! weft in loom 'Tis wet with blood; Now fight foreboding, 'Neath friends' swift fingers, Our gray woof waxeth With war's alarms, Our warp bloodred, Our weft corseblue <sup>6</sup> .	Stretch we tight the warp of war O'er beam so wet, and slick with blood Guts pulled long, with braids on floor Weft dripping, turning dirt to mud	1
<p>Dasent is working as a philologist, aiming for accuracy while using pseudo-medieval terms (“Lo!” “’tis”) to evoke an archaic feel.</p> <p>My approach is as a poet-translator, reshaping the text for rhythm, immediacy, and visceral force. His is more appropriate to a scholarly setting, while mine is a reinterpretation that communicates the horror of the scene to a modern audience.</p> <p>Braids are a traditional way of managing long lengths of loose warp thread. The material is looped.</p> <p>As a reminder: each “line” in the original piece is considered a <i>half</i>-line, which means eight half-lines become four full lines in English.</p>			

<sup>6</sup> *Corpse-blue, that is, the color of a dead body*

Stanza	Dasent's Version	My Version	Verse
2	<p>This woof is y-woven  With entrails of men,  This warp is hardweighted  With heads of the slain,  Spears blood-besprinkled  For spindles we use,  Our loom ironbound,  And arrows our reels;  With swords for our shuttles  This war-woof we work;  So weave we, weird sisters,  Our warwinning woof.</p>	<p>Foes' entrails serve well as weft  Their heads keep warp properly taut  Loom filled 'til no room is left  We swiftly work ere blood can clot</p> <p>Sinew heddles, rent from flesh  With spearhead shuttle, sword for sword  Firmly beat the bloody weft  The Valkyr prep to ride to war</p>	2, 3

Dasent makes the lines read like an inventory of the loom's gruesome components, rendering it more descriptive than dramatic.

My version pushes towards action, framing the weaving as battle preparation. Two of the lines – “We quickly work e'er blood can clot” and “Sinew heddles, rent from flesh” are wholly my invention, deliberately included to add to the urgency of their work.

Sinew is a polysemic word in Old Norse, as in English, and can also mean strength. Sinew was also traditionally used to make heddles for weaving, so although it is grisly, it is actually the least-changed part of the weaving setup described in the poem.

Stanza	Dasent's Version	My Version	Verse
3	Now War-winner walketh To weave in her turn. Now Swordswinger steppeth, Now Swiftstroke, now Storm; When they speed the shuttle How spear-heads shall flash! Shields crash, and helm-gnawer On harness bite hard!	Hild, Hjorthrimul go to weave We're fit to fight upon the field Sangrith, Svipul's swords shall cleave Sharp helmet's-bane they both shall wield	4

Dasent chose to translate the Valkyries' names, while I chose to keep them as they are. I hold the philosophy that personal names are not something that we translate, even in performance pieces where footnotes are impractical. No one insists on calling someone named *Agnes* "Lamb," even though that's the meaning of the name.

I opted to use the kenning "helmet's-bane" instead of "helm-gnawer," as the latter is a mouthful to say in a performance. They're different ways of saying the same kenning for "sword" (*hjalmgagarr*). (Margaret Clunies Ross 2023)

Stanza	Dasent's Version	My Version	Verse
4	Wind we, wind swiftly Our warwinning woof. Woof erst for king youthful Foredoomed as his own, Forth now we will ride, Then through the ranks rushing Be busy where friends Blows blithe give and take.	Swiftly weave the weft of war Eternal battle to behold Thickest fighting, forge we forth With Gunn and Gondul, as foretold	5

The next three verses all start off with the same two half-lines: "Vindum, vindum vef Darraðar," which would be literally translated as "We weave, we weave the weft of the spearman." Woof is an old word for weft (Woof n.d.).

Part of my artistic choice for this lay was to remove direct references to the Battle of Clontarf, instead aiming to make it a more generically war-themed poem. However, I did keep the intimation of prophecy – Dasent's "foredoomed" versus my "foretold."

Stanza	Dasent's Version	My Version	Verse
5	Wind we, wind swiftly Our warwinning woof, After that let us steadfastly Stand by the brave king; Then men shall mark mournful Their shields red with gore, How Swordstroke and Spearthrust Stood stout by the prince.	<i>Omitted</i>	-

This stanza continues the recounting of the Battle of Clontarf, mixing the mystical presence of the Valkyries with known historical events.

I opted not to include this stanza (see Stanza 4's notes).

Stanza	Dasent's Version	My Version	Verse
6	Wind we, wind swiftly Our warwinning woof; When sword-bearing rovers To banners rush on, Mind, maidens, we spare not One life in the fray! We corse-choosing sisters Have charge of the slain.	Swift, we weave the weft of war When banners fall, the slain lie dead Vict'ry nears, as does the gore We Valkyr walk where few dare tread	6

I very slightly modified the repetition so as to make a deeper impact: "Swiftly weave the weft of war" is an imperative, while "Swift, we weave the weft of war" puts the listener in the middle of the action.

<b>Stanza</b>	<b>Dasent's Version</b>	<b>My Version</b>	<b>Verse</b>
<b>7</b>	Now new-coming nations That island shall rule. Who on outlying headlands Abode ere the fight; I say that King mighty To death now is done, Now low before spearpoint That Earl bows his head.	<i>omitted</i>	-
<p>This stanza again continues the recounting of the Battle of Clontarf. "This island" is Ireland.</p> <p>I opted not to include this stanza (see Stanza 4's notes).</p>			

<b>Stanza</b>	<b>Dasent's Version</b>	<b>My Version</b>	<b>Verse</b>
<b>8</b>	Soon over all Ersemen Sharp sorrow shall fall, That woe to those warriors Shall wane nevermore; Our woof now is woven. Now battle-field waste, O'er land and o'er water War tidings shall leap.	<i>omitted</i>	-
<p>This stanza continues the recounting of the Battle of Clontarf ("Erseman" = Irish). It is the final one I omitted.</p> <p>I opted not to include this stanza (see Stanza 4's notes). I did, however, include the "battle-field waste" in Verse 7 ("battle's waste"), a kenning that alludes to the piles of bodies strewn across the field.</p>			

Stanza	Dasent's Version	My Version	Verse
9	Now surely 'tis gruesome To gaze all around, When bloodred through heaven Drives cloudrack o'er head; Air soon shall be deep hued With dying men's blood When this our spaedom Comes speedy to pass.	Grisly fabric now is set With battle's waste laid cold and bare Clothes we dye with battle-sweat War-winning songs now fill the air	7
10	So cheerily chant we Charms for the young king, Come maidens lift loudly His warwinning lay; Let him who now listens Learn well with his ears, And gladden brave swordsmen With bursts of war's song.	Needed is our work gruesome We fight until the king's secure Warriors go, and Valkyr come Their fallen souls we do procure.	8

In stanza 9, Dasent creates a visual parallel between the actual blood on the land and the blood-red sunset in the sky. His version is somber and somewhat mournful after the previous stanzas. Stanza 10 turns more celebratory in tone.

I opted to continue the weaving metaphor, as the fabric is cut from the loom and laid out. "Battle-sweat" is a kenning for "blood." The use of "dye" is deliberate wordplay, as it is a homophone with "die." I rearranged the placement of some of the phrases for a more impactful performance.

Stanza	Dasent's Version	My Version	Verse
11	Now mount we our horses, Now bare we our brands, Now haste we hard, maidens, Hence far, far away.	Forth we ride on bare-back steeds Our naked brands are used to slay War still calls the Valkyries Ride hard we maidens far away	9

This is the verse that I believe is closest to Dasent's version and the original Old Norse.

## X. Early Draft to Final Draft Comparison

Translation and interpretation do not spring from one’s head fully formed, like Athena from Zeus. There are repeated drafts and edits. For me, I also had to consider whether I wanted to engage in meter or stick to the more truncated, but free-flowing style of the original. I ended up settling on tetrameter after research into its uses and history.

Early Draft	Final version
<p>Stretch we tight the red warp of war            O’er beam so wet, slickened with blood            Entrails spread long, piled braids on floor            Dripping weft turning dirt to mud</p>	<p>Stretch we tight the warp of war            O’er beam so wet, and slick with blood            Guts pulled long, with braids on floor            Weft dripping, turning dirt to mud</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I removed the adjective “red,” both to fit the meter and because saying, “red warp of war” is a bit of a tongue twister.</li> <li>• There are multiple instances where I needed to switch whether I was using an iamb or a trochee, which required some massaging. (e.g. <i>slickened</i> → <i>and slick</i>)</li> <li>• Braids specifically references part of a weaving setup; the long warp threads were often braided or slip-chained together to prevent tangling. On a warp-weighted loom, these braids were typically left on the floor.</li> </ul>	
<p>Our enemies’ guts serve well as weft            Their heads keep the warp properly taut            Fill we the loom ‘til no room is left            Work we swiftly e’er blood can clot</p>	<p>Foes’ entrails serve well as weft            Their heads keep warp properly taut            Loom filled ‘til no room is left            We swiftly work ere blood can clot</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I was able to switch the use of “guts” and “entrails” between verses 1 and 2 to better suit their respective placement.</li> <li>• On a warp-weighted loom, weights are used to maintain tension on the warp threads (as the name implies). The weaving is done from top to bottom, then the piece is advanced. The weights were typically stones with holes bored in them.</li> </ul>	

<p>Sinew for heddles, rent from fresh flesh Spearhead as shuttle, sword for a sword Beat firmly the endless bloody weft The Valkyr prepare to ride to war</p>	<p>Sinew heddles, rent from flesh With spearhead shuttle, sword for sword Firmly beat the bloody weft The Valkyr prep to ride to war</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Another tongue-twister appears! “Rent from fresh flesh” is a fantastic way of practicing one’s Rs and Ls, but not ideal for a performance piece.</li> <li>• “Sword for sword” indicates that the Valkyries are actually using battle swords for their weaving swords. I often have my own weaving sword that I wield during performances of this piece.</li> </ul>	
<p>Hild and Hiorthrimul go to weave Ready to fight upon the field Sangrith and Svipul, their swords shall cleave And sharp helmet’s-bane they shall wield</p>	<p>Hild, Hjorthrimul go to weave We’re fit to fight upon the field Sangrith, Svipul’s swords shall cleave Sharp helmet’s-bane they both shall wield</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I cleaned up the phrasing to match the meter.</li> </ul>	
<p>Swiftly we weave the weft of war Eternal battle to behold In thickest fighting, forge we forth With Gunn and Goldu, as foretold</p>	<p>Swiftly weave the weft of war Eternal battle to behold Thickest fighting, forge we forth With Gunn and Goldu, as foretold</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Swiftly we” was proving to be a mild tongue twister, so I modified it a little in both this and the next verse.</li> </ul>	
<p>Swiftly we weave the weft of war Banners will fall, the slain lie dead As victory nears, so does the gore We Valkyr walk where few dare tread</p>	<p>Swift, we weave the weft of war When banners fall, the slain lie dead Vict’ry nears, as does the gore We Valkyr walk where few dare tread</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More adjusting of trochees and iambs to properly fit the meter.</li> </ul>	

<p>Our raven-food fabric now woven  Battlefield's waste laid cold and bare  Our clothes we dye with battle-sweat  And war-winning songs now fill the air</p>	<p>Grisly fabric now is set  With battle's waste laid cold and bare  Clothes we dye with battle-sweat  War-winning songs now fill the air</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I really loved the kenning of “raven-food” for corpses, but it did not work for the meter.</li> </ul>	
<p>But needed is our work gruesome  We fight until the king's secure  The warriors are gone, and Valkyries come  Fallen hearts we do procure.</p>	<p>Needed is our work gruesome  We fight until the king's secure  Warriors go, and Valkyr come  Their fallen souls we do procure.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I prefer gender-neutral language whenever possible; between the original and final version, I actually changed it to say “the crown's secure.” However, the original piece references a king and it is in a historic setting – keeping in mind Dr. Wilson's comments about awareness of our own biases, I eventually decided to switch it back to <i>king</i>. However, in performance, I can keep three options in mind (king, queen, and crown) and adjust it as appropriate for the audience.</li> </ul>	
<p>We ride forth steeds without saddles  Naked brands used to slay  'nother battle calls the Valkyr  Ride hard we maidens far, far away</p>	<p>Forth we ride on bare-back steeds  Our naked brands are used to slay  War still calls the Valkyries  Ride hard we maidens far away</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The final verse needed a little massaging to make the meter fit.</li> <li>There is more weaving wordplay at work here: <i>sleying</i> is when one threads the heddles on the loom with warp threads and is an important part of the setup for weaving. It is a homophone with “slaying.” It is meant to evoke weaving imagery again.</li> </ul>	

## XI. Conclusion

The *Darraðarljóð* occupies a singular position in Old Norse literature, both as a rare extended eddic-style poem embedded within a saga narrative and as a striking example of mythological imagery shaping the representation of history. Its gruesome weaving scene, with Valkyries crafting a fabric of war from human entrails, simultaneously evokes mythic fatalism and provides a chilling metaphor for the Battle of Clontarf.

Translating the poem demands constant negotiation between literal fidelity and poetic effect: Old Norse's flexible word order, kennings, and alliterative meter resist simple transference into modern English. Victorian translators such as George Dasent emphasized archaism and spectacle, while contemporary approaches tend to balance readability with formal echoes of *fornyrðislag*.

My own translation experiment underscores these tensions, particularly the difficulty of preserving both the visceral imagery and the rhythmic compression of the original. Ultimately, the *Darraðarljóð* demonstrates how translation is itself a creative act – mediating between linguistic precision, aesthetic form, and cultural resonance. By engaging with this poem's challenges, we are reminded that Old Norse verse is not only an artifact of the past but also a living field of interpretation, where each new rendering reveals fresh facets of its enduring power.

## GLOSSARY

### Poetic Glossary

- **Catalexis:** A single-syllable foot.
- **Foot:** two syllables.
- **Gnomic:** (poetry) meaningful sayings, maxims, or adages put into verse for ease of memorization.
- **Heiti:** special poetic vocabulary.
- **Iamb:** A foot with an unstressed syllable first and a stressed syllable second.
- **Kenning:** a metaphorical compound word or phrase.
- **Polysemy:** words that have multiple meanings. English examples: “set,” “brand.”
- **Tetrameter:** a poetic form with four feet per line.
- **Trochee:** A foot with a stressed syllable first and an unstressed syllable second.

### Weaving Glossary

- **Beam:** A long piece of wood with various uses in a loom. In a warp-weighted loom, there is typically only a cloth beam, which rotates and holds the woven cloth.
- **Beater:** A tool used to evenly force the weft threads into place.
- **Heddle:** On a warp-weighted loom, strings tied to a bar. The strings lift the warp threads to create the shed.
- **Shed:** the opening through which the shuttle is passed.
- **Shot, pick:** A single pass of weft through the shed.
- **Sleying:** Passing the warp ends through the dents (openings) in the heddles.
- **Shuttle:** A tool that holds the weft thread as it is woven. The shuttle passes back and forth.
- **Sword:** a long and skinny tool used to evenly beat the weft threads into place.
- **Warp:** The long strings in a woven piece; they are vertical on a warp-weighted loom.
- **Weft:** The horizontal strings that are woven back and forth.
- **Woof:** another word for *weft*.

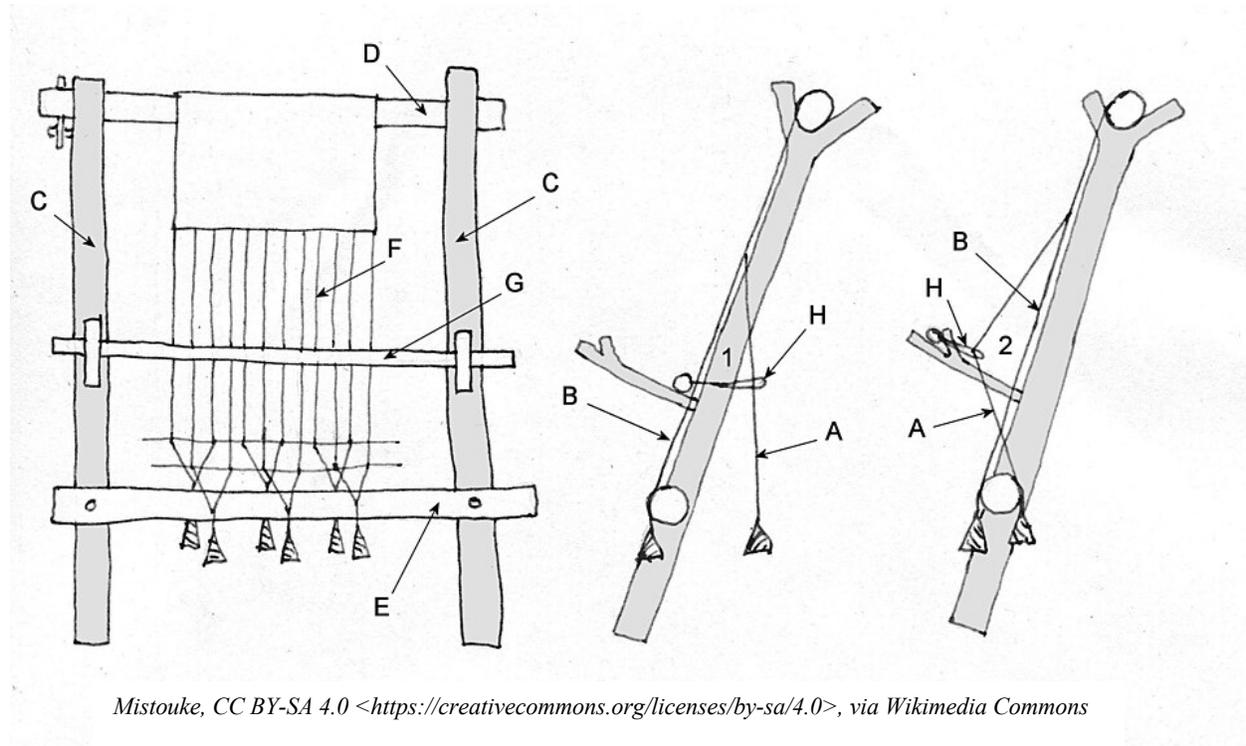
## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Árnason, Kristján. 1991. *The Rhythms of Dróttkvætt: A Study in the Performance and Text of Old Norse Court Poetr.* Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press.
- Abrams, M.H. & Geoffrey Harpham. 2012. *A Glossary of Literary Terms, 10th ed.* Cengage.
- Anonymous. 2025. *Brennu-Njáls Saga - Icelandic Saga Database.* May 28. Accessed August 2025. [sagadb.org/brennu-njals\\_saga.is](http://sagadb.org/brennu-njals_saga.is).
- Anonymous. c. 1300. *GKS 2870 4to - Handrit.is*, 2018, [handrit.is/manuscript/view/is/GKS04-2870/0#mode/2up](http://handrit.is/manuscript/view/is/GKS04-2870/0#mode/2up). Accessed February 2026.
- Attridge, Derek. 1995. *Poetic Rhythm: An Introduction.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brady, Amy. 2018. "How Emily Wilson Translated 'the Odyssey'." *Chicago Review of Books.* January 16. Accessed August 2025.
- Clunies Ross, Margaret. 2005. *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics.* Cambridge: D. S. Brewer.
- Dasent, George Webbe, trans. 1861. *The Story of Burnt Njal: From the Icelandic of the Njals.* Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas.
- Dronke, Ursula. 1969. *The Poetic Edda, Volume I: Heroic Poems.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Faulkes, Anthony. 1998. "1. Introduction, Text and Notes." In *Edda: Skáldskaparmál.* Viking Society for Northern Research.
- Gunnel, Terry. 1995. *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Homer. 2017. *The Odyssey. Translated by Emily Wilson.* New York ; London: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Leksikon, Store Norske. 2019. *Njáls Saga – Store Norske Leksikon.* April 4. [snl.no/Njáls\\_saga](http://snl.no/Njáls_saga).
- Margaret Clunies Ross, Kari Ellen Gade and Tarrin Wills, ed. 2023. *Poetry in Sagas of Icelanders.* 2 vols. Brepols. <https://skaldic.org/m.php?p=verse&i=37&v=i>.
- McClellan, Sally. 2015. "The Warp Weighted Loom." *Celtic Weaving.* July 22. Accessed August 2025. <https://celtic-weaving.com/the-warp-weighted-loom/>.
- Merriam-Webster. 2019. *Definiton of KENNING.* Accessed August 2025. [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/kenning](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/kenning).
- Minkova, Donka. 2014. *A Historical Phonology of English.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Shakespeare, William & Sylvan Barnet. 1998. *The Tragedy of Macbeth : With New and Updated Critical Essays and a Revised Bibliography.* Edited by Edited by Sylvan Barne. New York: Penguin Putnam.
- Tolley, Clive. 2014. *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics.* Cambridge: D.S. Brewer.
- Turville-Petre, E. O. G. 1976. *Scaldic Poetry.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Vigfusson, Cleasby &. n.d. *H - Old-Norse.net.* Accessed 2025. [old-norse.net/html/h.php#hjör](http://old-norse.net/html/h.php#hjör).
- Wills, Tarrin. 2022. "Skaldic - Class Combinations." *Kenning Lexicon.* July 29. [lexiconpoeticum.org/m.php?p=kenningpattern&i=315](http://lexiconpoeticum.org/m.php?p=kenningpattern&i=315).
- n.d. "Woof." *Oxford English Dictionary.* [https://www.oed.com/dictionary/woof\\_n1?tab=meaning\\_and\\_use](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/woof_n1?tab=meaning_and_use).

## APPENDICES

### A. WARP-WEIGHTED LOOM DIAGRAM

A quick visual guide on warp-weighted looms:



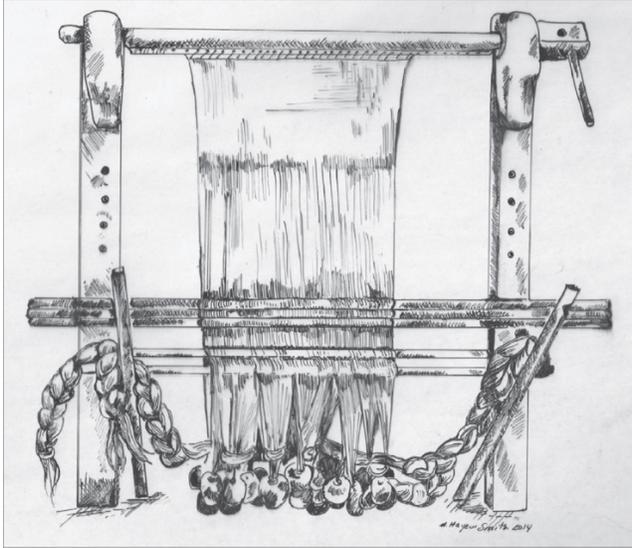
Mistouke, CC BY-SA 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Métier\\_vertical\\_à\\_pesons\\_2.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Métier_vertical_à_pesons_2.jpg)

Two upright posts (C) that support a round horizontal beam (D). D can be turned so that the finished cloth is rolled around it, which permits the weaver to make fabric taller than the loom while keeping the working area at an ergonomic height.

(F, A, and B) are warp threads; they hang from the beam and rest against the shed rod (E). Loops of string called heddles (H) are tied to some of the warp threads and attached to the heddle-bar (G)

To weave, a shuttle containing weft fiber is passed through the shed (1). Then the heddle rod is pulled out and set on the forked sticks, which creates the counter-shed (2) and the shuttle is passed back through. By continuing to alternate shed and counter-shed, fabric is woven.



### ***Loom prepped for weaving***

*A warp-weighted loom. The illustration was done based on a replica of a warp-weighted loom on display at the National Museum of Iceland. (Illustration © Hayeur Smith 2014).*

*Image included to illustrate the “braids on floor” part of the poem.*

## **B. EXTANT WEAVING SWORD**

Extant example:



*A weaving sword made from whalebone alongside loom weights. Part of the Museum Center in Hordaland, Norway.*

*ID: OM.01464*

<https://digitalmuseum.no/021029697322/vevsverd>

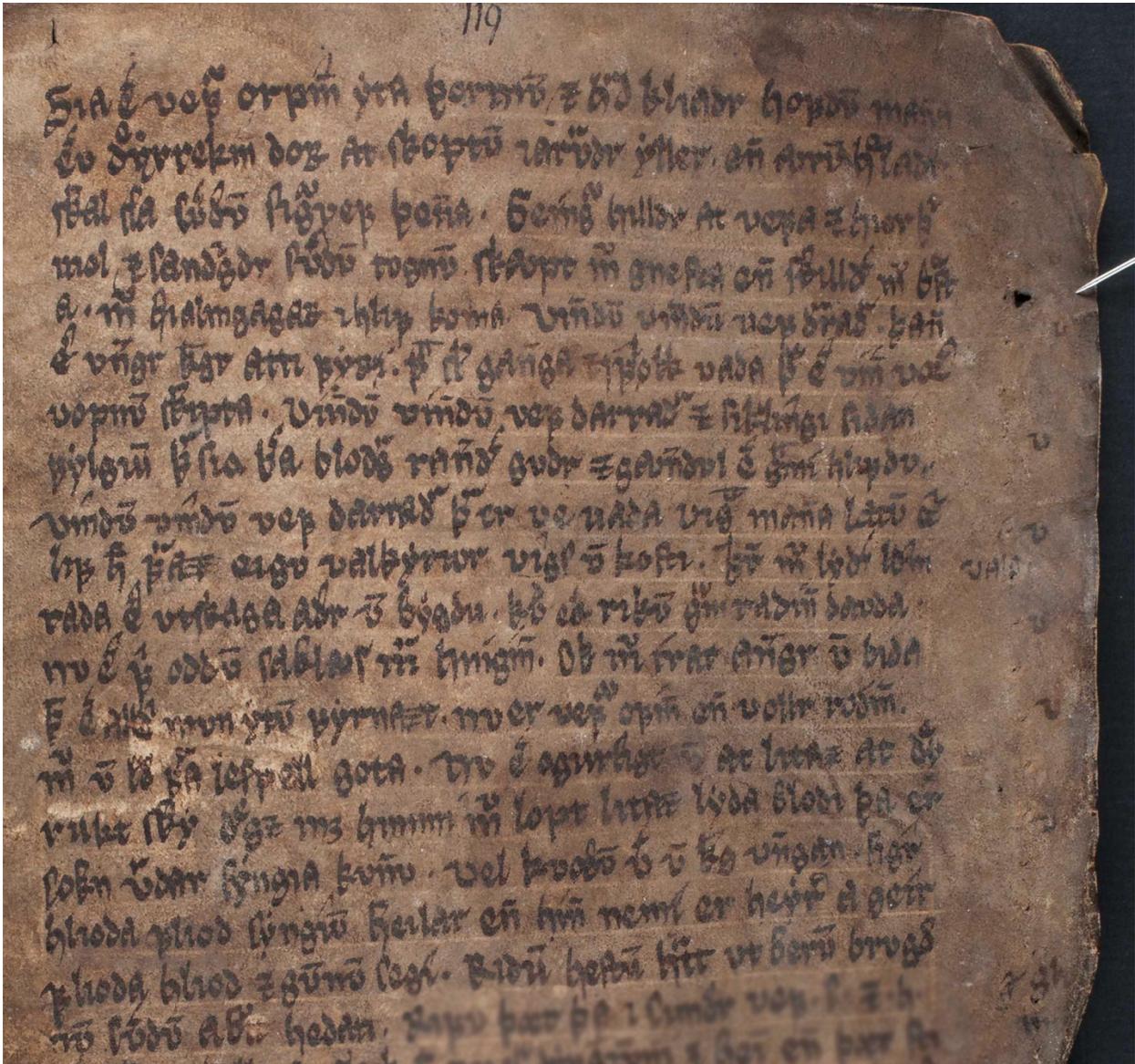
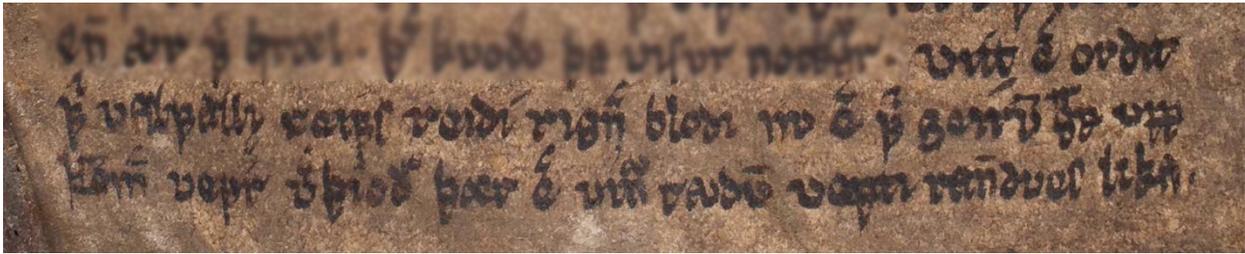


*To see the variety of weaving swords available in just Norway, please see this search:*

<https://digitalmuseum.org/search?media=picture&q=Vevsverd>

*QR code goes directly to the link.*

C. 13<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY EXTANT COPY OF THE DARRAÐARLIÐ IN OLD NORSE



Early copy. (Anonymous. GKS 2870 4to | Handrit.is")

## The Darraðarljóð

*Found in Chapter 157 of Njál's Saga (written in the 13<sup>th</sup> century)*

Vítt er orpit  
fyrir valfalli  
rifs reiðiský;  
rignir blóði;  
nú er fyrir geirum  
grár upp kominn  
vefr, verþjóðar  
er þær vinur fylla.  
Rauðum vepti  
Randvés bana.

Sjá er orpinn vefr  
ýta þormum  
ok harðkléaðr  
höfðum manna;  
eru dreyrrekin  
dorr at skoptum,  
járnvarðr yllir,  
en orum hrælaðr.  
Skulum slá sverðum  
sigrvef þenna.

Gengr Hildir vefa  
ok Hjörþrimul,  
Sanngríðr, Svipul  
sverðum tognum;  
skapt mun gnesta,  
skjöldr mun bresta,  
mun hjalmgagarr  
í hlíf koma.

Vindum, vindum  
vef Darraðar,  
þann er ungr konungr  
átti fyrri;  
framm skulum ganga  
ok í folk vaða,  
þar er vinir várir  
vápnum skipta.

Vindum, vindum  
vef Darraðar  
ok siklingi  
síðan fylgjum;  
þar sjá bragnar  
blóðgar randir,  
Gunnr ok Gøndul  
er gami hlífðu.

Vindum, vindum  
vef Darraðar,  
þar er vé vaða  
vígra manna;  
látum eigi  
líf hans farask,  
eigu valkyrjur  
vals of kosti.

Þeir munu lýðir  
londum ráða,  
er útskaga  
áðr um byggðu,  
kveðk ríkum gram  
ráðinn dauða;  
nú er fyrir oddum  
jarlmaðr hniginn.

Ok munu Írar  
angr of bíða,  
þat er aldri mun  
ýtum fynask.  
Nú er vefr ofinn,  
en völlr roðinn;  
mun um lönd fara  
læspjöll gota.

Nú er ógurlegt  
umb at lítask,  
er dreyrug ský  
dregr með himni;  
mun lopt litat  
lýða blóði,  
er sóknvarðir  
syngva kunnu.

Vel kváðum vér  
um konung ungan  
sigrhljóða fjöld,  
syngum heilar;  
en hinn nemi  
er heyrir á,  
geirfljóða hljóð  
ok gumum segi.

Ríðum hestum  
hart út berum,  
brugðnum sverðum,  
á brott heðan.