



How Formulaic is a Skaldic Formula? On the Function of Echoes in *Dróttkvætt* Poetry

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Accepted: 16 October 2024 / Published online: 26 March 2025
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Abstract

This article addresses the notion of *formulaicity* and the question of its applicability to the Old Norse skaldic corpus, a substantial part of which belongs to the pre-literate period of poetic composition (c. 850–1150). With few exceptions, scholars maintain that formulaicity, intended as an aid in versification, played a limited role in the composition of Old Norse poetry and the term ‘formula’ is thus generally limited to stylistic stereotypes or traditional collocations. Even so, assumptions based on oral-formulaic theory remain widespread, and concern, primarily, the conventionality of poetic expression and an alleged lack of authorial control on the text. Such features are not compatible with the profile of Old Norse verse. More importantly, however, the resort to a vaguely defined notion of formulaicity tends, in effect, to impair the discussion of intertextual phenomena, such as close verbal echoes and partial or full-line repetitions. Even in the most radically anti-formulaic of the Old Norse genres, skaldic verse, such phenomena are far from a rarity, but their significance has yet to be properly assessed. In this article, a definition of the term ‘formula’ and of its relevance for skaldic practice is critically discussed. Lines or textual passages showing an apparently ‘formulaic’ profile are explained intertextually, as manifestations of authorial agencies actively engaging with the poetic tradition.

Keywords Oral poetry · Skaldic verse · Formulaicity · Oral-formulaic theory · Intertextuality · Authorship

The Notion of ‘Formula’ and Its Explanatory Power

Parry and Lord’s ‘Oral-Formulaic Theory’ (OFT) revolutionized the study of pre-literate poetry, marking a turning point in oral studies and exerting lasting influence on the field. The hypothesis of composition in performance led to a critical re-examination of traditional notions such as textual unity and stability, individual

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creation, authorship and originality, but its primary aim was that of providing a clear answer to the problem of poetic composition in the absence of writing. Within this paradigm, the notion of ‘formula’ played a fundamental role, as it represented “an adaptive response to the unavailability of writing in the composition of the poems” (Bakker, 2022: 19). Formulaic language was posited as the main tool of extemporary versification, and, as such, its motivation was strictly *functional*: in the words of Francis P. Magoun Jr., a pioneer of OF studies in Old English, “usefulness, rather than mere repetition, is what makes a formula” (Riedinger, 1985: 304). In the wake of this methodological turn in oral studies, the idea that formulaic style constituted a self-evident symptom of ‘primary’ or ‘residual’ orality became widespread (Magoun, Capek, 1965; Haymes, 1970). Formulas were so central to traditional OFT, that the notions of formulaicity and orality soon showed the tendency to blur into one another and to be used as logically dependent and interchangeable categories (Thomas, 2019: 40–44). Parry and Lord’s model, however, was developed under precise conditions: it addressed long stichic compositions of epic/narrative verse, composed in a relatively loose and regular metre, whose diction was marked by metrically regular, semantically stable and frequently recurring units (formulas).¹ Although not all pre-literate poetic traditions conform to this description, the model of orality established by Parry and Lord for Homeric poetry was so influential that it was soon extended, with inevitable adjustments and significant forcings, to traditions exhibiting other characteristics (Lönnroth, 1971: 2; Bäuml, 1986: 410). Overzealous extensions of the OF model tend to posit that a “lack of consciousness regard[ing] the single word as a unit of speech is one of the characteristic features of oral poetries and probably of oral societies in general” (Finkelberg, 2000: 3), thereby creating false premises for literary and historical analyses of oral poems. If the poet is an anonymous interpreter of a shared poetic tradition, and each performance embodies a constantly evolving composing practice, then notions of authorship, authorial agency, originality and poetic influence turn into substantially moot questions (Edmunds, 1995: 4). In this way, as aptly expressed by Alaric Hall, orality became “something of a vortex into which a range of only partly related issues have been sucked: authorial originality/communal property; impromptu composition/meditated composition; authorial and audience alienation/immediacy” (2008: 279). The possible consequences of such a confusion for the study of Old Norse poetry have been most acutely described by Joseph Harris, who noted how the implications of associating oral poetry with formulaicity may result, in effect, in impairing historical and intertextual analyses:

Lord’s model, in effect, provides for no intertextual relations except through the competence of singers since texts exist only as instantly consumed products of the generative device, the “grammar” of extemporized poetic language in the particular tradition. No literary history is possible except as a history of individual singers, or, perhaps, as evolution of the generative device, the tradition. In practice, the South Slavic model encourages a synchronic, purely

¹ Parry defined a formula as “an expression which is regularly used, under the same metrical conditions, to express a particular essential idea” (1928: 16).

descriptive approach. But the historical dimension has always seemed of primary importance to eddic scholars, and an enormous philological literature has accumulated that argues “borrowings” among specific poems or from literature of one type or area to another. (Harris, 1985: 121–22)

In fact, the applicability of OFT to the medieval Germanic corpus was always challenging and provoked vigorous reactions.² In particular, two poetic traditions stand out as emblematic counterexamples to the main assumption of classic OFT, namely that formulaicity implies orality, and vice versa. These are the Old English and the Old Norse ones, whose poetic corpora situate themselves at opposite ends of a spectrum. In Old English poetry, a high degree of formulaicity is often characteristic of those texts that have, in fact, the strongest literate profile.³ In the Old Norse tradition, and maximally in the skaldic one, by contrast, the portion of the corpus that can be safely dated to the pre-literate period displays a remarkably low degree of formulaicity, a point to which I will return below.

A substantial part of the extant skaldic corpus dates to a time in which writing in Scandinavia was limited to runic epigraphy, and yet this genre challenges most of the notions commonly associated with ‘orality’, such as anonymity, lack of textual stability, ephemerality and incessant re-shaping in performance. The canonical corpus of courtly panegyrics is formed by attributed, fixed texts, with unique and distinctive contents, and secured by a heavily regulated metre, a situation that finds the closest typological parallels in other socially prestigious traditions of professional poetry in Africa and the Pacific (Finnegan, 1977: 12, 48–49, 73–79, 111, 189). The situation might, at first glance, appear different for the anonymous, narrative and metrically simpler eddic poems. While skaldic poetry has, in effect, mostly resisted OF analyses, the un-authorial, allegedly ‘folkish’ eddic poetry appeared as a decidedly more suitable corpus for such investigations.⁴ At a closer scrutiny, however, this turned out not to be the case: in the eddic corpus, the “evidence of a formulaic infrastructure suggestive of a composition-in-performance tradition” is lacking, while both internal features of the texts (reduced length, stanzaic form) and the way in which eddic poems are quoted in different sources testify to the individual poems’ relative stability (Frog, 2021: 45). As noted above, the extension of the Parry-and-Lordian model to orality *tout court* had raised objections already at an early stage (Finnegan, 1974: 60; 1976; Foley, 1980; Goody, 1987). OFT was challenged and, eventually, dismissed even in Homeric studies, where a necessary correlation between formulas and extemporary composition turned out to be a logically faulty axiom (Minton, 1965: 245; Nagy, 1979: 69–94; Shive, 1987;

² See, for instance: Sveinsson (1965); Curschmann (1967); Bäuml and Bruno (1972). The Old English debate on formulaicity is especially rich and articulated. For an overview, see: Olsen (1986) and (1988). For the Old Norse situation, see: Harris (1985: 111–25); Acker (2014: 85–110).

³ The connection between formulaicity and primary orality in OE was rejected in several studies: Schaar (1956); Benson (1966); Whitman (1975); Riedinger (1985); Lapidge (1996); Orchard (1994) and (2003).

⁴ The still widespread idea of the ‘folkish’ eddic poems, as opposed to the courtly skaldic panegyrics, seems ultimately a romantic relic. In fact, eddic and skaldic poems are most likely products of the same socio-cultural milieu, that of the warrior aristocracy (Males 2024; Finnur Jónsson, *LH*, I: 80). An exhaustive overview of eddic orality studies can be found in Thorvaldsen (2006: 7–35).

Čolaković, 2019). As a consequence of the repeated empirical rejections of ‘strict Parryism’ (Willcock, 1989: 175), OFT has today lost its original rigidity, turning increasingly towards stylistic and aesthetic explanations, whereby formulas abdicate their strictly functional role to assume more open-ended ones, as rhetorical devices and tradition-signallers. The notion of ‘traditional referentiality’ (Foley, 1991), for instance, attempts a reconciliation between oralist and literary analyses, trying to bridge the gap between the pole of unintentional, un-authorial, floating verbal art, on the one hand, and the ever conscious, learned and constantly allusive poet, on the other. This ‘aesthetic turn’, headed primarily by John Miles Foley, mitigated some of the axiomatic rigidities of the original theory and “decisively moved the debate away from the mechanics of composition and into the area of individual artistry and intertextual influence” (Orchard, 2003: 226). It appears to have gone largely unnoticed, however, that this act of ‘liberation’ came at the cost of nothing less than OFT’s very *raison d’être*. By pointing to the shortcomings of the traditional model and moving the debate *back* into the area of individual artistry and intertextual influence, the ‘aesthetic turn’ of ‘new OFT’ in effect renounces to the most consequential of Parry and Lord’s conclusions, namely, the *radical alterity* between oral and literate poetry. Without this assumption, the model loses much of its ability to explain the dynamics of oral composition, which is the purpose for which it was developed in the first place. Thus, while recent modifications may be seen as advances in the sense that they are more compatible with a range of observations, they bring us closer back to square one from the perspective of explanatory power. In effect, OFT in its current form is no longer a theory, and it is important to keep this in mind, since it is easy to jump to the conclusion that what was once a theory still is so. On a positive note, the dismissal of the so-called ‘Great Divide’ between Orality and Literacy has significant methodological consequences for the study of oral poetic traditions, making several of the questions posed by traditional literary history, such as matters of authorship and poetic influence, relevant again (Thorvaldsen, 2006: 32; Harris, 2008: 191; Thomas, 2019; Leneghan, 2019; Orchard, 2020). In fact, the methods available to the scholar to answer these questions are not profoundly dissimilar, albeit with the due adaptations, from the ones traditionally employed in the analysis of literate poems (Bakker, 2022; Montanari et al., 2012; Tsagalis, 2007).

Compared to half a century ago, the influence of OFT among specialists is today significantly reduced, but some of its cornerstones seem to have attained the status of scholarly truisms. For instance, a widespread reluctance to raise questions about oral poets’ compositional techniques, authorial control over poetic expression, or the *actual* degree of conventionality of their language is probably an inheritance of OF studies. The rest of this article will address these aspects, suggesting that the role played by careful memorisation in the skalds’ training was probably key to their process of composition as well, and that the generation of new lines often involved the re-elaboration of concrete, specific models. In order to investigate the crucial connection between poetic memory, author and tradition, I will first consider instances of vaguer verbal echoing or lexical collocation that have often received a ‘formulaic’ interpretation in previous scholarship, but I will then move to more pointed cases of repetition of nearly identical lines across the corpus. Paradoxically, these cases of

stronger lexical similarity have generally not been considered from a formulaic perspective, and rightly so.

Skaldic Poetry, Orality and (Lack of) Formulaicity

Skaldic poetry was a completely oral genre—meaning that writing was not involved in the moments of its composition, performance and transmission (Finnegan, 1977: 17)—at least for the first three centuries of its attested existence (c. AD 850–1150), until the development of a literate vernacular culture in Scandinavia.⁵ The amount of metrical, linguistic and text-critical evidence in this respect is imposing (Gade, 2001; Jónsson, 1901; Males, 2023; Myrvoll, 2014, 2020, 2023; Þorgeirsson, 2012, 2020, 2023) and, despite the agnosticism of the occasional sceptic, no alternative explanation has been advanced able to account for the linguistic and formal features of the poems, nor for the cultural and intellectual processes involved in their production. Skaldic poetry up to the mid-twelfth century is thus the most securely orally composed and orally transmitted corpus among medieval Germanic vernaculars. Nonetheless, its diction displays a decidedly low degree of formulaicity, and its lexical and syntactical complexity is such as to exclude the possibility of extemporary composition. In sum, this genre displays features that are more readily associated with ‘literate’ poetic traditions than with oral ones, a fact that is sometimes presented as a mysterious and yet inescapable anomaly (Würth, 2007: 264). Skaldic poetry is thus the Western vernacular tradition that most clearly challenges monolithic conceptualisations of orality, as its existence “forces us to recognize at least two different kinds of oral poetry: improvisational and memorial” (Haymes, 1976: 49). In societies ‘of tradition and memory’ (Mees, 2013: 144–45), the precursor of writing as the main technology of textual stabilisation is metre.⁶ Michael Schulte pointed to the metrical and, in some cases, paratextual ‘infrastructure’ developed by pre-literate poetic traditions that presuppose careful memorisation and textual stability, such as the Vedic and the skaldic ones (2008, 2011). As opposed to West Germanic verse, Old Norse verse, both eddic and skaldic, displays two features that suggest memorisation and accurate transmission as the basis of poetic practice: limited textual length and internal organization into stanzas. Indeed, the few hundred years of oral transmission of Old Norse poems is hardly an impressive feat of memory when compared to the several centuries generally assumed for the thousands of lines forming the sacred corpus of Vedic hymns (Jamison & Brereton, 2014: 14–18). The individual hymns of the Vedas are, however, relatively short and self-contained texts, organized in discrete metrical-syntactical units (Jamison & Brereton, 2014: 74–75), just like the Old Norse poems. Strophic form distinguishes Nordic poetry from West-Germanic

⁵ Viking Age Norse poetry could be associated with runic epigraphy on special occasions, such as the erection of funerary monuments like the Rök stone (c. AD 800) or the Karlevi stone (c. AD 1000). The poetic texts in question are of limited length, however, amounting to one poetic stanza.

⁶ Metre is intended here inclusively, as a ‘prosodic system’ involving rhythmical structures and/or aural features such as alliteration, rhyme, assonance, parallelisms (Finnegan, 1977: 90).

stichic poetry ever since the first fully metrical text attested in Scandinavia, on the Rök runic stone (Östergötland, c. AD 800). Stanzaic form is also held responsible for the alterity of Old Norse poetry from its West-Germanic counterparts in terms of syntax and diction (Fulk, 1996). Both the linguistic *facies* of skaldic poems and external evidence suggest that the canonical corpus was carefully memorised and then transmitted with great accuracy.⁷ It is probably no coincidence that the skaldic metre par excellence, the *dróttkvæðr háttir* ('courtly metre'), belongs among the most strictly regulated and aurally marked verse-forms.⁸ Each *dróttkvætt* stanza (*vísa*) consists of eight lines (*vísuorð*), and it is divided into two halves (*helmingar*) of four lines each. Each line comprises six metrical positions (the four positions of a Germanic half-line followed by a fixed trochaic cadence), roughly corresponding to six syllables, three of which carry metrical ictus. Each half-stanza is a self-contained syntactic unit and the interface between prosody and morpho-syntax determines the placing of sentence constituents within the line. Alliteration is required in every couplet, linking two lifts of the odd line to the first lift of the even line (alliterating staves are marked in bold below). Finally, two lifts in every line carry internal rhyme (marked in italics below), alternating between half rhyme (*skothending*) in odd lines and full rhyme (*aðalhending*) in even lines.⁹

Bragi Boddason, *Þórr's fishing* (c. 850)

Þás forns Litar flotna

á fangboða ongli

hrøkkviáll of hrokinn

hekk Vølsunga drekku.

When the coiling eel of the drink of the Vølsungar [POISON > MIDGARDSORMR] hung coiled up on the fishing hook of the wrestling-challenger of the followers of ancient Litr [GIANTS > ÞÓRR].¹⁰

This rigid prosodic grid must have served as a formidable mnemonic tool and is credited with great efficacy in preserving the 'exact' or 'original' form of skaldic compositions (Fidjestøl, 1997b: 324–25; Mundal, 2010: 163–65).

Formulas... or Something Else? Skaldic Strategies of Line Reworking

As noticed above, the idea that the presence of formulas presupposes some degree of orality appears to be an especially persistent one. As clearly borne out by the Old English and particularly by the Anglo-Latin evidence (Benson, 1966), this

⁷ Consider, for instance, the discussion of the disyllabic (etymological) pronunciation of the form *éarn* (instead of later *járn*) in a *dróttkvætt* line quoted in *The First Grammatical Treatise*, composed c. 1150 (Hreinn Benediktsson, 1972: 224–27).

⁸ For a comprehensive description of *dróttkvætt* metre, see: Myrvoll et al. (2016); for eddic metres see: Fulk (2016).

⁹ The conventions about the use and distribution of internal rhymes (*hendingar*) are not fully established in the earliest *dróttkvætt* poems and became stricter over time (Myrvoll, 2020).

¹⁰ Ed. and transl. by Margaret Clunies Ross (*SkP* 3: 51).

notion is already problematic as it stands. Equally problematic is its corollary, namely: the idea that no oral composition can be assumed for a poetic text lacking formulaicity.¹¹ Ever since the earliest attempts, studies that tried to apply OFT to Germanic poetry were forced to relax significantly the Parryian definition of *formula*, positing high degrees of abstraction, lexical variability and semantic flexibility (Whitman, 1975: 530; Bäuml, 1986).¹² Notions such as *shadows of formulas* (Russo, 1963: 239), *formulaic system* (Creed, 1957; Magoun, 1958; Niles, 1983) and *metrical-grammatical phrase type*, all to a certain extent traceable to the concept of ‘structural formula’ (Minton, 1965: 253), tried to account for recurrent metrical/syntactical structures exhibiting, however, differing lexical realizations. As pointed out by Bäuml, in a highly stylised form of expression such systems are to be expected, irrespective of the poetry’s oral or written nature (1986: 399–400). Since in skaldic poetry unique formulations are predominant (Wills, 2021), attempts at finding formulaicity under the ‘lexical surface’ have been advanced by Holland (2005), with the notion of kennings as *deep semantic formulas*, and by Frog with the notions of *metrically entangled semantic formulas* (2014 and 2016).¹³ The results of such studies appear modest, however, illustrating how portions of lines (often, but not necessarily, involving a kenning) or certain word collocations may recur in several poems.¹⁴ Crucially, however, the rest of the line as well as the surrounding metrical, syntactical and semantic environment of the *helmingr* are typically realized in significantly different ways by every skald. At the same time, these studies are forced to posit highly complicated deep structures, in order to account for the lexical flexibility of formulaic systems. Thus, the deeper the formula, the weaker its explanatory power, at least from a functional perspective. Consider, for instance, the opening involving the word *austr* in collocation with an internal rhyme (most often in *-aust-*) in positions 1–5. This ‘metrically entangled’ collocation is common throughout the productive period of skaldic panegyrics: (Table 1)

One can further isolate a ‘formulaic sub-system’, with a collocation *austr—flaustr* distinguishing itself as relatively productive: (Table 2)

We could assume a ‘deep structure’ involving an A or a D/E type verse with a structure somewhat like: / *austr* x x x *_st-* x/. Cognitively, however, the role played by such structures as generative tools in versification is questionable, especially

¹¹ This was already pointed out by Foley: “it is precisely this faulty conclusion—that is, that an absence of a specific formula count or a certain narrative recurrency means that we can cast a text back into the comfortable confines of written, non-traditional literature—that constitutes a distortion more culpable than the overly ambitious assertion of orality which it professes to correct” (1981: 127). See also: Curschmann (1997).

¹² This is, in fact, a general trend, as “throughout its development, the idea of what constitutes a formula has been subject to gradual extension” (Minton, 1965: 242).

¹³ The idea is that kennings might become ‘metrically entangled’, although “these metrically regular formulae might be concealed beneath a surface of synonymic variation as a function of skaldic diction” (Frog, 2014a: 101).

¹⁴ In fact, most of the exact word constellations surveyed, for instance, by Nyquist are interpreted as products of borrowing or of other forms of direct and conscious poetic influence (2014: 7, 10, 13–15, and *passim*).

Table 1 Line-opening in *austr*

1	c. 960	Gsind <i>Hákr</i> 5.4	austr geðbæti hraustan
2	c. 970	Glúmr <i>Gráf</i> 6.1	austr rauð jöfra þrýstir
3	c. 980	Eskál <i>Vell</i> 5.4	austr vín-Gnóðar flausta
4	c. 990	Hfr <i>Hákr</i> 1.2	austr at miklu trausti
5	c. 1000	Hfr <i>ErfÓl</i> 22.2	austr ór malma gnaustan
6	c. 1003	Gunnll <i>lv</i> 5.7	austr fyr unnar hesti
7	c. 1019	Sigv <i>Austv</i> 1.6	austr (svafk fátt í hausti)
8	c. 1019	Sigv <i>Austv</i> 14.3	austr til jöfra þrýstis
9	c. 1036	Sigv <i>Ást</i> 1.7	austr, es Ástríðr lýsti
10	c. 1023	Ótt <i>Hfl</i> 4.2	austr í salt með flaustum
11	c. 1023	Ótt <i>Hfl</i> 20.7	austr, sás eyjum vestan,
12	c. 1030	Gizsv <i>lv</i> 1.8	austr bragningi at trausti
13	c. 1045	Þjóða <i>Magnfl</i> 4.4	austr sjau tögu flausta
14	c. 1050	BjHall <i>Kálfl</i> 3.1	austr réð allvaldr rísta
15	c. 1050	Bqlv <i>Hardr</i> 1.7	austr vast ár it næsta
16	c. 1051	Þfagr <i>Sveinn</i> 8.2	austmenn á veg flausta
17	c. 1065	Þjóða <i>Sex</i> 7.6	austr á bragning hraustan
18	c. 1070	Steinn <i>Óldr</i> 5.1	austr helt Engla þrýstir
19	c. 1102 (?)	Eldj <i>lv</i> 1.7	austs til hár í hesti
20	c. 1152	Rv <i>lv</i> 18.2	austr gjaldkera hraustum
21	c. 1157	ESK <i>lv</i> 5.1	austr tók illa kristinn
22	c. 1180	Anon <i>Óldr</i> 9.1	austr þingat kom yngvi
23	c. 1180	Anon <i>Óldr</i> 16.7	austr, þeims unnu lqstu
24	c. 1200	Anon <i>Krm</i> 2.3	austr, í Eyrasundi
25	c. 1200	Anon <i>Krm</i> 6.3	austr fyr Dínu mynni
26	c. 1264	Sturl <i>Hákfl</i> 7.3	austr, þar er jöfrar treystuz
27	?	Anon SnE 12.3	austr sék fjöll af flausta
28	?	Anon SnE 17.2	austr ok suðr of flausta

Table 2 Collocation *austr—flaust*

1	c. 980	Eskál <i>Vell</i> 5.4	austr vín-Gnóðar flausta
2	c. 1023	Ótt <i>Hfl</i> 4.2	austr í salt með flaustum
3	c. 1045	Þjóða <i>Magnfl</i> 4.4	austr sjau tögu flausta
4	c. 1051	Þfagr <i>Sveinn</i> 8.2	austmenn á veg flausta
5	?	Anon SnE 12.3	austr sék fjöll af flausta
6	?	Anon SnE 17.2	austr ok suðr of flausta

when considering: *a.* the wide timespan covered by their occurrence (around four centuries); *b.* the extension of the skaldic corpus (esteemed at 122.340 lines)¹⁵ and *c.* the effort of metrical, syntactical and semantic re-casting required by every new

¹⁵ See the database of *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Age*: (<https://skaldic.org/m.php?p=skpstatstable>).

occurrence of the ‘formula’—a very different scenario from, for instance, Homeric epithets. Moreover, in the first occurrence of the collocation *austr—flaustr* in *Vellekla* (c. 975), the lexeme *austr* does not mean, as it generally does, ‘in the east’, but must be taken as the homonym word *austr* (m.) ‘bilge-water’, marking a subtle but substantial deviation from the two previously attested uses of the word by Guðþormr sindri (c. 960) and Glúmr Geirason (c. 970).¹⁶ The poet thus appears to be playing with the listeners’ expectations, a dynamic that is profoundly at odds with formulaic assumptions.

Recurring collocations can easily be expected in a rigidly memorised and tradition-aware poetic praxis, as aural imprinting and inertial echoing are a common by-product of memorisation and re-elaboration of models, in both oral and literate poetry (Pasquali, 2003: 275). ‘Stricter formulaicity’ might be supposed for nearly identical lines of the kind illustrated by the examples below:

(c. 990)	Bragi <i>Rdr</i> 6.1:	Mjök lét stála stökkvir
(c. 850)	Eil <i>Þdr</i> 6.5:	Mjök leið ór stað stökkvir

Such lines have an extremely limited distribution, however, and, despite the close aural match, even identical words may serve profoundly different functions in each occurrence. In *Ragnarsdrápa*, the nomen agentis *stökkvir* forms the kenning *stökkvir flaums stála* ‘the impeller of the stream of weapons’ [BATTLE > WARRIOR] (*SkP* 3: 36), while in *Þórsdrápa*, it is part of the kenning *æstr stökkvir þrjóts urðar* ‘the furious expeller of the defiant one of the stone’ [GIANT > ÞÓRR] (*SkP* 3: 87). Thus, even minimal deviations can affect the overall composition of the *helmingr*, necessitating a conscious effort at lexical, syntactical and semantic recasting. In reception, on the other hand, aural similarity can hardly have facilitated the audience’s interpretation of such lines: in many cases, if anything, it must have been an aggravating factor. An informative case is offered by the following triplet of lines belonging, respectively, to Bragi’s *Ragnarsdrápa* (c. 850) and Einarr skálaglamm’s *Vellekla* (c. 975):

Bragi <i>Rdr</i> 6.5	Eskál <i>Vell</i> 26.5	Eskál <i>Vell</i> 34.1
ok bláserkjar birkis	þás valserkjar virki	né sigbjarka serkir
(and of the birch-grove	(when [...] of the slain-shirt	(nor the shirts of the
of the dark shirt...)	[...] the rampart...)	battle-birches...)

These lines share similarities and, at the same time, differences that are too precise and too systematic to be due to chance. The three lines have the same metrical and morpho-syntactical template, which involves a similar syllabic and prosodic structure, as well as the same internal rhyme (*_rk*: *_rk*).¹⁷ All lines contain a kenning involving the word *serkr* (‘shirt’) which takes part in the internal rhyme. However, a few subtle deviations produce substantial changes. The second rhyming element

¹⁶ See above: Table 1 (items: 1, 2, 3).

¹⁷ A Cl² odd line introduced by a conjunction and with the first rhyming syllable (*frumhending*) in position 3 (Gade, 1995: 19, 123–28).

in *Rdr* 6.5, *birki* ('birch-grove'), is substituted in *Vellekla*, first, by the quasi-homophone *virki* ('rampart'), and, then, by the quasi-synonym *björk* ('birch').¹⁸ *Vell* 26.5 represents a close acoustic match to *Rdr* 6.5, but the deep syntax of the line varies, with the element *virki* belonging not to the kenning, like *birki*, but to a different phrase. By contrast, *Vell* 34.1 provides a closer semantic match to *Rdr* 6.5, but it inverts the structure of the kenning, where *sighbjarkar* ('of the battle birch') is the determinant and *serkir* ('shirts') is the base-word. These three lines present a paradoxical situation: an undeniable but diffused similarity coupled with a set of subtle but crucial differences. If we assumed the three lines to be twin products of the same generative versification pattern ('deep formulaicity'), we would be forced to posit a considerable degree of abstraction for the underlying blueprint. More importantly, the syntactical differences would de facto transform the similarities into restrictions that, rather than facilitating it, would make composition more difficult. Functionally, we are thus at the opposite of the spectrum from OFT, and we thus appear to be dealing with conscious reworkings rather than formulas or even mnemonic inertia. Indeed, the fact that the same model-line by Bragi is target of two imitations within the same poem strengthens the impression of a conscious authorial operation on Einarr skálaglamm's part. *Vellekla* offers in fact several examples of partial re-casting of previous poets' lines. In the case below, the line that was target of imitation in *Vellekla* appears to have been, in turn, already a re-casting: Eyvindr skáldaspillir 'echoed' his own line, playing with the collocation *Ullr: allr*, in a couple of twin *lausavísur* that share theme and imagery (*SkP* 1: 226–28).

Eyv *Lv* 8.1 (c. 960): Bórum, Ullr, of alla [...]

Eyv *Lv* 9.3 (c. 960): Ullar kjóls of allan [...]

Eskál *Vell* 4.1 (c. 980): Ullar gengr of alla [...]

One aspect of this dynamic deserves attention, namely the fact that the model line is never simply lifted by the echoing poet, but always modified. Aural imprinting undoubtedly played a role in skaldic composition, but the conscious effort of re-elaboration appears to have targeted not a virtual kenning-pattern (or a 'metrically entangled but lexically underdetermined morpho-syntactical pattern'), but the actual line in both its acoustic and semantic reality. This praxis suggests an impressive degree of authorial control and an intimate knowledge of the poetic canon. In *Háttatal*, Snorri Sturluson concedes the poetic license of appropriating other skalds' words, but with the caveat that the loan should not exceed the length of one line (*vísuorð*):

Átta [leyfí] er þat at nýta þótt samkvætt verði við þat er áðr er ort vísuorð eða skemra. (Faulkes, 2007: 8)

The eighth [poetic license] is to use one line or less, although it be identical with what has been composed before.¹⁹

¹⁸ It is worth mentioning that acoustic associations by means of homonyms and semantic associations by means of synonyms are key to the most self-aware form of skaldic riddle or pun, known as *ofljóst* ('too clear').

¹⁹ Translations from Old Norse are mine unless otherwise stated.

Considering the demands of skaldic metres, allowing no more than one *vísuorð* (amounting to roughly six syllables) of overlapping with previous poets' expressions seems a fairly strict copy-right policy. Snorri was a literate skald, and one might wonder whether his prescription should be taken as a classroom rule, conceived for the 'new generation' of learned skalds instructed through *Skáldskaparmál*, or if it applied to the pre-literate poets as well. In fact, the limitation of echoes to 'a line or less' is confirmed by the situation attested in the early corpus, where the appropriation of entire couplets is virtually unattested, while individual lines are generally modified in such a way that the 'borrowing' amounts to less than a line. Consider, for instance, the following pair of couplets, both describing a fire scene, and belonging to two *drápur* composed for, respectively, jarl Þórfinnr of Orkney (c. 1064) and Magnús berfœttr (c. 1100).

Arnórr jarlaskáld, *Þórfinnssdrápa*, st. 17, ll. 7–8
 Eim hratt, en laust ljóma,
limdolgr, náar himni
 (The foe of branches [FIRE] flung out smoke, and
 hurled light close to the sky)²⁰

Björn krepphendí, *Magnússdrápa*, st. 5, ll. 1–2
 Lék of Ljóðhús fikjum
limsorg náar himni
 (The branch-sorrow [FIRE] played fiercely
 near the sky throughout Lewis)²¹

As observed by Diana Whaley (*SkP* 2: 249), Arnórr's couplet echoes the description of the flames towering against the sky in *Völuspá* 57, ll. 5–8 (Neckel and Kuhn, 1927: 14): *Geisar eimi | við aldrnara | leikr hár hiti | við himin sjálfan* ('Smoke rages against the life-nurturer [YGGDRASIL?], fire towers high against the sky itself'). The presence of this eddic allusion in *Þórfinnssdrápa* is made more plausible by the fact that Arnórr famously alludes again to the same stanza of *Völuspá* in the closing of this poem (Fidjestøl, 1997a: 99–100; *SkP* 2: 258–59). In turn, Björn krepphendí re-casts Arnórr's line, but modifies the kenning base-word: fire is the branches' *sorg* 'sorrow' rather than *dolgr* 'foe'. The change is minimal, amounting to one syllable only, but it is enough to satisfy the principle of limiting the borrowing to 'a line or less', as formulated by Snorri. The process thus appears to have been one of active re-shaping that targeted not an unidentified and anonymous poetic tradition, but specific, authorial models.²² A parallel situation is found in the Vedic tradition, where the occurrence of recognizable motifs and echoes is realized along very similar lines:

Invariant repetition is fairly rare [in the Vedic corpus], and when it occurs, the repeated formulae tend to be short, generally shorter than the *pāda* (verse line) and not necessarily metrically fixed. But the poets often assume knowledge of an underlying formula, which seldom or never surfaces as such, but which they ring changes on—by lexical or grammatical substitution, scrambling, semantic reversal, and the like, confounding the expectations of their audience while

²⁰ Ed. and transl. by Diana Whaley (*SkP* 2: 249)

²¹ Ed. and transl. by Kari Ellen Gade (*SkP* 2: 399–400)

²² Conversely, evidence suggests that the plain lifting of lines is a phenomenon typical of later, learned skaldic composition, especially employed in strategies of antiquarian imitation of earlier verse (Gade, 2001: 65, 73–74; Patria, 2024).

drawing upon their shared knowledge of the underlying verbal expression (Jamison & Brereton, 2014: 14).

The situation that emerges from the skaldic and Vedic evidence is thus one of conscious intertextual dynamics playing out in an authorial setting, in which professional poets negotiate their re-interpretation of traditional material and imply a high level of expertise from the audience. Tradition awareness explains the Vedic poets' self-consciousness and concern for originality in expression:

The poets regularly boast that they are producing “a new hymn”—for example, in the felicitous phrasing of III.31.19, “I make new (the hymn) born of old” (*nāvyaṃ kṛṇomi [...] purājām*). This statement indirectly draws attention to another reason for the prizing of obscurity: the poets are working in an old tradition, and each poet takes pride in making something new using inherited techniques (Jamison & Brereton, 2014: 62).

The similar attitude of Vedic and skaldic poets towards their individual creations appears to be informed by comparable notions of authorial conscience and textual stability. In both traditions, the mnemonic effort put in the internalisation of the canon represented the technical requirement for practicing the poetic profession. It appears, then, that the nexus between authorship, memory and tradition is crucial for the understanding of intertextual dynamics in these forms of verbal art.

Authorship, Recognizability and Intentionality: The Battle at Ringmere

Although Snorri's limitation on poetic borrowing finds support in the early corpus, instances of plainly lifted or minimally modified lines do occur. These look like ready-made metrical fillers to be used at wish and thus seem to conform to the original, ‘Parryian’ sense of formula. Do formulaic dynamics or the alleged conventionality of skaldic diction provide the most apt explanation for these lines, though?

One such case is that of the *Hringmaraheiði*-line, occurring in three poems composed in the early eleventh-century:

<i>stóð</i> Hringmaraheiði	Sighvatr Þórðarson, <i>Vikingarvísur</i> , st. 7.5	(c. 1015)
<i>rauð</i> Hringmaraheiði	Þórðr Kolbeinsson, <i>Eiríksdrápa</i> , st. 15.7	(c. 1016–1023)
<i>rauð</i> Hringmaraheiði	Óttarr svarti, <i>Höfuðlausn</i> , st. 9.3	(c. 1023)

The poems in question were composed around the same years: Sighvatr's *Vikingarvísur* and Óttarr's *Höfuðlausn* were composed for king Óláfr Haraldsson (r. 1015–1030), while Þórðr Kolbeinsson's *Eiríksdrápa* is a praise poem for Eiríkr jalr Sigurðarson, although it is considered a product of the poetic milieu of Knútr the Great, to whom Eiríkr swore allegiance in 1014. At a later stage, both Sighvatr and Óttarr will also compose panegyrics for Knútr (Townend, 2001). Thus, the lines in question were composed within a short time span and by poets who operated

in a tightly interconnected environment. In addition, these lines represent the first attested occurrences of the ‘*brestr erfiði Austra*’ line-type (Kuhn, 1969; Gade, 2001: 66–68; Myrvoll, 2014: 221–37).²³ This metrical pattern has the peculiarity of carrying the first internal rhyme in the first position of a C-line, which is metrically weak. The first rhyme (*óð*) is thus oddly placed in a dip, preceding the first alliterating stave: *stóð Hringmaraheiði*. Kuhn explained this highly marked and previously unattested configuration as resulting from the necessity to accommodate the toponym *Hringmaraheiðr* (Ringmere Heath) and attributed its invention to Þórðr Kolbeinsson (1969: 461; 1983: 111). Other scholars, however, have argued that historical evidence points rather towards Sighvatr as originator of the type.²⁴ Based on the additional, literary evidence presented below, I concur with this view.

Sighvatr’s poem, known with the editorial title of *Víkingarvísur* (‘Stanzas about viking expeditions’), is the prototype of the sub-genre that Bjarne Fidjestøl named *orrostnatal* ‘list of battles’ (1982: 213–14). The poem recalls Óláfr Haraldsson’s youthful raids, treated in rapid succession: every half-stanza describes a military campaign, and makes a point of naming the place of the battlefield. At times, Sighvatr must resort to stratagems and original metrical solutions in order to accommodate the exotic names of the places and peoples encountered by the king on his travels. For instance, in order to include the obscure ethnonym *Partar* and achieve an exotic alliteration in *p*-, almost unattested in Old Norse verse, Sighvatr must use two loanwords from Old English: *prúðr* and *portgreifr*.

Sighvatr Þórðarson, *Víkingarvísur*, st. 8, ll. 5–8.

Sinn móttut bæ banna
borg Kantara — sorgar
mart fekksk **prúðum** **P**ortum —
portgreifar **Q**leifi.

(The town reeves were not able to ban Óláfr from their city, Canterbury; much sorrow was caused for the proud Partar).²⁵

In this case, the foreign title of the town officials (*portgreifar* ‘town reeves’) gives an exotic twist to a traditional line-type, the ‘glad-Óláfr formula’, which, despite its relative frequency and formula-like characteristics, occurs in contexts that suggest conscious dynamics of allusive art (Patria, 2023: 205–11). In *Víkingarvísur*, the *orrostnatal* design is pursued systematically. Given Sighvatr’s taste for lexical tokenism, the inclusion of the name *Hringmaraheiðr*—even at the cost of bending metrical rules — was more urgent for him than for Þórðr Kolbeinsson. It is thus

²³ The name of the line-type derives from the line *brestr erfiði Austra* (‘the burden of Austri [sky] splits asunder’) from Arnórr jarlaskáld’s *Þórfinnsdrápa* st. 24 (*SkP* 2: 258–59) composed c. 1064.

²⁴ According to both Campbell (1971: 14–16) and Fidjestøl (1982: 215) Þórðr depended on Sighvatr and Óttarr’s descriptions of Óláfr’s campaigns in England. The battle referred to in *Víkingarvísur* st. 7 is identified with the battle at Ringmere near Thetford in Norfolk, 5 May 1010 (Townend, 1998: 38–42; *SkP* 1: 544), whereas Eiríkr’s stanza, if historically reliable, would refer to a second battle in the same location some years later, in 1016 (Poole, 1987: 277–80).

²⁵ Ed. and transl. by Judith Jesch (*SkP* 1: 545).

plausible that Sighvatr invented the *brestr*-pattern for this purpose. Moreover, it should be noticed that Sighvatr uses the same metrical innovation, but in a B-type verse, in one of his *lausavísur*.

Sighvatr Þórðarson, *lausavísa* 2, ll. 1–2.

Hlýð mínur brag meiðir
myrkblás, þvít kannk yrkja
alltíginn — mátt eiga
eitt skald — drasils tjalda [...]

(Listen to my poetry, most high-born destroyer of the dark black steed of awnings [SHIP > WARRIOR], because I know how to compose — you can have one skald [...]).²⁶

Sighvatr is thus probably the inventor of the *brestr*-type, which then became target of imitation by Þórðr and Óttarr, as coincidence clearly cannot account for the fact that their lines contain a rare placename and the most conspicuous metrical innovation of the *dróttkvætt* tradition.²⁷ Þórðr's *Eiríksdrápa* borrows extensively from other poems (especially from Tindr Hallkelsson's *drápa* for Hákon jarl, on which see below) and it features the names Ulfkell (*Ulfcytel* in OE sources) and Lundún that occur in *Víkingarvísur* sts 6 and 7 (*SkP* 1: 544). The intertextual relationship between Óttarr svarti's *Höfuðlausn* and Sighvatr's poetry is well known: *Höfuðlausn* is modelled on *Víkingarvísur* for what concerns the subject matter (Townend, *SkP* 1: 532, 739–40). Moreover, in the opening of the poem, Óttarr signals his poetic debt by means of a subtle allusion to one of Sighvatr's *lausavísur* (Grove, 2009; Patria, 2018: 85–90). Interestingly, Óttarr's allusion targets the abovementioned *lausavísa* 2, and particularly the couplet containing the *brestr*-pattern in the B-line:

Óttarr svarti, *Höfuðlausn* st. 1, ll. 1–2.

Hlýð, mannþofugr, minni
myrkblás, þvít kannk yrkja;
finnum yðr ok annan,
allvaldr, konung fallinn.

(Listen, noble with your retinue, to the recollection of the dark black one [Óttarr], because I know how to compose; we [I] come to you, mighty ruler, and another worthy king).²⁸

In his allusion, however, the marked line-type has been re-worked into a plain C-line, with the first internal rhyme occurring regularly in the strong position 2 (*mann-*) and after the alliterating stave (*mann-*). In *Höfuðlausn*, Óttarr is thus alluding not to one,

²⁶ Ed. and transl. by Robert Fulk (*SkP* 1: 701).

²⁷ Russel Poole suggested, for instance, that Þórðr's re-use of this toponym (and the echo of this marked and recognizable line) would have enhanced the rhetorical impact of his praise for Eiríkr, with the effect of suggesting a *mannjafnaðr*, an implicit comparison, between the jarl and his royal patron, Knútr the great (1987: 280).

²⁸ Ed. and transl. by Matthew Townend (*SkP* 1: 741).

but to two occurrences of Sighvatr's innovation, showing that the metrical oddity had not gone unnoticed.

In sum, the *Hringmaraheiði*-line occurs in three poems that treat the same (or a similar) episode, share some lexical material concerning the 'English campaigns' (e.g. *Ulfkell*, *Lundún*, *Kantaraborg*), and the two later ones show a strong inclination towards intertextual references targeting the first. Moreover, both Þórðr and Óttarr reproduce the *brestr*-type three times in their poems (Myrvoll, 2014: 226):

Sigv	<i>Vikv</i> 7.5	<i>stóð</i> Hringmaraheiði
Sigv	<i>lv</i> 2.1	Hlyð <i>mínum</i> brag, meiðir
ÞKolb	<i>Eirdr</i> 14.5	<i>fekk</i> regn Þórins rekka
ÞKolb	<i>Eirdr</i> 15.7	<i>rauð</i> Hringmaraheiði
ÞKolb	<i>Eirdr</i> 16.7	<i>galt</i> hilmis lið hjalta
Ótt	<i>Hfl</i> 3.5	<i>Varð</i> nýtligust norðan
Ótt	<i>Hfl</i> 9.3	<i>rauð</i> Hringmaraheiði
Ótt	<i>Hfl</i> 13.7	<i>réd</i> áttstuðill áðan

His colleagues are here acknowledging and paying their tribute to Sighvatr's art, while simultaneously asserting their own skaldic personae. The line's metrical novelty probably played a key role in attracting the quotations, and as observed by Kuhn, "es muß schnell Anklang und Nachfolge gefunden haben" (1969: 416). Indeed, the popularity of the *brestr*-type increased rapidly in the following years, becoming a relatively frequent metrical pattern in the period c. 1150–1250 (Myrvoll, 2014: 228–29). The minute authorial interplay and attention to individual contributions witnessed by this case study should alert us to the degree of authorial control and presence involved in skaldic intertextuality.

Proper Names and 'Formulaic' Behaviour

In a genre devoted to the celebration of rulers and patrons, it is hardly surprising that proper names became focus of poetic attention.²⁹ This is the case, for instance, of the abovementioned 'glad-Óláfr' formula, and an analogous case is provided by a *clausula* containing the name Hákon, occurring three times in the extant corpus:

Eyvindr skáldaspillir, <i>Lausavísa</i> 8	Tindr Hallkelsson, <i>Hákonardrápa</i> 8	Þórðr Kolbeinsson, <i>Eiríksdrápa</i> 6
Bórum, Ullr, of alla, ímunlauks, á hauka fjöllum Fýrisvalla fræ Hókunar ævi	Þá veit öld, meðan aldir, Yggs, Þriðja man byggva, gnótt þess's göglum veitti, gæfs Hókunar ævi	Meinrennir, brá — manna margs fýsa sköp —, varga, ljóða lítlu siðar læ Hókunar ævi

²⁹ The repetition of names at the end of *dróttkvætt* lines or at the closing of *helmingar* is employed as a structuring device in several poems (Gade, *SkP* 1: 470; Heslop, *SkP* 1: 433; Patria, 2023: 202–06).

<p>We bore, Ullr of the battle-leek [WARRIOR], the seed of Fýrisvellir [GOLD] on the mountains of hawks [ARMS] during the whole life of Hákon.³⁰</p>	<p>People will know about the life of generous Hákon, who supplied plenty to the geese of Yggr [RAVEN], as long as generations inhabit the maiden of Þriði [JQRD > EARTH].³¹</p>	<p>Harm-banisher of wolves [EIRÍKR JARL], a little later the people's treachery ended the life of Hákon; the fate of men urges much on.³²</p>
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The rulers praised in these poems are, respectively, king Hákon góði Haraldsson (r. c. 934–961), Hákon jarl Sigurðarson (r. c. 970–995) and his son Eiríkr jarl Hákonarson (r. c. 1000–1014). The three respective poets probably worked in tight proximity: Eyvindr skáldaspillir composed first for Hákon góði and later for his namesake Hákon jarl at Hlaðir. Here, Tindr Hallkelsson was active among Hákon jarl's main poets, while Þórðr Kolbeinsson composed a *drápa* for Hákon jarl's son, Eiríkr. The latter, as observed above, is rich in echoes from several poems, but the most frequent target of allusion is precisely Tindr's *Hákonardrápa*, which shares with *Eiríksdrápa* the topic of the battle of Hjörungavágr (*SkP* 1: 488, 491, 510).³³

The *Hókonar ævi* lines occur as nearly identical in the three poems, differing only in the monosyllable of position 1: *fræ* 'seeds' (of gold, a kenning for 'gold'), *gæfs* 'generous' (an attribute of Hákon), *læ* 'deceit, treachery'. In each occurrence, this word serves a different syntactical function. Notably, so does even the stable segment of the line, the phrase *Hókonar ævi*: in the first occurrence, it is part of a temporal construction: *of alla ævi Hókonar* ('for the entire life of Hákon'); in the second, it is a direct object of the verb *vita*, in the accusative; in the third, it is the direct object of the verb *bregða*, in the dative. Once again, the syntactical complexity involved in the re-workings is at odds with plain 'metrical recycling' and, indeed, the distinctive meanings of the three lines suggest a more conscious design. The first two occurrences of the 'formula' share a similar theme, the unforgotten generosity of, respectively, king Hákon góði and Hákon jarl Sigurðarson: the fame of these generous rulers will endure. The continuity between the two namesakes was, of course, a key element in the Hlaðajarlar's message of political opposition to the Eiríkssynir. Hákon jarl's father, Sigurðr jarl Hákonarson († 962) had been an ally of Hákon góði and was killed by the Eiríkssynir shortly after the death of the king.³⁴ The last occurrence of the line, however, has a different ring: although the poem praises Eiríkr, this stanza lingers on the treacherous murder of his father, which Eiríkr will avenge (sts 6–9). Thus, whereas in the two previous occurrences the closing *Hókonar ævi* 'the life of Hákon' had a purely positive, celebratory meaning, in the third one it assumes an ominous tone. The avenging of Hákon's father, Sigurðr jarl, had been a point of honor for Hákon jarl and a central topic in the panegyrics for him, as borne out by some passages in Einarr skálaglamm's monumental *drápa*, *Vellekla* (c.

³⁰ Ed. and trans. by Russell Poole (*SkP* 1: 228)

³¹ Ed. and trans. by Russell Poole (*SkP* 1: 351)

³² Ed. and trans. by Jayne Carroll (*SkP* 1: 501)

³³ De Vries suggested that Tindr and Þórðr might have been acquainted not only because they both composed in the poetic milieu of the Hlaðajarlar, but also because of their provenance from the same region in Iceland, coming respectively from Hallkelsstaðir (near Reykholt) and Hítarnes, both in the proximity of Borgarfjörður (1964–7, I: 181).

³⁴ Eyvindr skáldaspillir Finsson's *Háleygjatal* st. 9 (*SkP* 1: 207).

975).³⁵ In *Eiríksdrápa*, the killing of Hákon is described as a treacherous scheme, just like that of his father Sigurðr, while the topic of vengeance is taken up once again in the celebration of Hákon's son. It is in this context that Þórðr Kolbeinsson inserts the *Hôkunar ævi*-line. In retrospect, the play with the listener's expectations and ability to recognize the allusion, brings emphasis on the phrase *ljóða læ*, the 'people's treachery' that put an end to the jarl's life. Intertextual play, in the form of frequent allusions to the poems composed for Eiríkr's father, is a prominent feature not only of Þórðr's *Eiríksdrápa*, but also of Halldórr ókristni's *Eiríksflokkur* (Gade, *SkP* 1: 470), and of Eyjolfur dáðaskáld's *Bandadrápa* (Poole, *SkP* 1: 456) and thus represents a distinctive and deliberate choice in the poetics of all Eiríkr's skalds. In sum, as for the *Hringmaraheiði* example above, these recurring lines look like conscious allusions rather than inertial echoing, carrying a clear political message: in the propaganda of the Hlaðajarlar, the three rulers praised in these *drápur* are linked by an ideal continuity.

Conclusions

In skaldic scholarship, the term 'formula' is more often used for cases in which the lexical correspondence is far less precise than the one observed in the cases examined in this article.³⁶ On the formal side of things, skaldic strategies of line re-working clearly exclude the mechanical appropriation of lines as a shortcut in versification, and this is true even in the case of common and unmarked kenning-types, which are virtually always modified at the lexical level. Attempts at detecting productive formulaic patterns have landed quite deep under the surface of the verse's lexical makeup or have been able to account only for partial phenomena, such as recurring 'metrically entangled' word collocations. Paradoxically, however, OFT fails to provide a convincing explanation precisely for those cases in which the verbal correspondence between skaldic lines is strongest, namely cases in which the 'echo' amounts to (almost) the entire line. These verses look like traditional formulas from a formal perspective, but, for various reasons, demand a different explanation:

1. The effort required by the linguistic re-working is such as to exclude any benefit in composition.
2. General poetic conventions, prohibiting the use of already attested kennings, suggest that similarities are more plausibly explained as the product of a conscious and pointed authorial effort at imitation.

³⁵ In particular sts 9 and 12 (*SkP* 1: 293–98).

³⁶ For instance, in a recent article Daniel Sävborg analysed occurrences of the motif of love-sickness in Old Norse poetry (2023: 377). Rather than lexically and metrically stable segments (formulas in the stricter 'Parryian' sense), the formulas investigated by Sävborg occur as shared conventions within the Old Norse poetic *langue*, the formulaic dimension pertaining more to the conceptual than to the formal sphere.

3. The lines’ distribution is limited in space and time: echoing lines tend to cluster around specific figures and poetic contexts.
4. When considered in their historical and literary contexts, echoing lines reveal conscious intertextual strategies, and, in several instances, occur in poems that make systematic use of allusions as stylistic devices.

The instances of complex line-reworking or conscious allusion examined in this article do not claim to account for the dynamics of skaldic versification at large, although several examples of such dynamics could be adduced. Nonetheless, an implicational principle is here at work: if a skald could re-elaborate a model in a highly demanding way, it must follow that less demanding and less conscious re-workings were also possible. The opposite, however, is not granted: inertial formulaicity cannot explain pointed allusion. On an ideal continuum of intertextual phenomena, ranging from the most diffused forms of ‘traditional referentiality’ to the most deliberate cases of authorial reference, such as allusion and quotation, the presence of the latter easily implies the former, but not vice versa (Fig. 1).

An explanation that accounts for marked forms of intertextuality can easily encompass also more banal manifestations of it, such as word-collocations in common kennings or recurring *clausulae* and line-openings. In fact, the surfacing of *unabsichtliche Gedächtnissplitter* (de Vries, 1952: 174) is a common phenomenon, shared by most oral as well as written poetic traditions, and is to be expected in any practice involving careful memorisation. In such cases, skaldic poetry does meet expectations of minimal formulaicity, but arguably so does saga prose (Sävborg, 2018), which goes to show that minimal requirements translate to explanatory impotence. In sum, oral-formulaic explanations can account for looser intertextual phenomena, but cannot explain more complex line-reworkings at all. On the contrary, the fact that greater authorial presence is involved precisely there where the formal similarity is strongest reveals the conscious nature of *dróttkvætt* composition. Such dynamics imply a high degree of authorial control on the poetic expression, as well as on the traditional canon. While scholars generally presuppose such dynamics in the study of written texts, they are often reluctant to admit their presence in pre-literate verse. This is borne out by Bjarne Fidjestøl’s critique of Jan de Vries’ attempt at using poetic echoes as a useful criterion for investigating a skald’s use of the tradition.

Jan de Vries once wrote an article in which he attempted to study Arnórr’s place in the skaldic tradition, especially by considering the reuse of poetic



Fig. 1 Graded scale of intertextual relations (based on Clarke, 2019: 32)

clichés in his work (1952). It is however difficult to decide how much importance should be attached to such recurrences. A repeat can easily arise as a secondary, substitute feature in oral transmission; and it could, in fact, come about by chance, and just as easily, when different skalds worked with the same vocabulary and the same technique and composed about the same topics. The line *hjq̄rþey á Skáneyju* [Arnórr jarl., *Magnússdrápa* 16.4] may look like re-use of *geirþey á Skáneyju* [Hallfreðr vand., *Óláfsdrápa* 4.8] (de Vries, 1952: 165), with variation only in the first syllable, the chief alliterative syllable or *hq̄fuðstafr*, but it seems more likely that it is a formulaic tag, of oral origin, which could as well have been introduced by the skald himself or by a later transmitter.

(Fidjestøl, 1997a [1984]: 99)

Bjarne Fidjestøl published this article in 1984, while Jan de Vries' study dates to 1952. The years that separate these two studies are the years in which OF studies rapidly revolutionized the way scholars viewed pre-literate texts. As this article has hopefully shown, however, the close similarity of two lines is no warranty of their 'conventionality', and the oral nature of a poetic tradition should not impair the study of its intertextual underpinnings. As argued by Harris, the correct evaluation of formulaic phenomena in an oral poetic tradition is an essential premise for acknowledging and studying its intertextual and historical development (1985: 119–20). In the case of a strongly self-conscious and authorial genre as skaldic poetry, explanations resorting to manifestations of 'poetic memory' (Conte 1986) or even to deliberate authorial dynamics, prove more fruitful than oral-formulaic ones. As it emerges from several references in this article, this is in effect the praxis followed by most scholars dealing with skaldic 'echoes', although their theoretical and methodological premises remain often implicit.

One final remark. If the function of compositional aid ceases to exist, then, in principle, the strongest motivation for availing ourselves of the very concept of formula substantially evaporates. The point here is, crucially, not to deny the existence of the phenomena currently described by the term 'formula': quite the contrary. The resort to vaguely defined notions of formulaicity or conventionality, however, should not impair a more nuanced analysis of oral intertextual dynamics.

Funding Open access funding provided by University of Oslo (incl Oslo University Hospital). Universitetet i Oslo.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author has no competing interest in relation to the present work.

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