Old Norse skaldic poetry is an interesting genre within Old Norse literature when it comes to the study of memory. The artistic qualities of this poetry once praised and practised by the old Scandinavians are not easily detected by us modern people. Unfortunate metaphors have been used to describe this poetry, which is often referred to as riddles, puzzles or even crosswords.\(^1\) Apparently such metaphors mostly illustrate the reception of this poetry in our times; it is at least easy to get the impression that the complexity and bizarreness of this poetry stems from a fundamentally different socio-cultural context, namely that of oral society. Albert Bates Lord, the main protagonist of Oral Theory, has commented on Skaldic poetry as a stable text form, and argues further that complexity in oral poetry is a sign of a long life under oral circumstances.\(^2\)

Skaldic poetry is “old” in the sense that the oldest stanzas do not seem to be imbued with Greco-Roman or classical learning and aesthetics. These poems have possibly preserved a somewhat different worldview and aesthetics that one could refer to with some humour as “Made in the North.” This homemade aspect, and the fact that this genre preserves a corpus from both heathen and Christian skalds, gives these poems great potential in connection to the theory of memory and not least when it comes to topics such as the memorization of texts. From our point of view it would be natural to ask if the poems of the oldest skalds can be said to reveal some “oral” characteristics not found in the poetic expression of later skalds. This poetry has been referred

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to by some as “the most original literary contribution” of the North, while most scholars from the thirteenth to the twentieth century have referred to its aesthetical character as “monstrous” and “barbaric.” The genre of skaldic poetry seems to have been developed in some courtly milieus of Norway in the ninth century, but it is mostly promoted by Icelandic poets, the so-called skalds, after the conversion in Scandinavia around 1000 AD. The Old Norse skald was highly valued in society, primarily because of his skills in making poems on the heroic deeds of kings and royalty, thereby rendering them persistent in the memory of the Scandinavian oral society. The skald is frequently shown as the king’s closest adviser, both in personal and political affairs.

The oral circumstances of skaldic poetry can easily lead one to regard it as a poetry that was meant to be learned by heart. The most common metre, which was termed dróttkvætt in Old Norse, implies certain prescriptive rules for rhyme, alliteration and the amount of syllables in each line, and it has been pointed out by scholars that this highly advanced metre must have been a great help in memorizing the stanzas by heart, thus rendering the stanzas stable during their oral transmission.

The Imagery of Kennings

In the present paper I wish to focus on another aspect of this poetry that indeed could have helped it to prevail under oral circumstances no less than its advanced form. This is its visual imagery, often referred to by scholars when speaking of the “barbaric” and the “primitive” nature of the oldest skaldic poetry. Imagery is usually associated with meta-

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