

Golden Words

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ABSTRACT: *No one shows much surprise at the many kennings referring to poetry and the mead of poetry that are found in the Old Norse corpus of poetry. There is, however, another group of rather puzzling kennings, which seem to have been taken mainly at face value, although they are based on a rather strange notion. These are the many kennings that refer to gold as the speech and/or sound of the *jǫtnar*. In this article, I present the idea that these gold-kennings are strongly associated with the idea of poetry as the highest, most precious, form of speech.*

RESUME: *Ingen viser megen overraskelse over de mange kenninger som henviser til digtning og digtermjødret som findes i det norrøne digt-korpus. Men der findes en anden gruppe ret gådefulde kenninger, som synes hovedsageligt at være blevet taget bogstaveligt, skønt de er baseret på en temmelig sær idé. Det er de mange kenninger som henviser til guld som jætternes tale og/eller lyd. I dette bidrag fremfører jeg den idé at disse guld-kenninger er meget tæt forbundet med ideen om digtekunst som den højeste og mest dyrebare form for tale.*

KEYWORDS: *Skaldic poetry; kennings for gold and poetry; jǫtnar; Snorri.*

In this article, I will present the idea that the many kennings that refer to gold as the speech, sound, or song of the *jǫtnar* actually spring from the idea of poetry as the highest, most treasured, form of speech. When looking at the *jǫtnar* in the Old Norse sources, one of the things that draws attention is their close connection to gold; most of them seem to possess it in abundance. In Eddic poetry, we see in *Hávamál* that Suttungr's hall is equipped with a golden chair, in *Þrymskviða*, Þrymr decorates his dogs with gold ribbons and he owns cattle with gold-plated horns, according to *Skiðmismál*, there is no lack of gold in Gymisgarðar, *Lokasenna* says that Gymir's daughter was „gulli keypt“; finally in *Hymiskviða* we are told that Hymir's consort walks into the hall „algullin“, something which may just as well mean that she is bedecked with golden jewellery as that the word is a synonym with her other descriptive adjective „brúnhvít“ which designates fairness of complexion. Finally, in *Grottasǫngur*, the

jǫtunn-women Fenja and Menja grind gold in huge quantities. Together with such direct mentions of gold in the possession of *jǫtnar*, all of these cases, except for *Grottasǫngr*, yield further indications of great riches owned by *jǫtnar*, such as large herds of cattle, great halls, leisure time and big banquets. This, however, may not be the whole story.¹

Looking to the skaldic poetry, a large number of the references that connote the link between *jǫtnar* and gold consists of a special group of somewhat perplexing kennings.² These are the many kennings that refer to gold as the words, speech, sound or song of *jǫtnar*. This rather strange metaphor of gold as a form of speech has been widely noted in scholarly discussion, but mostly, it has been accepted without much probing, for example, into the kind of imagery or conception that might lie behind this unlikely mental picture.³ As far as I know, this imagery has not been discussed in any detail by earlier scholars. Even so, it seems to me to be worth a more detailed investigation.

These kennings, twenty-six in all, are constructed with a base word meaning speech, words, laughter or song – that is, they refer to a sound that comes out of the mouth – and a determinant which refers to a *jǫtunn*, who is either named or otherwise designated:

Kenning for Gold	Translation	Source
boð mellings	words/message/order of the <i>jǫtunn</i> - gold	Guðmundardrápa 15 (Árni ábóti Jónsson)
orð fjallgestils	word/s of the mountain king/ <i>jǫtunn</i> - gold	Íslendingadrápa 4
Iðja orð	the words of Iði - gold	Anon (TGT) 5
Iðja dómr	opinion/advice of Iði - gold	Poem about Áróon Hjörleifsson 2 (Þormóður Ólafsson)
Iðja glysmól	the shining speech of Iði - gold	Bjarkamál in fornu 5
Iðja mál	the speech of Iði - gold	Kátrínardrápa 38 (Kálfr Hallsson)
Iðja rødd	the speech of Iði - gold	Kátrínardrápa 39 (Kálfr Hallsson)
Iðja hlátr	the laughter of Iði - gold	Lausavísa 3 (Ófeigr Skíðason)
Iðja niðleikr	Iði's brothers' playful words - gold	Lausavísa 15 (Gísli Súrsson)
Iðja galdr	the chant of Iði - gold	Lausavísa 11 (Skarphéðinn Njálsson – Njáls saga)
jǫfra heiðar galdr	the chant of the chieftains of the heath - gold	Lausavísa 2 (Einarr Skúlason)

- 1 All references to Eddic poetry are to *Eddukvæði* I, II. (2014). Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (eds.). Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag.
- 2 All references to skaldic poetry are to *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages I–III*. (2009–2017). Editorial Board: Margaret Clunies Ross, Kari Ellen Gade, Guðrún Nordal, Edith Marold, Diana Whaley, and Tarrin Wills. Turnhout. Brepols; <https://skaldic.abdn.ac.uk/m.php?p=skaldic>
- 3 See, for example, Meissner 1921, p. 31; Turville Petre 1976, p. I; Kuhn 1983, pp. 220–238; and Guðrún Nordal 2001, p. 330.

Geitis galdr	the chant of Geitir - gold	Lausavísa 2 (Gestr Þórhalls-son)
Hamðis geirs grams orð	the giant's word/s - gold	Lausavísa 47 (Egill Skallagrímsson)
glóflýtir Gangs sennu	Gangr's shining words - gold	Lausavísa 1 (Gunnlaugur ormsunga)
glórødd Gauta hellis	the gleaming-voice of the Gautar of the cave - gold	Lausavísa 7 (Røgnvaldr jarl kali)
hella mildings mál	the speech of the lord of the cave - gold	Erfidrápa Ólafs helga 2 (Sigvatr Þórðarson)
áar steðja Eldis mál	Eldir of the stone: giant; his speech - gold	Anon 10 (Snorra Edda)
þursa kveðja	greeting of giants - gold	Háttalykill 71 (Røgnvaldr jarl and Hallr Þórarinsson)
moldreks orð	the speech of the soil-ruler - gold	Knútsdrápa 7 (Hallvarðr háreksblesi)
orð myrk-Danar beina grœnnar Hløðynjar	of the words of the dark-Dane of the bones of green Hløðyn - gold	Ogmundardrápa 2 (Völu-Steinn)
rødd Ála vast-undirkúlu	the voice of the Áli of the rock - gold	Fragments 6 (Bragi inn gamli Boddason)
sagnir jøtnuns	giant's stories/words - gold	Lausavísa 20 (Hallfreðr Óttarsson)
rómur jøtna	the speech of giants - gold	Kátrínardrápa 40, 50 (Kálfr Hallsson)
Íma hljóð	Ími's sound - gold	Guðmundardrápa 22 (Árni ábóti Jónsson)
Sirnis hljóð	Sirni's sound - gold	Lausavísa (Signý Valbrandsdóttir – Harðar saga)
þingskil Þjaza	Þjazi's assembly declaration - gold	Þjarkamál in fornu 6
(gulli mælti Þjazi sjálf)	Þjazi spoke in gold	Málsháttakvæði 8

As can be seen from this table, a very frequent kenning-model refers to gold as the “speech” or “word” or “sound” uttered by *jøtnar*. Some of these kennings have *galdr* (magic – *gala* [sing a magic song]) as a base word, which may indicate that kennings of this kind contained or symbolized some form of numinous power and/or authority (possibly ritualistic or connected to rituals). The poems which contain these kennings cover a considerable period of time, ranging from the 10th century to the 14th, which seems to indicate that this concept must be quite old and well-established in the vocabulary of at least some of the skalds. Referring either to *jøtnar* as a generic group or to individual, named *jøtunn*-figures, these kennings suggest that these two concepts, gold and the speech of *jøtnar*, were at some point in time regarded as compatible, even synonymous, in some special way. In all parts of the world, in all societies from the very earliest of times, gold has been seen as the most beautiful of metals and thus the most precious and valuable, and possession and ownership of it has always denoted high status and superiority, even divinity. Therefore, the equation of speech with gold could mean that the speech thus designated is considered to be of superior quality. Following on from that, ascribing this kind of superior speech to a particular generic

group must attribute a special status or role to that group of beings – especially since *jötnar* appear to be the only kind of creatures capable of making such precious utterances. No other type of being does it. The kennings hence suggest that the speech of *jötnar* was seen as something extremely precious and had something exclusive and much treasured about it.

The objective here is to try to identify what kind of speech or words are meant in these kennings. They are only used in skaldic poetry, and it seems not unlikely that in the mind of poets, who often composed and performed their art for kings and other high-standing persons and were frequently paid in gold or other valuables, poetry would be considered the highest and most admired or esteemed form of word-use. Of skaldic poetry Gabriel Turville-Petre says:

The author frequently celebrates an event, a glorious victory or heroic defeat and death. He may praise a prince or chieftain for his valour, and especially for his generosity, for many scalds lived on the generosity of chieftains ... They committed the triumphs of a chieftain to immortal memory; they might be commissioned to make a lay in his memory after he was dead.⁴

It may seem a banal question, but it is certainly relevant to ask why poets would make the effort to compose praise for kings and chiefs in a complex poetic form if that form were not considered of a higher quality and order than prose – and was rewarded accordingly. The obvious deduction is that even from very early times, poems or poetry were the golden speech and words in question. Over the course of time, this image may have lost its deeper meaning although poetry as such retained its status in the minds of men.

There may, however, be more aspects to consider. In a story Snorri relates in *Skáldskaparmál*, he says the following of the *jötunn* Ólvaldi and his three sons:

Hann var mjök gullauðigr, en er hann dó ok synir hans skyldu skipta arfi, þá höfðu þeir mæling at gullinu er þeir skiptu at hverr skyldi taka munnfylli sína ok allir jafnmargar. Einn þeira var Þjazi, annarr Íði, þriði Gangr. En þat höfum vér orðtak nú með oss at kalla gullit munntal þessa jötna, en vér felum í rúnum eða í skáldskap svá at vér köllum þat mál eða orða-<k>, tal þessa jötna.

He was very rich in gold, and when he died and his sons had to divide their inheritance, they measured out the gold when they divided it by each in turn taking a mouthful, all of them the same number. One of them was Thiassi, the second Idi, the third Gang. And we now have this expression among us, to call gold the mouth-tale of these giants, and we conceal it in secret language or in poetry by calling it speech or words or talk of these giants.⁵

There are several points of interest here. One is that, in Snorri's mind, gold can apparently be equated with "the mouth-tale" of the *jötnar*. Another is that it is concealed in *rúnir* (secret language) or in poetry. The third is the name of the father, Ólvaldi.⁶

4 Turville-Petre, 1976. p. xvi.

5 *Skáldskaparmál*, p. 3.

6 His name is Allvaldi in the manuscript of Codex Regius (*Hárbarðsljóð* 19) but Ólvaldi in *Skáldskaparmál*, of which the latter form is, according to the few scholars who have dealt with

Regarding the first point, we see that the names of the three brothers/sons of Ólvaldi are attested in the above listed gold-kennings in which gold is referred to as the “speech of *jǫtnar*.” Especially interesting in this context is the point that, when the sons are supposed to take their inheritance, they are to put their father’s gold into their mouths (“taka munnfylli”). This seems a strange way of dividing the father’s inheritance between them and, in light of the number of gold-kennings in which these three brothers are mentioned, eleven in all, with Iði featuring in more than half (see above), it is hard not to see some kind of connection here. As mentioned above, we know from the many attestations in both poetry and prose that *jǫtnar* in general are closely associated with gold, and just like Suttungr with the golden chair in his hall, Gymir in *Skírnismál* and Þrymr in *Þrymskviða*, Ólvaldi was certainly not lacking gold before his death, according to Snorri’s narrative.⁷ When his sons fill their mouths with gold, it equates what is in their mouths and what comes out of them, namely speech, with this most precious of metals and becomes a strong indication that the speech of the *jǫtnar* was at one time or other seen as being of the highest quality.

As to the second point, it seems that this gold-equated “mouth-tale” of the *jǫtnar* may have had some link to the secret language of the *rúnir*. This is suggested both in Snorri’s words quoted above, and, even more remarkably, in those of the above listed gold-kennings that refer to the speech of *jǫtnar* as *galdr* (magic; [*gala*: sing or chant magic songs]). This link cannot easily be ignored. Additionally, if we look closely at Snorri’s wording, things get even stranger, because gold can be referred to as being *concealed* in *rúnir*. Yet, if we look at this issue from another angle, that is, if we assume that the *rúnir* and/or poetry issued by the *jǫtnar* are as precious and highly esteemed as gold, the most treasured metal available, then the story makes perfectly good sense: The inheritance shared by the three brothers after their father’s death is the knowledge and skill of the highest form of speech: powerful magic incantations and poetry. This knowledge is not meant for everyone but only for a select group, in this context the *jǫtnar*, and only they can wield it. On the human level skaldic poetry may possibly be seen as an equivalent since it requires special knowledge and skill; it is highly wrought and crafted and the *þættir* and poets’ sagas make clear that kings appreciated that craftsmanship.

If we now move briefly from skaldic to Eddic poetry, stanza 140 in *Hávamál* comes to mind, in which Óðinn, after his ordeal of hanging on the *vindga meiðr* for nine nights, picks up “*rúnar*”, that is, he learns or receives runic knowledge, which in the next stanza he calls “*fimbulljóð nú*” (variously translated as “nine mighty spells/songs/chants/charms”). The prefix *fimbul-* (mighty) is always used to denote the

this name, most likely the original and more reliable. See von See et al. 1997 II, pp. 168, 200; and Simek 1984, p. 308.

7 *Uppsala-Edda*, p. 201. It should be noted that, in the *Uppsala-Edda*, this figure is named Auðvaldi; but even if that form should be seen as more reliable than Ólvaldi, that does not cancel out the implication of wealth and power. but rather enhances it.

superlative, the ‘most’ or ‘highest’ of something,⁸ and more often than not it appears in connection with mystical and runic knowledge. In that stanza (*Háv* 141), it also becomes clear that Óðinn learns these apparently mighty charms or poems from the *jotnar*, and that he receives the “drykk ins dýra mjaðar”⁹ (a drink of the precious mead). This echoes the earlier events in Suttungr’s homestead (*Háv* 104-5), where he also received “drykk ins dýra mjaðar” after he had recited *morg orð* (many words), supposedly to prove his prowess in one way or another.¹⁰ What we have in this cluster of images is runic magic, mighty poetry, and recitation, all intertwined with one another and all taking place on premises belonging to *jotnar*.

Turning now to the third point, the name of the father of the three brothers: Ólvaldi. It indicates someone who wields power over *öl* (ale/mead)¹¹ and leaves no doubt that it is in his hands to bestow it; this is compatible with what we know about many other *jotnar* who in various Eddic poems are seen to host feasts for the *æsir*, as well as being designated as the keepers of mead (see list of kennings below). We may assume that the lord who owns a hall has power over his resources and that the mead served in his hall is one such asset. Such ruling figures exist among the *jotnar*, for instance Suttungr in *Hávamál* 104-110 and, apparently, the unnamed character in *Hávamál* 140 (*inn frægi sonr Bolþórs, Bestlu faðir* [the famous son of Bolthor, Bestla’s father]) who seems to have a status comparable to Suttungr’s; also the wealthy Þrymr in *Brymskviða*, Gymir in *Skírnismál* and Hymir in *Hymiskviða*; and most likely also Ægir in *Lokasenna*. In most of these cases, the mead that features even seems to carry ritualistic connotations and is generally referred to as “dýr mjöðr” (precious mead) or “forn mjöðr” (ancient mead). It is served by *jotunn*-women in a glass or cup called *kálkr* or *hrímkálkr*, apparently a formal object of some kind which is most likely used on formal occasions or in rituals.¹² As the abundantly rich father of the three sons in Snorri’s narrative, and as is indicated in the many gold-kennings listed above, it may be assumed that Ólvaldi falls into the same category as these other *jotnar*: he is the lord of his own hall. As we know, all the feasts mentioned in the poetic sources are held by *jotnar* and other occasions where mead is served such as in *Skírnismál* 37 also take place at the *jotnar* premises. While it may be disputable whether all the above-mentioned references to mead should be seen

8 Cf. *fimbulvetr*: “the great and awful winter preceding the end of the world” (Cleasby and Vigfússon 1874/1957, p. 153; see also, de Vries 1962, p. 121); and more appositely *fimbulþulr* in *Hávamál* 142.

9 This formula „drykk ins dýra/forna mjaðar“ occurs in *Hávamál* (105 and 140), but also in other contexts (*Skírnismál* 37; *Hymiskviða* 8, 30-32; and *Lokasenna* 53).

10 See Ingunn Ásdísardóttir 2018, pp. 76–83.

11 The words *öl* and *mjöðr* seem to be metonymic of one another and their choice in the sources mainly seems to depend on rhythm and alliteration.

12 Gunnlōð serves the *dýr mjöðr* in *Hávamál* 105; Gerðr and Sif serve the *forn mjöðr* in *Skírnismál* 37 and *Lokasenna* 53. As regards Sif, it has been suggested that she may be of *jotunn*-origin, see Mundal 1990, pp. 5-18; also Simek 1984, pp. 216-217; and Ingunn Ásdísardóttir 2018, p. 115 n. In both *Brymskviða* and *Hymiskviða*, a *jotunn*-woman is present; in *Hymiskviða* even also a *kálkr* of magic power.

as relating specifically to the poetic mead¹³ the many skaldic kennings that do refer to the poetic mead leave no doubt about this drink being in the possession or keeping of *jötnar*, as can be seen from the following list:

Kennings for Poetry ¹⁴	Translation	Source
brunnr Aurnis	Aurnir's well - poetry	Hallmundarkviða 12 (Bergbúa þátrr)
Billings burar full	the drink of Billinger's son - poetry	Poem about a woman 2 (Ormr Steinþórsson)
Gauta gildi	the Gautar's (giants') drink - poetry	Lausavísa 46 (Kormákr Qgmunarson)
gildi geðreinar grjótdaldar	the giants' drink - poetry	Poem about Þorsteinn 1 (Hofgarða-Refr Gestsson)
gjöld Gillings	Gillinger's payment - poetry	Háleygjatal 1 (Eyvindr Finnsson)
Hrauðnis gjöld	Hrauðnir's payment - poetry	Hákonardrápa 5 (Tindr Hallkelsson)
hornstraumur Hrímnis	The stream in Hrímnir's horn - poetry	Poem about Þórr 1 (Eysteinn Valda-son)
sættir Áms ok Austra	Ámr's and Austri's settlement/agreement - poetry	Lausavísa 5 (Ófeigr Skíðason)
Surts ættar sylgr	the drink of Surtr's kin - poetry	Erfidrápa Ólafs Tryggvasonar 15 (Hallfreðr Óttarsson)
drykkja Fjölnis fjalla	drink of Fjölnir of the mountains (giant) - poetry	Fragments 5 (Bragi inn gamli Boddason)
líð lýða landherðar	drink of giants - poetry	Erfidrápa Ólafs Tryggvasonar 21 (Hallfreðr Óttarsson)
fley berg-Saxa	drink of giants - poetry	Vellekla 2 (Einarr skálaglamm Helgason)
bára berg-Mæra	drink of giants - poetry	Poem about Þorsteinn 1 (Hofgarða-Refr Gestsson)
ramar veig salar Falsbrautar fannar	Falr of the mountains' (giant's) drink - poetry	Poem about Gizurr gullbráskáld 3 (Hofgarða-Refr Gestsson)
mína jastRín aurgreppa Sýrar fentanna	ale of giants - poetry	Sigurðardrápa 1 (Kormákr Qgmunarson)
possibly also: simblir sumbls	giant of the ale/drink	Fragments 3 (Bragi inn gamli Boddason)

13 Snorri's interpretation of *Hávamál* 104-110, in which he relates that Óðinn stole the poetic mead from the *jötnar*, is the basis for many/most of the kennings that refer to the mead of poetry as Óðinn's stolen prize. This interpretation has, however, been contested, especially by Roberta Frank and Svava Jakobsdóttir who both emphasize that there is nothing in the *Hávamál* episode that connects the „drykkir ins dýra mjaðar“ clearly to the mead of poetry, whereas it seems to hold some other kind of sanctifying sacredness relating to rituals of one kind or another (see Frank 1981, pp. 155-170; Svava Jakobsdóttir 1988, pp. 215-245; an English translation of this article was published in *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology*, eds. Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington, 2002, pp. 27-57. See also Ingunn Ásdísardóttir 2018, pp. 76-84.) It seems, however, more likely than not that, in the *Hávamál*-episode and Snorri's interpretation, we may see the remnants of two older variants of a myth that has a precious drink of one kind or another at its core.

14 The unclear kenning “simblir sumbls” (the simblir of the drink), which is thought to denote *jötunn*, might possibly be added to this list, see *Lexicon poeticum* s.v.

Conclusion

Looking for a coherent explanation of this perplexing and seemingly illogical equation of speech/sound with gold, evident from the above-listed group of gold-kennings, the key is to be found in the determinants of the kennings, the *jǫtnar* and their chief attribute, gold and riches. From that standpoint it is my conclusion that this most treasured metal can be equated with that form of word-use which is regarded as the highest and most valuable form of speech, steeped in complexity and numinous knowledge and intended only for the select few. Poetry is, exactly as Snorri says, what is meant by this strange combination wherein gold represents the various sounds emitted through the mouth. The „munntal jǫtna“ is poetry and, on the mythological or runic and magical level, those who possess the knowledge and skill to perform it are the *jǫtnar*. When these three elements, gold, speech/sound and poetry, are connected in this way in the sources, the riddle of the gold-kennings resolves itself in a logical manner, showing that the *jǫtnar* are creatures who host and preside over feasts where numinous knowledge and poetic skills are prevalent. As skalds commit knowledge of historical events to the collective memory by putting it into memorable words, so *jǫtnar* possess this valuable knowledge which the *æsir* are so interested in getting a share of. The equation of poetry with gold on the human level, namely the fact that a skald should be paid for his art in gold, thus makes poetry and gold interchangeable, as the above-listed gold-kennings in question exhibit.

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