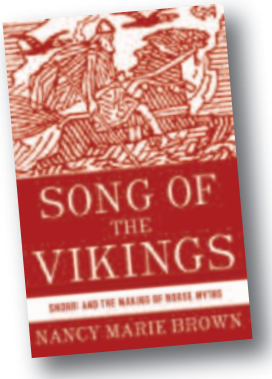

A review of

Song of the Vikings: Snorri and the Making of Norse Myths

Jacqueline Simpson

It is immediately obvious that Nancy Marie Brown has an enthusiastic appreciation of medieval Iceland's history, literature and culture, and can convey this through vivid and witty narrative and descriptions. Her book centres upon the career of Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241) – an unscrupulous chieftain and politician, but also a major historian, poet and mythographer – making extremely large claims for his importance not merely as transmitter but as creator of the Norse myths. The blurb to the book puts it bluntly: he 'create[d] unforgettable characters and tales, including nearly every story we know of the gods … It was Snorri who created the archetype of the bold, blond, laugh-in-the-face-of-death Viking.'

Unfortunately, this is far too simplistic. It is true that modern American and British readers almost always first encounter the characters and tales of Norse mythology in translations of Snorri's *Edda*, but it is by no means true that he created them; he built upon a corpus of poetry going back centuries, weaving its scattered material into sustained narratives. There has been much scholarly debate as to how far his literary talent, his humour and his Christianity affected the result, but nobody would argue for the extreme position stated above. Brown is well aware that Snorri was explaining, and expanding upon, mythological allusions in numerous skaldic verses, but she makes surprisingly few references to the narrative poems gathered in the *Poetic* (or *Elder*) *Edda*, the primary source for many tales of gods and heroes (including Hogni, who died laughing while his heart was cut out). She gives only a single very inadequate paragraph (125) to the collection itself, perhaps because the oldest surviving manuscript, Codex Regius, was compiled some fifty years after Snorri's death. However, this manuscript was made up from older, smaller collections now lost, at least one of which seems to have been available to him. Individual poems, naturally, are older still. It would be reasonable to assess Eddic poems as sources for Snorri; instead, Brown simply notes that he may have encouraged people to write them down.

To me, as I read Brown's book, the *Poetic Edda* took on the implacable outline of 'the elephant in the room'. Indeed, it trumpeted its call on the very first page, where the epigraph to the Preface reads: '"What troubles the gods? What troubles the elves? … Would you know more, or not?" – Snorri, *Edda*.' This is a serious distortion, for these words were not *written* by Snorri, merely *quoted* by him: they are from the poem *Völuspá,* composed around the year 1000 and included in the *Poetic Edda*. (There is the same error in the epigraph to chapter 5.) The elephant trumpeted again at the end of the Preface, where Brown talks of her delight on discovering that the dwarf names in *The Hobbit*, together with the name 'Gandalf', are in Snorri; she says (xi, and *cf*.200): 'The name of the wizard, Tolkien acknowledged, he had plucked from Snorri's list of dwarfs'. Surely, I thought, a scholar like Tolkien would cite the primary source, not a derivative one; this list of names is an interpolation in *Völuspá*, and Snorri was merely quoting it. Sure enough, in a letter to the *Observer* of 16 January 1938, Tolkien wrote: 'The dwarf-names, and the wizard's, are from the *Elder* [i.e. *Poetic*] *Edda*.'

Brown is much more successful in her other aim, to give an account of Snorri's life, his family, and certain significant ancestors, and to set him in the context of his country and his times. Contemporary sources recorded many facts, but making them understandable to today's non-specialist readers cannot have been an easy task. Snorri's unscrupulous pursuit of wealth and power involved a web of alliances, kinship, marriages, inheritance, quarrels, lawsuits, betrayals, and politics which eventually cost him his life; as one who once struggled through chunks of *Sturlunga saga* I can appreciate her patient untangling of all this. Along the way she also gives us many anecdotes about the people and places linked to Snorri or his forebears, or mentioned in his writings, and excellently clear explanations of medieval Iceland's laws, chieftainships, farming, trade, and so forth.

The last chapter traces the ever-increasing knowledge of Icelandic literature and myths in England and Germany from the 18th century to the present day, with particular emphasis on the books of William Morris and Tolkien, which in turn have inspired the whole modern genre of fantasy fiction.

As she swings to and fro between the myths, the history, the biography and the general cultural background, Nancy Marie Brown is always enthusiastic, entertaining and informative. Despite the inaccuracies noted above, her book will surely grip the attention of many readers and increase their appreciation of Iceland, its writers, and its myths.

Author: Nancy Marie Brown.
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