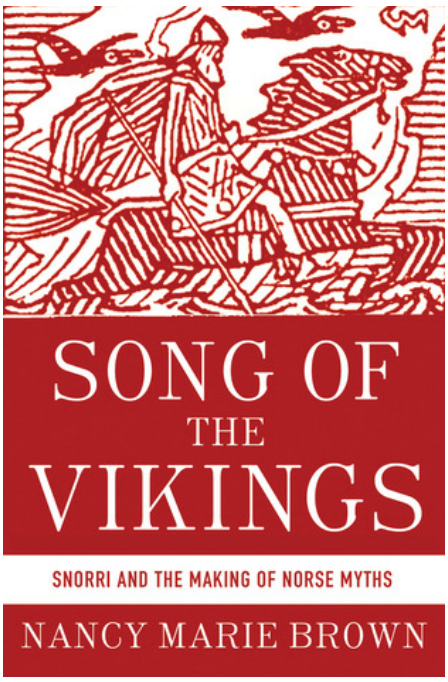

Song of the Vikings: Snorri and the Making of Norse Myths

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Much like Greek and Roman mythology, Norse myths are still with us. Famous storytellers from JRR Tolkien to Neil Gaiman have drawn their inspiration from the long-haired, mead-drinking, marauding and pillaging Vikings. Their creator is a thirteenth-century Icelandic chieftain by the name of Snorri Sturluson. Like Homer, Snorri was a bard, writing down and embellishing the folklore and pagan legends of medieval Scandinavia. Unlike Homer, Snorri was a man of the world--a wily political power player, one of the richest men in Iceland who came close to ruling it, and even closer to betraying it... In "Song of the Vikings," award-winning author Nancy Marie Brown brings Snorri Sturluson's story to life in a richly textured narrative that draws on newly available sources.

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

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From Reader Review Song of the Vikings: Snorri and the Making of Norse Myths for online ebook

Heidi The Hippie Reader says

I received a free copy of this book through Goodreads First Reads. FTC guidelines: check!

This book was very different from anything else that I've read. I have a background education in Greek and Roman mythology, but knew very little of the Norse legends and mythology. The snippets of myth that Brown included in this book were excellent. I wish that she had put more of that in there.

The historical person of Snorri was fascinating in that I had no idea what Icelanders were up to in the 1100s. It was less interesting when it delved into the lists of names, quarrels, chieftainships, marriages, divorces, and endless political scheming of Snorri and his family which surprised me because usually I enjoy reading about that kind of history. Brown's delivery was dry in places and somehow the material that could have been so engaging, just wasn't.

I liked that she listed the names of authors and books that have been heavily influenced by the Eddas (more to add to my to-read list!). Also, this is the first book that explained to me in detail about Tolkien's fascination with Snorri's materials and how he introduced them to his fellow Inklings and students. Fans of the Lord of the Rings should read pages 195-204!

I enjoyed Brown's descriptions of skaldic poetry and the use of kennings. They built riddles and puzzles within their epic poetry and part of the enjoyment of their works was figuring out what on earth they were talking about in the first place. Modern English doesn't really have an equivalent to that in my opinion.

Read this book if you're interested in Snorri's Iceland and authors who have been influenced by his works. Do not read this if you're looking for a fast-paced historical saga.

Also, if you're interested in Norse mythology, I'd recommend Joanna Harris' Runemarks, which is her own take on the Eddas. Runemarks was written for juveniles, but I believe she's going to write another set of books with the same theme for adults.

Alan Driscoll says

I can't speak for its historical accuracy, but Song of the Vikings does a fantastic job of fleshing out the period and characters that shaped what we know of Norse Mythology. Far from being a grim and cold epic, this is a pleasant, readable bit of popular history that I'd recommend to anyone with even a passing interest in the topic.

Barb Middleton says

This biography about the 13th century Icelandic Chieftain, Snorri Sturluson, who was murdered in his cellar when he angered King Haakon IV of Norway, is engrossing and slow at times. Full of great literary facts,

sometimes the pacing got bogged down with all the different relatives vying for power. Perhaps if I had written the names down as I was reading, I wouldn't have gotten tripped up at times. I read 40 minutes everyday and perhaps one sitting would have helped me keep everyone straight. Nancy Marie Brown has a straight-forward narrative that is easy to read and engaging. She does a terrific job bringing to life the customs and lifestyle of the Icelandic people.

Snorri's famous books, "Heimskringla" and "Edda," were written on the history of Norwegian kings and Norse mythology and they had an enormous impact on literature, influencing the rise of the gothic novel in the 1700s, inspiring J.R.R. Tolkien, and leaving a footprint that can be seen in the immensely popular modern day Marvel comic movies and Game of Thrones television series. Snorri married a rich heiress and became a chieftain later acquiring more chiefdoms. An accomplished lawyer, he was chosen three times as lawspeaker for the Althing which is like being president of parliament. He got into trouble with King Haakon in his late 50s when he disobeyed the King's order to stay in Norway and returned to Iceland. The King sought consequences for Snorri's disobedience and Snorri's main rival that wanted to usurp him was quite willing to carry out the death sentence.

Snorri was a brilliant storyteller and brought to life the Norse gods of old making them "peculiarly human." The gods had limitations and were not particularly smart. They liked to play games on each other, joke, and be cruel. They also knew that the end of the world was coming but they didn't know how to stop it or save the world. Snorri adds humor and entertainment and while the poems are difficult to understand because of their complex style, they had a resurgence in the 1700s. Brown ties mythology with national history and shows how it evolves to some extent. She doesn't delve deeply into it but I found the few links she does make tantalizing. I'd like to explore this topic more.

Brown's writing didn't feel as cohesive as her other book I read, "The Far-Traveler." The narrative felt scattered at times and while I know some of that is due to the long genealogies, I also felt the main focus got lost at times as she points out Snorri's skills as lawyer, historian, and poet. The section on kennings and how complex the poems are was really fascinating and I wished it had been closer to the beginning. I kept wondering why she wasn't quoting his poems. As she gives an example then I realized that it would read like nonsense to the modern day reader. What a difficult topic to write about and I admire her effort even if it falls short at times. In "The Far-Traveler," Brown frames the story with archeology and for me it was the glue that held it all together. I needed something more to hold all the pieces together.

The information in this book is valuable and heavily researched. I read about Snorri on Wikipedia after reading Brown's book and there are some conflicts between it and what she has written. They are small things but it would be a way to show students how the Internet is not always a reliable source. Snorri loved power and in the end it was his downfall. This is loaded with great facts and extensive footnotes. If you are interested in the Icelandic sagas and history of Norse mythology then I highly recommend it.

Bruce says

Much of what we know of the Norse Gods and legends apparently were preserved and embellished upon by an Icelander of the 12th and 13th centuries, Snoori Snurluson. Most of the chapters start with a story of one of the Gods or legends and then the author skillfully weaves elements of Icelandic/Norse history and Sturulson's biography therein to make an easily read narrative. The last chapter also starts with a Norse legend, some Sturluson biography and Icelandic/Norse history but the preponderance covers the 'history' of Snurluson's manuscripts and their use in later 'culture.' Some of the manuscripts were damaged or lost but

those that survived influenced later writers and composers. J.R.R. Tolkien is perhaps the one best known in recent times. However, many of Wagner's Operas are based on Snurluson's work.
Religion played a part in Icelandic society and, interestingly, different classes favored different Gods, Thor was favored by farmers and sailors while Odin was an aristocrat's God. Christianity came to Iceland in 1000 and that was when Icelandic book culture started. Snoori subtly gives some of the myths a Christian coloring 'bringing out the correspondence between Norse paganism and Christian teaching.' Unfortunately, some of the Sagas have been used to foster groups and societies that have been detrimental to world peace.

Matt Fimbulwinter says

Less myth and more Snorri than I was expecting based on the author's essays on Tor.com.

I found that in parts it devolved into lists of names who were related to other lists of names who... were really dull.

Also, the weasel words are really heavy in this book. There's a whole lot of "Snorri may have..." or "Snorri could have..." Given that the book was plugged as taking us behind the curtain of the Edda, that the evidence pretty much boils down to the author's opinion was a bit of a let down.

In terms of ebook pickiness, I also hated the ways notes were handled here. There were no references in the chapters to the end notes, so for most of the book, I thought the author had simply failed to back up any of her claims. Instead, about 40% of the book was end notes that one would have to flip back to the chapter in question to look up.

All in all, I wasn't that impressed with the book. It didn't follow through on the promise of going deeply into the Norse myths. It was an interesting book on medieval Icelandic society, and on Snorri Sturlason, but I felt like I was drawn in with a promise that was left unfulfilled.

Lindsey says

You can read and comment on this and other reviews here: http://digitalmanticore.com/?p=114

So, a few weeks ago we saw the new Loki movie—excuse me—Thor movie and I was like, by Odin’s beard! It has been too long since I read up on Norse mythology (which according to my records was in 2011)! I came home, hopped on to the website for my local library and found this book.

Song of the Vikings is an interesting read because it links a few different vectors of Norse mythology. There is a little bit of the myths themselves (we learn about the time Loki got down with a horse, for example, and why gold is otter’s ransom), but more than the myths, Brown lays down the saga of Snorri Sturluson and how the myths came down from the Vikings to the present. In many ways, this is more instructive than the actual content of the myths.

Snorri Sturluson is one of the most influential dudes you have (probably) never heard of. He is the author of several works: The Prose Edda, Heimskringla, and Egil’s Saga. The Edda is perhaps the most well-known of

his works, even though no one knows what an “edda” actually is. Some think it might be “the book of Oddi,” (Oddi being the name of a place Snorri lived), or maybe something like “the art of poetry.” It could possibly even be given the cheeky translation of “the art of great-grandmother’s old-fashioned songs.” The Prose Edda (yes, this is in contrast to another author’s Poetic Edda) is the primary compendium of the stories we recognize as Norse mythology. Not only is this mythology awesome, but it has been called “the deep an ancient wellspring of Western culture.” So, if you are not an uncultured lout, you should listen up and learn yourself some Norse business.

Snorri lived in Iceland during the late 12th and early 13th century. Iceland at this time was kind of the way you might imagine it to be. People then and there had plots of land where they might graze cows or goats. There was, of course, a lot of fishing, and exceptionally well-situated landowners might have access to a hot spring. Families were brought together under chieftains, who were not exactly elected, but who could not govern if they did not have the confidence and might of the people behind them. Positions of power were typically cemented through family ties, but people were also respected for being well-versed in the law or for being great poets. Another cultural force at this time was Christianity, which was a surprise to me. There were churches in Iceland during this period and the church was gradually becoming more influential among the people.

In this climate we have Snorri. He was born to a fairly influential family and was a foster son to Jon Loftsson of Oddi, the “uncrowned king of Iceland.” Snorri became educated and grew up to be influential in his own right. He was the chief over some choice chieftaincies and he even became the lawspeaker at the allthing—essentially the most law-knowing and well-versed guy at the annual Icelandic assembly. He was also a great poet and he loved writing about the gods, especially Odin, who was, in Snorri’s opinion, the best god. While most people at the time favored Thor, Snorri seems to have considered him a dumb meat-head, eschewing Thor for Odin and his cleverness and skill in poetry. It should be noted that poetry was not then, as it is today, seen as a sign of femininity. Manly men went on raids and also traded verses to exhibit their keen wit. Vikings love poetry; it is manly business.
an image of Snorri Stuluson

Although Iceland was, at this time, an independent commonwealth, the Norwegian king had designs on the land. Snorri, in his quest for more power and influence, spent several seasons at the Norwegian court getting to know the young king and apparently glad-handing with everyone there. Snorri was also semi-obsessed with the concept of kingliness and what it meant to be a king. His first visit to Norway inspired his work Heimskringla, which is a saga about Norwegian kings. Snorri was concerned the Norway’s young king (then 16) was missing out on vital information. He worried that kids these days were losing the ability to understand poetry—that most influential of arts. Heimskringla goes a long way to explain the old stories of the gods; understanding these stories is the key to understanding poetry, and as such, all the important literature of the time. Nordic poetry was fond of kennings, which is basically referring to something by calling it something else. Brown includes this example to illustrate the importance of knowing one’s stories:

“The noble hater of the fire of the sea defends the woman-friend of the enemy of the wolf; prows are set before the step brow of the confidante of the friend of Mimir. The noble, all-powerful one knows how to protect the mother of the attacker of the work; enjoy, enemy of neck-rings, the mother of the troll-wife’s enemy until old age.”

Brown comments “As the translator of this stanza notes, the audience needs to know five myths and the family trees of two gods or it’s nonsense.” The majority of verses were similarly oblique (if the poet had any level of skill).

The main concept I got from Song of the Vikings is that almost everything we know of Norse myth came from one guy: Snorri Sturluson. It seems obvious that Snorri's personal biases would have been woven into the myth, but I wonder how much? One thing that comes to mind is the duality of fire and ice, which runs through a lot of the myths (the creation myth, for one). Iceland would have been a place where snow and lava clash, but that would not be true of Norway and Sweden, where the myths originated. Did Snorri come up with this imagery himself because he was a storyteller or was this idea already part of the world of myth? I wonder how the myths would be different if not told by Snorri? We know that he was a big fan of Odin. Would we know that Odin traded an eye for wisdom?

The last chapter of the book deals with how Norse mythology became a part of our present culture. For a long time, the stories were essentially lost. After Snorri's death, Iceland was annexed into Norway, Christianity became more prominent and, you know, paganism was not really on the rise. The church even tried to change the names of the weekdays to silly things like Third Day and Midweek Day (instead of Tyr's Day and Odin's Day, also known as Tuesday and Wednesday). I thought it was interesting that the Germans later (by later I mean 1700-1800s) reclaimed Norse mythology as their heritage. They took it up so fiercely that it essentially inspired modern German nationalism. During the early 20th century, any non-Germans who were interested in Norse myth were suspected to by Nazi sympathizers. Yes, this includes J. R. R. Tolkien, who was hugely influenced by Norse mythology.

Tolkien has probably done more to propel Norse myth into modern Western (American and English, at least) consciousness than anyone. As a professor of English, he started a club to focus on Nordic literature and he fought to get Norse myth into the syllabus. He felt that the Norse mythology was of great import to the English canon than Shakespeare, which is quite the claim.

Now, of course, the Norse gods are very much in pop culture, especially with movies like The Avengers and comics and the rest of it. Although, I think mythology is general is having quite the renaissance. Greek and Roman myth is getting treatment in things like Rick Riordan's Percy Jackson and Camp Halfblood series, as well. I would be interested in see an analysis regarding what draws us to mythology. Is it just that it makes for great storytelling? Is it something more?

I'll conclude with a quotation from Snorri. He states in the Edda, "But these things [lore] have now to be told to young poets … but these stories are not to be consigned to oblivion." Thankfully, they were not and it seems like they will not be consigned to oblivion any time too soon.

If you are interested in Norse mythology, here are some suggestions for further reading:

Loki by Mike Vasich is a fantasy novel that retells some of the Norse mythology with a focus on my personal favorite aesir, Loki.
From Asgard to Valhalla: The Remarkable History of the Norse Myths by Heather O'Donoghue is a non-fiction work that focuses on how Norse myth has played out in popular culture over the last several centuries.
Gods and Myths of Northern Europe by H.R. Ellis Davidson is an academic treatment about the Norse gods, what we know about them, etc.

Adam Gutschenritter says

Part historical context for the Sagas, part biography of Snorri Sturluson, part description of Norse (Icelandic)

literature's influence on Tolkien through Gaiman, this book seeks to place the sagas and Snorri in the context of his time and how his work was both shaped by that time and how it has since shaped literature today.

Rachel says

This engaging biography describes the life of Snorri Sturluson, a powerful 12th-century Icelandic chieftain and the author of the poetic Edda - one of the oldest surviving documents of Norse mythology. As a novice of Viking history, I found this book fascinating and informative - though I suspect that there is much speculation and Brown isn't always clear when she is speculating and when she has hard evidence for her claims. As such, I think this biography would be enjoyed by people who are interested in learning a bit about the Vikings, but not experts on the subject.

Brown started each chapter out with a legend out of Snorri's Edda. Often, she told how this legend differs from other known versions and/or how it has effected modern culture. The rest of the book describes Snorri's life - his youth in the household of "the uncrowned King of Iceland," his marriage, his rise to political power, and his downfall. She seemed to get most of her hard evidence from a few primary documents and an outwardly biased biography written by Snorri's nephew, so often she had to fill in the gaps by saying "it's possible it happened more like this, since his nephew's story doesn't really jive with Snorri's personality." Of course, that makes me wonder if she had just as much positive bias towards Snorri as his nephew had negative bias. Overall, though, I'd say this biography was a success. When there is so little information available, and when the book is intended for a popular crowd rather than an academic one, such speculation is necessary - it makes the book more fun.

Jo Walton says

This is an odd mixture, a biography of Snorri along with synopses of Norse mythology.

I'm not sure who Brown thinks the audience for this book is -- anyone who knows enough to want to read it wouldn't need the retellings of the stories. I enjoyed reading it, I gained some information, especially about the context of the writing of the Edda, I boggled at the fact that Snorri lived at the same time as St Francis (or even on the same planet...) and it left me with a strong desire to visit Iceland. But it also left me unsatisfied -- and I did feel that she either shouldn't have covered modern post-Tolkien fantasy at all or done it more thoroughly. When I read something cursorily skimming over a subject I know about, it makes me dubious about the sections I didn't know anything about and wonder if they were just as superficial.

Naomi Toftness says

The beginning was super interesting- and then it quickly tapered off to be a series of hard to keep track of Norwegian and Icelandic names. Not a great introductory book for someone who is not history-focused. This book is geared toward readers who would like to know the minute details of Snorri, not the interesting facts of how Tolkien/Lewis/etc. adapted the stories to become the fantasy genre we know now.

David says

Finally, finished this slog of a book. It was a meandering mess, and while the brief interludes of the fascinating means of governance, the day-to-day life of Iceland, and the intricacies of skaldic verse were fascinating, it didn't make up for the schizophrenic mess of the rest of the book. I can't recommend this. Also, I didn't need retellings of Norse myths, as who, having chose to read a book on the life of Snorri Sturluson without already being intimately familiar with the Prose Edda and the Helmskringla? I'm not sure who she thought the audience of this book would be. Do not recommend.

Frederick says

Outstanding! I recommend this read for anyone interested in Norse mythology. It is very interesting to note that so much of what we know or think we know about what the Vikings actually believed comes from one writer who had an agenda named Snorri, an Icelander and a Christian. This is a must read for Icelandic history, Norse mythology, and a detailed biography of what is known about Snorri.

Gail Goodrick says

While it's easy to get bogged now in the all the characters who play a role in Snorri's life, the story is fascinating. What a violent lot those Icelanders were! Especially interesting was how important Snorri was in setting down some of the ancient stories of the gods and how influential those stories were on later authors and writers. The book made me want to see Iceland for myself!

Adam Wiggins says

Norse mythology and the viking sagas are the basis for almost all modern fantasy, starting with Tolkien and up through Game of Thrones. And almost everything we know about Norse mythology comes down to us in the 800-year-old writings of one man: Snorri Sturluson. This book is his biography.

Snorri was not primarily a skald (aka bard or poet), or a writer. Storytelling was a hobby; his day job was amassing power through politics and war, eventually leading to him becoming the lawspeaker at the Althing and the most powerful chieftain in Iceland. He also built lavish homes for himself, fathered many children, participated in the debates about how Christianity fit into Icelandic life, and politicked on Iceland's relationship to the growing empire of Denmark over the sea to the east. Snorri's enemies eventually caught up with him and assassinated him.

This book will be best enjoyed by someone who is already familiar with (and fascinated by) Norse mythology: Odin, Thor, Freya, Loki, Ragnarok, valkyries, frost giants, Fenrir, the Midgard serpent, and so on.

One reason why Snorri's life matters so much in understanding Norse mythology is because he brought his own influences to the stories. For example, he depicts Thor as a bumbling oaf; but Thor must have been well-respected by Scandinavians of the time, given the number of male children named Thor. Snorri writes

the stories to put Odin in the most favorable light. Odin achieves his ends through being clever, resourceful, knowledgeable, and sometimes manipulative. (This is in fact how Snorri built his power: he wasn't a great warrior, but instead he knew how to influence people and organize them to his benefit.)

So since Snorri's writings are almost the only written record of the Norse sagas, it's clear that we don't have anywhere near a complete picture of what Scandinavians from this era really believed, let alone what those from the peak of the Viking age (which around 500 years before Snorri's time) believed.

Wonderful book which I enjoyed very much.

Rage says

I found this book interesting and I feel like I learned a lot, but I also think the information could have been arranged/presented more effectively. I would have liked to get a simple outline of Snorri's biography and something similar to describe the material in the writing attributed to Snorri. The book spans Snorri's life, but there are a lot of other people involved, and their names can be kind of confusing, and I feel like it would have been easier for me to take everything in if I started out with a simple framework. (For example, there are a lot of feuds. But then people seem to get over it pretty quickly, because they have new enemies that they have to burn down and torture.) Meanwhile, I haven't actually read any of this historical literature that's being described, so I was at a bit of a disadvantage there as well. But, I really enjoyed the connections between these ancient texts and really popular media today (ex/the Lord of the Rings). Brown even discusses how Viking lore has been appropriated by the Nazis and again by neo-Nazi white pride types.
