Snorri Sturluson: his life and work

Snorri Sturluson is the first major writer of Old Icelandic prose from whom we have a large body of extant writing, including some poetry, and whose life is, in outline, well documented. Unlike most earlier writers of prose, he was not a cleric, but an aristocratic layman, and nearly all he wrote is on secular topics. The main sources for his life besides annals are the nearly contemporary *Íslendinga saga* and the saga of Hákon Hákonarson (king of Norway 1217–1263), both by Snorri's nephew Sturla Þórðarson; and the sagas of Guðmundr Arason (bishop at Hólar in northern Iceland 1203–1237).

Snorri was born in western Iceland in 1178 or 1179, son of the powerful chieftain Hvamms-Sturla whose family gave their name to the turbulent period of Icelandic history leading up to the loss of political independence in 1262–1264, the Age of the Sturlungs, which was also the great age of Icelandic saga-writing. When he was three (his father died in 1183) Snorri was sent to be fostered (i.e. educated) at Oddi in southern Iceland, with the chieftain Jón Loptsson (died 1197), grandson of the historian (writing in Latin) and priest Sæmundr fróði (the Learned). Jón himself was a deacon, but was prominent in the resistance of secular leaders to the extension of Church power in the later twelfth century.

Many have thought that there must have been some sort of school at Oddi, but at that period in Iceland as elsewhere in Europe, most formal education took place in monasteries and cathedrals, and was based on training in Latin and preparation of pupils for ordination as priests. There is no trace in Snorri's writings of any knowledge of Latin; he almost never uses Latin words and never quotes Latin works. Where he shows knowledge of Latin concepts or theological ideas that were not already available in Icelandic translations, it is mostly of a fairly general nature and could easily have been derived from listening to vernacular preaching in churches or from conversation with clerical friends such as the priest and historian Styrmir Kárason (died 1245). But there would undoubtedly have been books at Oddi, and they may have included secular writings in the vernacular such as Eddic poems and historical records about Icelandic and Norwegian history. Snorri was a learned writer, but his learning was mostly in native lore rather than continental European writings in Latin.

At the age of twenty, Snorri married Herdís, daughter of Bersi Vermundarson 'the Wealthy' of Borg in western Iceland, formerly the home of the Viking poet Egill Skallagrímsson, and Snorri went to live at Borg in 1202 on the death of his father-in-law. He went on to acquire, by

inheritance, bargaining, purchase, or just plain intimidation, many chieftaincies (*goðorð*), or a share in them, in the Borgarfjörður area and even in part of one in northern Iceland. After about four years at Borg, he moved to Reykholt, about 50 km further inland, and took over the church property there, and probably the Reykholt chieftaincy at the same time, and thereafter also gained possession of several other churches. There is a document listing the property of and gifts to the church at Reykholt which has a short entry thought by some to be in Snorri's own hand — if so, it is the only autograph by him extant. Herdís, who seems to have remained on what had been her family property at Borg (their two children were both born before 1206), died in 1233. Snorri also had several children by other women.

Thus, Snorri became a very wealthy and powerful man. This accumulation of chieftaincies and properties in the hands of one man is characteristic of the social and economic changes in thirteenth-century Iceland, and led to most of the chieftancies and much of the property coming into the possession of a small number of very powerful families, who then fought it out among themselves, hoping to make one individual or family predominant — or even king. In the end it did no one in Iceland much good, and the king of Norway eventually gained control of the whole country, though he did not live to enjoy it.

Snorri began soon to make use of his powerful position, and already in 1202 had a violent dispute with some merchants from Orkney, whom he seems to have treated very badly. In the following years he was involved in several disputes, sometimes legal ones, some more warlike, but seems often to have worked for reconciliation. He served two periods as president (lawspeaker) of the General Assembly (Alþingi), 1215–1218 and 1222–1231. One attractive feature of his character is that he gave his booth at the General Assembly the mythological name Valhöll; the association of the name with warfare was occasionally justified in practice.

At the same time, Snorri was making himself a name as a poet. He sent a poem to Earl Hákon galinn (died 1216) and received gifts in return, and also composed about the earl's wife Kristín, King Sverrir (died 1202) and King Ingi Bárðarson (died 1217). These poems are all lost. He composed two poems about Earl Skúli Bárðarson, probably during his first visit to Norway (1218–1220); three lines of a refrain of one of them only survives. *Háttatal*, the only substantial poem of his that survives, was composed in honour of Earl Skúli and King Hákon, probably soon after his return to Iceland. Two lines survive of a poem addressed to a bishop, perhaps Guðmundr Arason, and six and a half stanzas of occasional poetry.

While he was in Norway, Snorri became known to the young King Hákon (still only 14), and first received the honorary title of 'cupbearer' (*skutilsveinn*), then 'landed man' (*lendr maðr*). It was understood that he was to work to make Iceland subject to the king of Norway, and was to send his son Jón to Norway as a guarantee. But he came to be on much closer terms with Earl Skúli, the king's father-in-law and regent for the time being; Snorri managed to persuade Skúli to abandon a projected invasion of Iceland and stayed with him for his two winters in Norway.

On his return, Snorri met considerable hostility from other Icelandic chieftains, and was even lampooned in verse, but this seems gradually to have subsided, and moreover he did nothing towards fulfilling his promise to King Hákon and Earl Skúli. In 1224 he entered into partnership with Hallveig Ormsdóttir (it is not said that they ever married). Hallveig was said to be the richest woman in Iceland, and Snorri himself now became the richest, and probably the most powerful, man. In 1224 he married his daughter Ingibjörg to Gizurr Þorvaldsson.

During his second period of presidency of the Alþingi and on until his second visit to Norway in 1237, Snorri was involved in various violent disputes with other Icelandic chieftains, including his brother Sighvatr and Sighvatr's son Sturla, not always getting the best of it.

In Norway this time, Snorri had even less to do with King Hákon, but spent much time with Earl Skúli or the latter's son Pétr in Trondheim. Snorri returned to Iceland in 1239, in defiance of the king's express ban, but was rumoured to have been made a 'secret earl' (*fólgsnarjarl*) by Earl Skúli. In 1240 Skúli, hoping himself to become king of Norway, rebelled against the king and was killed, while in Iceland Gizurr Þorvaldsson was becoming dominant over all other chieftains and became King Hákon's chief agent in Iceland. Gizurr received a commission from the king to force Snorri to return to Norway or else to kill him, on the grounds that he had become a traitor to the king. Gizurr, with a great following, surprised Snorri at Reykholt on the night of 23 September 1241. Snorri took refuge in his cellar, but Gizurr's men found him there and killed him.

Scholars have come to very different conclusions about Snorri's character and attitudes from a study of his works. There are four main sections of his *Edda*, a treatise on poetry. The final section, *Háttatal*, offering patterns of nearly a hundred verse-forms and metres for Icelandic poets. is remarkable for its technical ingenuity, in which the author shows some pride, but few readers are very impressed by the content or the style. But it has an impressive commentary, and *Skáldskaparmál,* an analysis of poetic language with examples from the work of more than seventy earlier poets, was

expressly designed as an aid to young poets. *Gylfaginning* may have been added later, as a collection of mythological narratives to show the background and origin of skaldic kennings. The Prologue gives a narrative account of the origin of the heathen religion of the author's ancestors. It is clear that Snorri was fully Christian; but he shows no polemic tendency towards heathendom, and many of his stories are told with irony and humour.

His separate *Óláfs saga helga* is based on earlier lives of the saint, but is remarkable for its secular attitudes and the enhanced realism of his portrayal of the king. Although the miracles are not all suppressed, Snorri often gives a rationalistic explanation of them, and does not emphasise the king's saintliness. *Heimskringla*, a more mature work than his *Edda*, and thought to be an expansion of his *Ólafs saga*, begins the history of Norway in legendary times and continues down to 1177. The earliest attribution of the work to Snorri is from the seventeenth century, but it is now accepted. Though much is said in *Heimskringla* about relations between Norway and Iceland, the author's political views do not come out clearly. It is obvious that Snorri had nothing against kingship, and admired some Norwegian kings immensely, and enjoyed being a courtier; on the other hand, the oft-quoted speech of Einarr Þveræingr in defence of Iceland's independence (*Íslenzk fornrit* XXVII: 216) suggests that Snorri realised the dangers of Iceland coming under the power of Norway. Recent writers have stressed that Snorri and others who entered a feudal relationship with the king of Norway were not at the time seen as traitors to Iceland.

There is little real doubt that he was the author, or at any rate compiler, of these three works. They must have been compiled between his two visits to Norway (according to *Sturlunga saga*, in the summer of 1230, Snorri's nephew Sturla Sighvatsson spent much time in Reykholt having Snorri's histories copied). Many have thought it possible that he also wrote *Egils saga*, one of the earliest of the Sagas of Icelanders, which gives an archetypal picture of the heathen Viking which perhaps in some respects reflects Snorri's own character — or perhaps the character he would have liked to have been.

The best books about Snorri are Nordal (1920) and *Snorri: átta alda minning* (1979).

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