

REVIEWS

ÁRMANN JAKOBSSON:

A sense of belonging: Morkinskinna and Icelandic identity, c. 1220.

Translated by Fredrik Heinemann.

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This book is the culmination of Ármann Jakobsson's work on a relatively neglected kings' saga, *Morkinskinna*, work earlier represented by, *inter alia*, his doctoral thesis *Staður í nýjum heimi: konungasagan Morkinskinna* (Reykjavík, 2002), and by his two-volume edition of *Morkinskinna*, done together with Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, in the *Íslensk fornrit* series, vols 23-24 (Reykjavík, 2011). The book under review, aimed at an international audience (see p. 9), is a welcome companion to this edition and also to the English translation of *Morkinskinna* by Theodore M. Andersson and Kari Ellen Gade, *Islandica* 51 (Ithaca, NY, 2000).

Morkinskinna, 'rotten vellum', is the name given in modern times to the manuscript GKS 1009 fol., dating from c.1275, kept in the Royal Library, Copenhagen, and containing a history of the kings of Norway from the death of St Óláfr (1030) to that of Eysteinn Haraldsson (1157). The name is hardly appropriate, since the manuscript, though it has several lacunae and the end is missing, is in good physical condition. The anonymous work preserved in it, also known as *Morkinskinna*, is viewed by Ármann as a lengthy, unified saga including many short narratives or *þættir* (sg. *þáttir*), and as dating originally from c.1220. Recognising that it influenced both *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* (the former anonymous and the latter attributed to Snorri Sturluson), both histories of Norwegian kings from the first half of the thirteenth century, Ármann criticises the view of earlier scholars that because certain episodes in *Morkinskinna*, frequently of *þáttir* type, are not present in one or other of those two works, the latter must be indebted to an 'Oldest', lost version of *Morkinskinna*, partly or altogether lacking the *þættir*, and that these were interpolated in the version which survives in GKS 1009 fol. Ármann argues convincingly that there

is no older *Morkinskinna* than the one surviving in that manuscript, that its *þættir*, far from being interpolations, are an integral part of *Morkinskinna*, 'the core of the saga', as he puts it (p. 78), and that the absence from *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* of episodes present in *Morkinskinna* is due to 'the differing attitudes of three individual authors' (p. 53).

Among the *þættir* examined in detail may be mentioned, in the order in which they occur in *Morkinskinna*, the tale of the Icelander Hreiðarr the Simple, who, at the court of King Magnús the Good, talks the king into standing up so that he can walk round him and view him from all sides; the well-known story of how the Icelander Auðun, in Norway en route to Denmark, declines to sell King Haraldr the Severe (*harðráði*) the polar bear he intends to give Haraldr's enemy, King Sveinn Úlfsson of Denmark, but is generously allowed to leave for this purpose by Haraldr, to whom Auðun later returns and gives in gratitude the ring he has received from Sveinn in part return for the bear; the story of how the Icelander Sneglu-Halli is accepted at the court of Haraldr the Severe where, as a poet, he incurs the envy of the Icelandic court poet, Þjóðólfr Arnórsson, falls into disfavour with the king but is pardoned after composing, on pain of death, an excellent poem, quarrels with Þjóðólfr, tricks one Einarr the Fly into paying him compensation for the death of a bogus relative, and later, in Denmark, dupes the Danish king into rewarding him for an inferior poem before returning to Norway; and the tale of how Ívarr Ingimundarson, an Icelandic poet at the court of King Eysteinn Magnússon in Norway and disappointed in love, is restored to good spirits by the king.

All these stories illustrate, in one way or another, a major theme of *Morkinskinna*, 'the relationship between Icelanders and Norwegian kings' (p. 14). Ármann sees Hreiðarr walking round King Magnús as symbolic of the way *Morkinskinna* views kingship from all angles (p. 112), and the story of Sneglu-Halli as 'a sort of *Morkinskinna* writ small' (p. 122). The story of Auðun is as much about relations between kings as about an Icelander doing well abroad (p. 99), and the story of Ívarr focuses more on his relations with King Eysteinn than on those with his beloved in Iceland (pp. 93-94).

Ármann sees *Morkinskinna* as subject to 'influences from southern

European court culture, including romances' (p. 327), and analyses its structure in terms of the devices of amplification and interlace favoured by medieval rhetoricians (pp. 80-81). He does not deny its partial debt to oral tradition (p. 298), but could perhaps have given this more emphasis. One writer missing from his very full bibliography is Axel Olrik (referred to once, very briefly, in Ármann's *Staður í nýjum heimi*, p. 66). Olrik would no doubt have seen the title *Fra Eysteini konvngi oc Ivvari* (introducing in *Morkinskinna* the story of Ívarr but mentioning the king first) not, as Ármann sees it (p. 93), as an indication that the king is the main character of the story, but as an example of the laws of oral narrative involving two main characters and final stress, whereby the character who is formally most important is mentioned first, and the character who arouses most sympathy last (Olrik, *Principles for oral narrative research*, trans. Kirsten Wolf and Jody Jensen (1992), pp. 49-50, 52-55). Another writer that I should like to have seen mentioned, given Ármann's playing down of the 'pan-Germanic heritage' of *Morkinskinna* (p. 338), is Vilhelm Grønbech. It was indeed characteristic of the medieval Christian environment in which *Morkinskinna* was written that, as Ármann writes, 'growing interest in the individual was accompanied by increased preoccupation with fraternity' (pp. 225-26), but something like this, according to Grønbech, was already a characteristic of pre-Christian Germanic society: 'the more the soul is moved, the more the individual personality is lost in the kin' (Grønbech, *The Culture of the Teutons*, trans. W. Worster, I (1932), p. 32).

But one can't have everything. This is an admirable book, with far more to offer than I have been able to indicate here. It has a very full Index, giving the dates not only of medieval kings but also, rather alarmingly, of modern scholars, and is lucidly translated. Ármann Jakobsson, who has written elsewhere (in his *Illla fenginn mjöður* (2009), p. 97) that the giants of Old Norse mythology should not necessarily be regarded as uncivilised or physically massive, is fast becoming a giant of Old Norse-Icelandic studies.

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