
NORTHERN STUDIES

The Journal of the Scottish Society for Northern Studies

Volume 55

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2024

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Desmond Seward

The Greatest Viking: The Life of Olav Haraldsson

Birlinn: Edinburgh, 2022

ISBN: 9781780277950

WITH A titular claim of ‘The Greatest Viking’, Desmond Seward’s popular history book immediately grabs the attention of any audience, though it may also immediately invite questions from academics.¹ A biographical work on Olav Haraldsson, this book charts his life through twenty chapters of vivid writing. The book begins with a short prologue detailing the circumstances of Olav Haraldsson’s birth and ends with the enduring legacy of Norway’s Eternal King. The titular claim is primarily derived from Olav Haraldsson’s legacy and sainthood, and how his efforts to impose Christianity ended the viking way of life. The definitive line which Seward draws between the two is something which many academics may find too blunt, and which could be easily argued against in terms of both semantics and in examples of later viking raids led from Norway. However, Seward spares no space for discussing the intricacies of changing customs. Ever a biographical work, the book focuses almost exclusively on Olav Haraldsson to create a narrative that is simultaneously informative and entertaining to read. This book offers little for the academic reader, but it is clear that it is not intended for such an audience.

The biography is well-researched, drawing much of its source material from translations of *Heimskringla*, as well as from *Fagrskinna*, the *Historia Norwegie*, and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* where relevant.² Archaeological evidence is also referenced in the descriptions given to the world in which Olav Haraldsson would have found himself (for example, pp. 27–29 on different types of ships). While the book is not analytical, it does engage with a breadth of scholarly material, providing a tidy summary of where new evidence has changed

1 Note: the Anglicised spelling used throughout this review is how the names and terms are presented in the book under review.

2 Finlay and Faulkes (2011–2016) and Laing (1951) for *Heimskringla*; *Fagrskinna*, trans. Finlay (2004), *Historia Norwegie*, trans. Fisher (2003), and *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, trans. Garmonsway (1962).

previous understandings (p. 9) and recent thought (p. 26). In this way, the book can easily serve as a rudimentary primer for both Olav Haraldsson and the Viking world for those new to either subject. However, these overviews are largely kept to the edges of a book which is largely written as a narrative discourse rather than a critical and thoughtful engagement of history.

The first five chapters detail the early events of Olav Haraldsson's life: his upbringing in Norway, his raids in the Baltic, England and Iberia (pp. 31–38, 43), and his adoption of Christianity (pp. 40–44). Seward uses these chapters to set the scene for later events. The narrative of Olav's life is frequently paused in favour of descriptions of the world in which he would have found himself. Seward draws on archaeological and literary evidence in describing the ships and crews in which Olav Haraldsson would have found himself, and brings them to vibrant life through his writing. Through these and similar digressions, such as describing law codes and social structures, the book serves as a good introduction to the Viking world for readers who may be dipping into the waters for the first time.

The descriptive digressions culminate in Chapter Seven which is devoted entirely to an overview of Norse mythology. In Seward's mind, the world which Olav Haraldsson had been born into was one dominated by the Norse gods and in which Christianity was an almost entirely alien concept. It is here where the argument of the book comes to the fore. Olav Haraldsson is deemed to be the greatest viking on the merit of his achievement in suppressing paganism and championing Christianity even after death. For this to be understood, it is reasonable to expect an emphasis on the bastions of paganism which Seward describes. Olav's stay at Rouen in France is given particular importance as the pivotal moment at which he adopted Christianity (pp. 40–42). It must be said that Seward likely goes too far for the academic reader, telling of the inner struggles which Olav Haraldsson may have faced due to the lingering shadow of the Norse gods with which Seward supposes he grew up (pp. 113–114). This can only be considered as an imaginary addition to Seward's depiction of Olav and is difficult to take seriously when viewed through a critical lens. Nevertheless, these quasi-fictitious moments in the book appeal to the reader in bringing Olav to life, and pose interesting questions of how an individual may have reconciled their old faith against or in the context of a new one.

The political landscape of Norway in the early eleventh century is treated alongside the religious landscape through chapters six to twelve. Having established himself as king over Norway in Chapter Six, the following chapters deal with Olav Haraldsson's administration of the kingdom and his political ambitions. Chapter Nine details Norway's respective relationships

with Orkney (pp. 84–88), Iceland (pp. 93–98), and the Faroe Islands (pp. 88–92), while Chapter Ten concentrates on Olav Haraldsson's attempts to secure a Swedish princess as his wife (pp. 100–112). Both chapters feature examples of Olav Haraldsson's dealings with people from these territories and their intermediaries, mostly drawn from literary accounts including *Orkneyinga saga* and *Heimskringla*. For the events recounted in Chapter Ten, in which Olav Haraldsson seeks firstly to marry Ingegerd but after a foiled plan marries Astrid instead, it may serve just as well to read the equivalent passages of *Óláfs saga helga* (the Saga of Saint Olaf) in *Heimskringla*.³ Throughout this chapter, critical narration all but disappears, though a few contextual comments on the tense relationship between Olav Haraldsson and the Swedish Olof Skötkonung remain.

In Chapters Eight, Eleven, and Twelve, space is given to Olav Haraldsson's administration of Norway, largely concentrating on his forceful strategies of converting the Norwegian population to Christianity, as well as the appointment of *ármenn* (stewards) from humble backgrounds. Seward explains how, in changing both the religious customs and administrative duties, Olav Haraldsson sowed the seeds of discontent that ultimately led to his downfall by usurping the authority of the previous magnates and upsetting the social order. It is almost inevitable, in Seward's presentation, that Knut Sveinsson (the Great) found allies in Norway. Through Chapters Thirteen to Fifteen, the threat Knut posed is tidily explained, bringing in the complexities of politics between Denmark, Norway and Sweden. The battle of Helgeå between the Danish forces and an allied Norwegian and Swedish fleet is narrated in cinematic style, though its outcome proved indecisive (pp. 140–147). When Olav Haraldsson is forced into exile (pp. 155–164), it is with all the dramatic verve of a hero in a high-stakes epic licking his wounds before the grand finale.

Seward returns to his imaginative overviews of time and place in Chapter Sixteen, creating a vivid backdrop of Gardariki (the Rus' lands in eastern Europe) where Olav Haraldsson spent his exile. As at the start of the book, context is provided for the networks running through Gardariki and about its ruler, Yaroslav (pp. 166–169). The question of religious influences re-emerges in Chapter Sixteen as Seward supposes the impact which eastern Christianity could have had on Olav Haraldsson, as opposed to the western Christianity he had encountered before in France (pp. 40–42, 170–172). When Olav Haraldsson decided to return to Norway (pp. 171–174), it is presented as being religiously motivated through divine command, though brief

3 *Heimskringla* II, chs. 72, 78, 80, 91–92.

acknowledgement is also given to Olav receiving news that Knut's plans had gone awry with the drowning of Jarl Hakon Ericsson. Any critical engagement begins to significantly wane at this point in the book, and is instead replaced by a captivating story of a doomed king.

For all the build-up to the battle of Stiklestad (29 July 1030), the event is narrated in short order in Chapter Eighteen, but is filled with all the story-telling flair this reviewer has, by now, come to expect from Seward's book. As in the case of the Swedish princesses, much of the chapter is drawn directly from the saga material and Seward's main contribution is in condensing and modernising the style of narration. There is little by way of academic quality in these otherwise dramatic chapters, but Seward does an excellent job in making the order of events accessible and comprehensible to a novice audience.

The final two chapters, Nineteen and Twenty, are devoted to the development of Olav Haraldsson's legacy as a martyr. A selection of early miracles is recounted (pp. 199–203) with believers joining the mounting opposition against the harsh rule of Álfifa and her son, Sveinn (pp. 203–206). The unhappy situation in Norway is thus quickly contextualised and Magnus Olavsson is easily brought in from Gardariki to become the new Norwegian king (p. 207). The book concludes with the iterations, challenges and endurance of Olav Haraldsson's saintly legacy and the continued draw of pilgrims to Nidarosdom (pp. 211–218), and it is this longevity of memory that, for Seward, makes Olav Haraldsson the greatest viking.

*Harriet Clark,
University of Nottingham*