

A Chieftain in an Old Norse Text: Sveinn Ásleifarson and the Message behind *Orkneyinga Saga*

Icelanders are famous for having produced a huge volume of prose literature in Old Norse in the Middle Ages (in a Nordic context, c. 1050 – c. 1530): the Icelandic Sagas. Largely thanks to these sagas, we have formed a vivid picture of the excitement of the Viking Age (c. 800 – c. 1050). The early 13th century *Orkneyinga Saga*, focussing on the Earldom of Orkney between c. 900 and c. 1200, is a good example. One of *Orkneyinga Saga*'s most famous passages runs: “*This was how Sveinn used to live. Winter he would spend at home on Gairsay, where he entertained some eighty men at his own expense. His drinking hall was so big, there was nothing in Orkney to compare with it. In the spring he had more than enough to occupy him, with a great deal of seed to sow which he saw to carefully himself. Then when that job was done, he would go off plundering in the Hebrides and in Ireland on what he called his ‘spring-trip’, then back home just after mid-summer, where he stayed till the cornfields had been reaped and the grain was safely in. After that he would go off raiding again, and never came back till the first month of winter was ended. This he used to call his ‘autumn-trip’.*” (OS ch. 105) Farming, entertaining followers, and ship-bound plundering raids – the man described here, Sveinn Ásleifarson, seems to epitomise the Viking Age way of life. Entertained by these and other colourful details in *Orkneyinga Saga*, popular and scholarly authors alike have therefore labelled Sveinn “the ultimate (Orkadian) Viking”.

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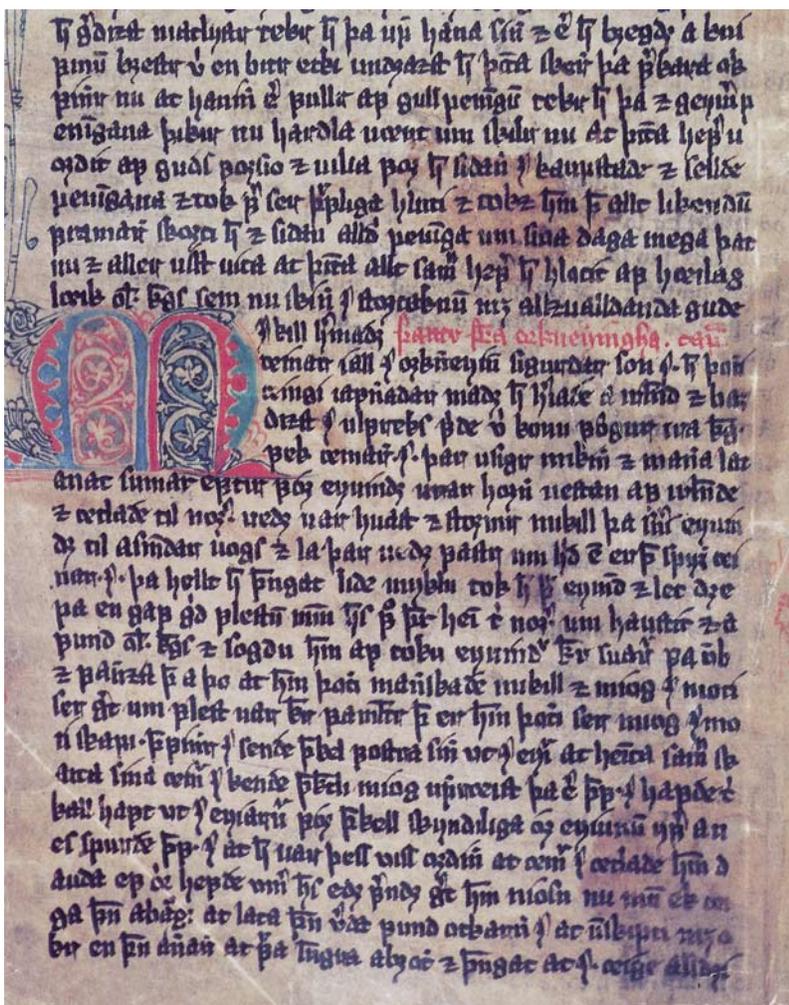


Who or what was Sveinn?

Sveinn was a young adult in about 1135, and was presumably killed in 1171. He was known to own farms in Orkney and Caithness. However, was he really such a bloodthirsty Orcadian warrior? The common view can be challenged on more than one count.

Is honour really everything?

Orkneyinga Saga recounts how Sveinn killed another man during the Christmas festivities in the early 1130s. The Saga describes in detail how the situation escalated because the two men accused each other of cheating during a typical drinking contest in the hall – a serious insult to a man's honour. Yet between the lines, one discerns that there is more to the subsequent retaliatory murder than a set piece Viking scene of a feast, drunken males, alien concepts of honour, and senseless violence. There are indications that high-ranking men may have harboured a grudge



Orkneyinga Saga was compiled, revised and copied into different manuscripts between c.1200 and c.1400. The picture shows a detail from *Flateyrbók* ("The Book of the Flat Island"), the late fourteenth century Icelandic manuscript which contains, amongst many other texts, the most complete version of *Orkneyinga Saga*.

against Sveinn's victim for a long time. Indeed, they may even have cleverly manipulated a drunken Sveinn to do their killing for them (OS ch. 66, 76).

Orkneyinga Saga also notes that Sveinn had dealings with Hebrideans on several occasions. On the face of it, Sveinn either rushed to the aid of beleaguered friends there, or he exacted terrible revenge for betrayals. With this, the Saga's account once again stresses that Sveinn met the demands of honour that applied to a Viking warrior. Reciprocal bonds of friendship held viking society together. Yet also here, the small print points to other motivations. One particularly striking example is the Saga's explanation of Sveinn's help to a man called Holdboði in the 1140s: Sveinn had "*had a request for help from the last man he could refuse, since that man had given him the greatest help when Sveinn needed it most*". Immediately afterwards though, Sveinn's honourable reputation was somewhat tarnished by the fact that before committing to any fighting, he had first discussed his reward with Holdboði: marriage to "*Dame Ingrid [who] had much wealth and*

[*many large estates*]” (OS ch. 78). In the Hebridean, just as in the Christmas episode, there is a thick layer of viking honour, beneath which *Orkneyinga Saga* conceals quite profane political and economic interests.

No betters?

Sveinn is famous for his turbulent relations with the Orkney earls. *Orkneyinga Saga* describes how, in the 1130s, Sveinn orchestrated a coup by capturing the reigning earl and clearing the way for two new joint rulers, the earls Rognvaldr Kolsson and young Haraldr Maddaðarson (OS ch. 77). In the 1150s, when Haraldr reached adulthood, relations with Rognvaldr became strained, and internal warfare broke out. *Orkneyinga Saga*'s account puts Sveinn's exploits in the foreground. Sveinn switched back and forth between Rognvaldr and Haraldr, and eventually supported a third joint earl, Erlendr (OS ch. 92-9). Moreover, Sveinn's support was frequently decisive. Erlendr is described as a simpleton who died as soon as Sveinn stopped controlling him, while Rognvaldr and Haraldr would not have become earls without Sveinn's help in the first place. The Saga does not give us any explicit reasons for Sveinn's actions; it seems more interested in underlining *that* they took place, stressing Sveinn's independence and utter freedom of action. Yet it is likely that Sveinn had reasons for changing sides. There are indications that Sveinn's 'king-making' in Orkney was connected to his economic contacts, already hinted at, with the Hebrides and the Irish Sea. Both Rognvaldr and Haraldr seem to have taken an interest in Sveinn's activities there. Sveinn may, at times, have resented such interference, supporting another less intrusive earl (Beuermann forthcoming). Had *Orkneyinga Saga* simply mentioned that sound politico-economic concerns might have dictated which earl Sveinn supported, the reader's attention would have been deflected away from Sveinn as the independent and maverick 'king-maker'.

Orcadian?

This leads to the most controversial criticism of the common perception of Sveinn, i.e. that he was an *Orcadian* Viking. Even in *Orkneyinga Saga*, it is apparent that Sveinn spent a considerable amount of time in the Hebrides and the Irish Sea, whether longer periods at irregular intervals (in the 1140s, 50s, and early 70s), or shorter regular periods – remember, for example, the initial quote about the twice-yearly expeditions. It is equally obvious that Sveinn had important economic interests in the area, as argued here, important enough to influence his decisions about which earl to support back in Orkney. Historians might still be aware of Sveinn's first attempt to settle on the Isle of Man in the 1140s following his marriage to Dame Ingrid, but most ignore Sveinn's probable second attempt to emigrate, which was to Dublin in 1170 (OS ch. 78-9, 96-7, 100-1, 105-8, Beuermann forthcoming). In short, Sveinn was at least as much an Irish Sea man as an Orcadian.

The ultimate Viking?

Consequently, a careful reading of *Orkneyinga Saga* questions commonly held assumptions about Sveinn as the Orcadian arch-Viking. We might be equally justified in calling him a timeless international businessman-cum-politician, for example a 12th century Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

Unfortunately, the debate had to be based almost exclusively on *Orkneyinga Saga*. Almost surprisingly, considering his fame in the Saga, Sveinn hardly appears in other sources. This means that hardly any of the Saga's information on Sveinn can be corroborated. At this stage therefore, earlier historians would have backed off, deciding that reaching an agreement on Ranke's famous *wie es eigentlich gewesen* is probably impossible.

Yet increasingly, Icelandic Sagas, including the more historical subgroup of the Kings' Sagas amongst which *Orkneyinga Saga* can be counted, are mined less for what they tell us about "how it really was" (what Sveinn did). Instead of the history of events in the period described, we might aim to discern the ideas shaping the texts during the periods of composition or revision. This leads to a rather different question.

Why is Sveinn in *Orkneyinga Saga*?

An odd choice

Sveinn is an important character in 27 of *Orkneyinga Saga*'s 108 chapters: the colourful description of his activities takes up one-quarter of the whole Saga (ch. 66, 73-84, 92-101, 105-8). However, as mentioned, Sveinn can only tentatively be identified in other sources, most notably in some Irish Annals, Giraldus Cambrensis' *Expugnatio Hibernica*, and *La Geste des Anglais en Yrlande*. So for all we know, Sveinn might be a fictitious literary character. At the very least, the viking society Sveinn epitomises in *Orkneyinga Saga* seems outdated by the late 12th century. Sveinn appears more like a character of the 9th and 10th centuries. The Saga's only concession to the 12th century is that he is not depicted as a pagan, but he is introduced as a killer during the Christmas celebrations! In short, Sveinn might not have existed at all, or the real Sveinn was different or, if the description corresponds to the real Sveinn, then he was an exceptional character in the 12th century. The three possibilities imply that there was a deliberate authorial choice to compose fiction, give a one-sided description, or choose an unusual character. Another problem is that *Orkneyinga Saga* is usually correctly summed up as recounting the lives of the many Scandinavian earls of Orkney from the late 9th to the early 13th century. Yet the Sveinn who takes up so much space in the Saga was no earl; not even an earl's relative, but a 'mere' chieftain. So why was so much ink spent on this man, on this exceptional chieftain?

Sveinn and Orkney

Was Sveinn meant to embody an ideal? Does the post-Viking Age author use Sveinn's example to praise the values of a free Viking society, a warrior society with independent-minded honour-driven chieftains (and where one earl, Rognvaldr, composes poetry in the best Old Norse tradition at every possible moment)? Or does Sveinn serve as a bad example? Are chieftains like Sveinn enemies of social progress towards a more settled state of affairs? The Saga calls him "*the greatest troublemaker in the western lands*" (OS ch. 107). Does this criticise the state of upheaval of Viking society?

Depending on the interpretation preferred, would this part of *Orkneyinga Saga* then encourage the earls of Orkney to allow their chieftains freedom,

to condone their honour-driven bravery? Or is the text rather intended to be an admonition to the earls to keep control of their chieftains, since otherwise in the worst case they might even make and unmake earls?

Sveinn and the Norse world

The debate has wider implications. *Orkneyinga Saga* is not a purely Orcadian phenomenon. As mentioned, it forms part of the group of Kings' Sagas – sagas written by Icelanders mainly about the kings of Norway and Denmark. The best known example is Snorri Sturluson's 13th century compilation *Heimskringla*. Although the details are still debated, most scholars think that *Orkneyinga Saga* was at least revised by Icelanders in the 1230s and again in the late 14th century, and that it was first written down in around 1200, probably also by an Icelandic with Orcadian connections. All these periods saw important political changes which may have influenced the choice and presentation of topics in the Saga.

1190s to 1260s

The first version of *Orkneyinga Saga* was composed shortly after Earl Haraldr Maddaðarson of Orkney had unsuccessfully backed a competitor to King Sverrir of Norway. Haraldr had to surrender unconditionally, and Sverrir used the opportunity to establish Norwegian overlordship on Orkney. The 1190s therefore saw the end of the semi-independent earldom. Four decades later, when *Orkneyinga Saga* was revised by an Icelandic, Sverrir's grandson King Hákon Hákonarson had already embarked on attempts to bring Iceland under Norwegian dominion, a policy that culminated with the end of Iceland's independence in the 1260s.

A less political interpretation would see the Sveinn sub-saga as either a romantic or a horrified depiction of viking life in the good or bad old days before Norwegian overlordship. Going further, the stories about Sveinn might also be read as an admonition to the kings of Norway, encouraging them not to do away with the political and cultural heritage of the Viking Age. In particular, *Orkneyinga Saga* might entreat them not to destroy an idealised viking society where chieftains have a high standing and where kings or earls rule in conjunction with them. Kings Sverrir and Hákon both had rather different ideas about their royal position and orchestrated the replacement of the traditional Old Norse aristocracy by new men who were dependent on the crown.

However, the opposite interpretation cannot be excluded either. Rather than a literary counter-measure to the policies of the Norwegian kings from the 1190s on, the Sveinn chapters might also have been intended to support the Norwegian crown in its attempts to stand firm, to root out unruly remnants of the Viking Age in Orkney. With regard to Norwegian-Orcadian history, such unruly remnants would not only include boisterous chieftains, but also unreliable earls who rebelled against and endangered a king of Norway (Beuermann 2006).

The 1390s

In the late 14th century, *Orkneyinga Saga* was revised and copied into the manuscript known as *Flateyrbók*, giving us the most complete surviving

version of the text. By then, Orkney and Iceland had long been under Norwegian dominion. But in 1387, in the very year when work began on *Flateyrbók*, the Norwegian royal dynasty ended with the death of the boy-king Óláfr Hákonarson. His mother, Margareta of Denmark, who had been ruling in his name but had no legal right of succession, managed to become ruler of Norway in her own right. Margareta seems to have been unwelcome to the Icelanders. One wonders therefore whether the all-male Norse viking society glorified in the Sveinn chapters of *Orkneyinga Saga* would also particularly have appealed to Icelanders, who faced the prospect of a Danish queen for the first time.

Ultimate Orcadian Viking or timeless Irish Sea businessman, real or fake, idealised or abhorred by authors, copiers, earls or kings, Sveinn Ásleifarson's story gives us a vivid medieval picture of the excitement of the Viking Age. It is certainly 'a good read', but we should beware of taking it at face value.

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A Chieftain in an Old Norse Text

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