



Orkneyinga Saga: The History of the Earls of Orkney

Anonymous, Hermann Pálsson (Translator), Paul Edwards (Translator)

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Written around AD 1200 by an unnamed Icelandic author, the Orkneyinga Saga is an intriguing fusion of myth, legend and history. The only medieval chronicle to have Orkney as the central place of action, it tells of an era when the islands were still part of the Viking world, beginning with their conquest by the kings of Norway in the ninth century. The saga describes the subsequent history of the Earldom of Orkney and the adventures of great Norsemen such as Sigurd the Powerful, St Magnus the Martyr and Hrolf, the conqueror of Normandy. Savagely powerful and poetic, this is a fascinating depiction of an age of brutal battles, murder, sorcery and bitter family feuds.

Orkneyinga Saga: The History of the Earls of Orkney Details

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From Reader Review Orkneyinga Saga: The History of the Earls of Orkney for online ebook

bookinglibrarian says

A surprisingly captivating saga in the Icelandic style set in the Orkneys, Scotland and beyond...the names of the people populating this history are entertaining in themselves.

Alyssa says

3.5

"Orkneyinga Saga" is an interesting read, however, it is not one of my favorite Norse sagas.

In general I would probably not suggest "Orkneyinga Saga" to someone who has never read a Norse saga before. Like with other sagas, the first half of the book sets up the events of the second half. That it takes so long to get to the primary characters may be frustrating to many modern readers. There are also a lot of characters with the same or similar names which can be confusing, especially since characters tend to only last a few pages before they are killed off. My edition of this book had a family tree, and it was much needed.

"Orkneyinga" is a little different from other sagas; most of it takes part in Orkney and other parts of modern day Scotland, it takes place later than most of the other sagas, when Christianity has started to be established, and it is very focused on warring, rather than mixing fighting with domestic issues. Unlike in most of the other sagas, women hardly have a role except to be mentioned as the wife, mother, or sister of someone. This gives "Orkneying" a unique perspective, showing the transition in their culture, and giving readers an idea of the harsh life the Norse men lived -- there is lots of betraying, house burning, and, of course, killing.

Unfortunately for me, what "Orkneying" lacks is what generally interests me most in Norse sagas. While the battling is interesting it can get repetitive. While it is interesting to see a culture in transition, the elements of the original Norse religion are really interesting to me, and I missed it. There are a few hints of it, such as in a scene where a woman and her sister make a beautiful shirt for one of her two sons. Against protest the other son puts the shirt on and dies. That is the scene in which both the old religion and women are most prominent in the book, and it was probably my favorite. Other hints of the old religion can be found in small elements, such as the man who is missing and eye and has a connection with crows. Sadly these are very small hints, however. There are also small peeks at the men's domestic lives, such as how they would schedule their raids to fit between the planting and harvesting of their farms. Here again, the reader only gets to see small bits and pieces of this element of the Norse life.

Overall, fans of Norse sagas will probably find interest in "Orkneyinga Saga." However, it is different from other sagas, and it wasn't my favorite.

Eric Smith says

A fascinating look into the stories about people who are so like, but so very unlike us. I wish modern-day fantasy writers could write with this sort of clarity.

Dimi Balerinas says

A really awesome translation of Orkneyinga saga, this book offers the reader the chance to have a very useful and historically accurate insight regarding the history of Orkney between 9th and 12th century and its relationships and influences with the rest of Northern Europe (And even down to Byzantine Empire). The book is very well written, it's exact and accurate to the context, the translation is one of the best that exists out there.

It's one of my favorite historical books and my main source of information about the History of the Earls of Orkney (as is the title the book is also known as).

If you love reading history records and study them, or if you are curious about expanding your knowledge about Norse history and the Sagas, then this book should be in your library!

M.J. says

Now, you have to be in the right frame of mind to read this.

It is a terse narrative, rich in detail and names. It meanders along at its own little pace and is a fascinating insight into a culture which thrived so long ago. The people in it feel real, a little twisted at times, but this is, after all, a story of people who lived possibly hundreds of years before the author was alive.

Read this if you love all things Viking and Norse or if you're interested in the history of early Scotland.

Annette says

Extraordinary insight into Viking Life. Written in the 1200s by an Icelandic poet (skald). I am related to most of the Viking Earls of Orkney so reading this was an amazing experience.

Paul says

Well, what to say about this? It's difficult to review.

I'd have to start by saying I enjoyed it much less than other Icelandic Sagas that I've read. There again, I recognise its importance as a quasi-historical document and to the Orcadians' sense of their identity, and their Norse inheritance in particular. Certainly, in Hermaan Palsson and Paul Edwards' translation (the former is surely not the son of the latter?), it read well enough. From a modern reader's perspective, though, there was plenty to object to.

Firstly, it was incredibly repetitive. In essence, two Norse earls would somehow end up ruling half of Orkney each, having visited either the King of the Scots or the King of Norway first. Before long, they would fight each other over the remaining half, the result depending on who was first to put an axe through the other's skull. Repeat ten times over... Sometimes, Caithness would be thrown in for good measure as something else

to fall out about. Did nothing else happen in the Orkneys during the centuries of Norse occupation?

Secondly, I know it's judging the past by modern standards, but it's hard to accept the characters presented here as tragic/heroic/saintly as the anonymous hagiographer would have us believe. They spend their time terrorising innocent yeomen and peasants and killing each other in the most brutal fashion, living off the proceeds of looting and their tenants' hard work. It's equivalent to being asked to think of terrorists or armed bank robbers as admirable. There again, I suppose some of our contemporaries try to persuade us of just this.

Thirdly, it was pretty incoherent in terms of its chronology and genealogy. Scores of names were bandied around, characters coming and going to meet their maker then re-appearing again. This made it hard to follow at times and difficult to remember who was who between one reading session and another.

And fourthly, as much as I love Norse history, the more I read, the less sympathetic I find myself towards its main characters. The society the Sagas describe is elitist and hierarchical, one where heritage is everything and those without it count for nothing. The narratives deal in Manichean simplicities, the actors either presented either as out-and-out treacherous villains or men of holy virtue (though not averse to the odd skull splitting).

I'm going to read George Mackay Brown's 'Magnus' next, a novel drawing directly on these accounts. Hopefully, it'll prove more entertaining.

Emily says

lots and lots of war and raiding. I was hoping for some verses on the queens, but there weren't many.

Karen says

Bought this during a holiday as a student at the St Magnus Festival, where I fell for the place (and the cheeky, chunky owner of the music shop in Kirkwall), but been putting it off for twenty years because I feared, deep down, it'd be really boring. It truly was. Despite my adoration for Orkney and lust for Vikings, I'm no historian. I suspect I should've tried to find a picture book version... Two stars, though, because its deadpan gore threw up some unintentionally hilarious passages, such as:

The night was pitch dark, and it was hard frost. During the night he came to another farm. His feet were very much frostbitten, and some of his toes fell off.

P.S. I recently took another trip to Orkney, and was just as enchanted by it. I was gutted, however, to find that the music shop is no more, let alone run by its previous owner...

Chad says

Great history of Orkney in the Viking age.

Scott says

Although not one of my favorite sagas, I enjoy pulling this one out every now and then.

Laura says

Vikings are the best. Reading about Vikings is even better. You have it all: adventure, the high seas, plunder, pilgrimages, romance (Ermergarde of Narbonne is apparently quite the pretty lady), you have feuds and battles and poetry:

"Once the wine-serving/wench understood me/the touches of my tongue/I was content/I loved that good lady/but lime-bound stones/crumble: now I cram/the hawk with carrion."

Picturesque, don't you think? The 'Orkneyinga' is prime storytelling. I love the simplicity of it, the strait to the facts, the foreboding and the idea that nothing is out of your reach as long as your ship is strong, winds are at your back, and you have the bigger axe. There is humor: "Amundi so arranged things that Earl Harald and Svein had to use the same bed."

I really liked that my main man, Macbeth aka Thorfinn Sigurdsson is a major player in this book and showcases to be one of the most powerful Earls of Orkney. He is my all time fave and I loved reading his stories.

"Earl Thorfinn ruled all his lands till he died, and it's said on good authority that he was the most powerful of all the Earls of Orkney."

It is like most Viking sagas go, where no man lives long and fights from the moment of his birth to the end of his life. They tell of his sons, sometimes of their daughters. There is magic and miracles and it is so easy to read these stories and imagine them spoken out loud by bards by firelight with a mug of mead in hand. There is a luster of adventure and blood lust in every story and it was difficult to put these characters away. There is brutality yes, but there is friendship and high seas, and these stay with you.

Sonya says

A very enjoyable read although a bit repetitious. Vikings drink, go on raids, kill each other over power/land, repeat. It is also amazing that all the names, stories, and poems (yes, the Vikings have a softer side) have come down to us at all after about 1000 years. It must have taken a lot of memorization to get all the family members, places, events, etc. straight. Some of the names are a bit more memorable than others. I just loved reading about Thorfinn Skull-Splitter, Eirek Blood-Axe, and Thorbjorn the Black. However, there were men who were less-intimidating sounding but probably were pretty tough anyway: Thorarin Bag-Nose, Einar Belly-Shaker, and Einar Buttered-Bread. I also enjoyed reading about how Orkney was becoming Christian but the bishops went on raids with them. How did the bishops justify that what they were doing would have been accepted by the Church? This was a good story about viking women as well (although their roles in the story were not very prominent). Recommend to anyone interested in Viking history.

Jenny Whyte says

The people in this book are literally my ancestors, from Norway and Shetland and they seem to have been very stupid, although good at making tools, boats, and weapons, and drinking. Numerous references to "they spent the day sitting in a great hall drinking", followed by "he mistook his brother Jon for Svein Stone Brains, and split his head down the middle with an ax, after which Jon fell down on the ground." My ancestors were drunk idiots. A fun read though, and lots of references to the Auld Rock, so kinda cute.

Edward says

Introduction

--Orkneyinga Saga: The History of the Earls of Orkney

Genealogy of the Earls of Orkney

Glossary of Personal Names

Glossary of Place Names

Maps
