



Sons of Norway
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SNORRE STURLASON

Snorre Sturlason

On September 23 in the year 1241, a man was murdered. Sixty armed men surrounded the farm, Reykholt, in Iceland and slew the owner, while the king of Norway claimed his properties.

The murdered man was Snorre Sturlason, seen by his contemporaries as a powerful chieftain, known both for his generosity and his greed. We know him as Snorre, the Saga Writer. Through his works, generations of people have entered the world of the old Norse kings. He was a critical researcher who also had an unusual talent for psychologically credible explanations for the actions and events he recorded.

Snorre Sturlason was born in 1179 into the powerful family of the Sturlungs. Through his skills—and probably also through his ruthlessness—he made a fortune as a young man.

Snorre is said to have been skillful in everything that he undertook. The respect of his peers for his abilities is shown in the fact that he was relatively young when elected law-speaker for the general assembly. This offered him a chance to take personal advantage of the subtleties of the law—and Snorre seems to have made good use of this possibility. He also made a number of enemies.

For an ambitious man like Snorre Sturlason, Iceland soon became too small. On several occasions he attempted to get his hands on larger affairs on the continent. Norway was the natural place for him to turn, for it was mother country of the Icelanders. On both sides of the ocean the same language was spoken, intellectual and commercial relations were strong, and families were closely bonded.

Snorre got his first opportunity to travel in 1218, when Håkon IV was king of Norway. Since the king was a minor, his uncle, Earl Skule, was regent. Snorre soon became associated with the earl—they were two of a kind in ambition and lack of scruples.

While in Norway, Snorre promised to help make the old dream of the Norwegian rulers come true: to unite Iceland and Norway into one kingdom. We don't know if he ever meant to betray his country—for he never made any effort to keep his promise. But rumors about his secret dealings reached Iceland even before his return. Snorre handled the difficult situation with superior diplomacy. He regained the confidence of his countrymen and became more powerful than ever before.

However, in 1236 Snorre suffered a grave conflict with his brother and decided to sail back to Norway the next year, even though he knew he might get in trouble for having gone back on his promise to deliver Iceland to the king. He avoided King Håkon and associated only with Earl Skule. With the built-up tension between the king and his uncle, this was a dangerous thing to do. Snorre further endangered his position by returning to Iceland against the king's express orders.

A letter from king Håkon gave Snorre's adversaries in Iceland the opportunity for revenge. The king ordered Snorre brought to Norway—or killed. On a dark September night, the Icelanders showed that they preferred the latter option.

It can safely be said that Snorre's own actions caught up with him. He was far from perfect, but time has made the shortcomings of his personality insignificant. It is Snorre's illustrious work as a saga writer that marks his importance to modern man.