



HISTORICAL ARTEFACTS IN REYKHOLT AS A VISUALIZATION OF OUR LITERARY HERITAGE

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SNORRI STURLUSON (PHOTO 1)

Distinguished guests. We are meeting here in Reykholt, this historical place that has been home to many remarkable people in our history, foremost of whom was, of course, Snorri Sturluson. In fact, it was Snorri, in the form of the statue by the Norwegian sculptor Gustav Vigeland, who greeted us as we arrived.

We have long had an friendly dispute with our Norwegian cousins as to whether Snorri is a Norwegian or an Icelander. The Norwegians claim him as he is the author of their great sagas of the Norwegian Kings, but we know that Snorri was born in Iceland in the year 1179, the descendant of a long line of Icelanders, including, on his mother's side, the tenth-century poet Egill Skallagrímsson.¹ This statue, on the other hand, is unquestionably Norwegian, as perhaps is this image and the appearance of Snorri, that bids us welcome to his estate, where he lived from 1206 to the time of his assassination in the autumn of 1241.

The Norwegians presented us with this statue of Snorri in 1941, when both countries commemorated the 700th anniversary of his death. The commemoration actually took place in the middle of World War II, so the delivery of the statue had to be postponed until after the war.

Gustav Vigeland was considered the most distinguished sculptor in Norway of his time. He was greatly interested in Snorri and his works, as well as in Norse mythology and



Photo 1. Mats Wibe Lund, Island.



history in general. His museum in Oslo includes both a statue of Egill Skallagrimsson, which he completed in 1923, and the prototype for the statue of Snorri, which he completed in 1938. Vigeland died during the war, in 1943. This statue reached Iceland and was unveiled in 1947, the same year the Norwegians opened Vigeland's studio in Oslo, now his museum, to the general public. This monument of Snorri is, I think I may dare to say, the foundation stone for a research- and cultural centre about Snorri Sturluson here in Iceland.

REYKHOLTSMÁLDAGI (PHOTO 2)

The most important tangible record of Reykholt in Snorri's time is the *Reykholtsmáldagi* vellum manuscript, in which are recorded the assets and rights held by the Reykholt Church for almost a century, that is, from about 1185 until the middle of the thirteenth century, with most of the text dating to the time when Snorri lived here. We are allowed to believe those lines from the 13th century may have been written by Snorri himself. The manuscript consists of one sheet with seven entries or records. The earliest entries are among the oldest that have been preserved in Icelandic. The twenty-fifth line records the granting of the Reykholt estate by the priest Magnús Pálsson to Snorri, in the presence of, among others, Gissur Hallsson who died on July 27, 1206. Line thirty records the gift of two bells to the church by Snorri and his wife Hallveig Ormsdóttir. On the back is a list of the vellum manuscripts belonging to the church in Reykholt, and a mention of Snorri's daughter Ingibjörg. This important manuscript is now preserved in the National Archives, but the exhibit here includes a picture of it.²

When we look around here at Reykholt we do not see many visible remains from earlier centuries, – most of the buildings were constructed in the twentieth century. The oldest building is the small timber church, which was erected in 1886, that is to say 116 years ago. A century is a very short time span compared to the history of this place, yet the twentieth century was a time of great change in Iceland, with shifts in management and power in all areas of society. Most developments took place around the coast. Many of the ancient estates that housed those who held power throughout the ages have lost their glory. Some have been given a new role, often in connection with tourism, as for example the buildings on the island of Viðey; others are isolated and off the beaten track, like Bær at Rauðasandur, Vatnsfjörður, Sauðanes on Langanes, and many other places of historical importance. Still others are now “only” vicarages.



These major changes in Icelandic society and structure that characterise the last century were accompanied by an indifference to the old remains. It is only now, in the past few decades, that a serious interest in preserving ancient ruins and relics has arisen. But it is necessary to look for them, to dig down into the earth to find them.

Sturlunga Saga gives a description of Snorri's homestead here in Reykholt. We know that he was sleeping in the *skemma* (a *skemma* was a detached house of that period) when his enemies arrived that fateful night after the Mass of Mauritius, on the 23rd of September 1241. The leader of the group was Snorri's former son-in-law, Gissur Þorvaldsson. And we know that Snorri "*ran into the little houses that were beside his skemma – found Arnbjörn the priest there, and spoke to him.*" But his enemies hunted Snorri down and finally caught him in the cellar under the little houses. "*Eigi skal höggva*" were Snorri's famous last words – ("Do not strike.") The saga relates that at least two men delivered the fatal blows, Árne the Bitter and Þorsteinn Guðinason.³ The saga also tells of the fortifications that Snorri had built, and of his geothermal pool just south of the main house. Here there is still a hot pool named after him, and a tunnel that led up into the home buildings.

Archeological investigations have been carried out for some years now here at the farm-site. There was a farm here until the 20th century; in the exhibition there are photographs of the last stone- and turf- built buildings here. Underneath many phases of occupation, often in a very fragmentary state, some reasonably well preserved building-remains were found which could well date to Snorri's occupation. They include a dug-down passageway running between the warm pool Snorralaug and the farm-house, access to which is gained via stone steps and a paved building, towards which a conduit or channel runs, which would have carried hot water or steam from the hot spring "Skrifla" to the east of the site. The director of the excavation, Dr. Guðrún Sveinbjarnardóttir, says it seems reasonable to interpret this house as a bathhouse. Remains have been found of four conduits or channels at the site, showing that extensive use was made of hot water in the medieval period. These are very important discoveries, and spread new light on our knowledge of life in medieval Iceland.⁴ Some of the archaeological discoveries are displayed in the exhibition. Those discoveries will help to build up a picture of Snorri's Reykholtstaður, backed by the descriptions in our literature.

There has been a church here in Reykholt since Christianity first came to Iceland. Today there are two churches – this new one consecrated in 1996 and the old timber church from 1886. –



The remains of a third church are even visible in the middle of the old cemetery. Archaeologists began investigating these remains this summer.

The old timber church was to have been moved away a long time ago, as it had fulfilled its role. But time passed, and last year it was decided that the National Museum would acquire this old church and see to its upkeep. The church was removed to make a new foundation, and archaeologists were given the opportunity to research the foundation. Note that this church was erected in the 19th century on a new site north of the old cemetery and farmhouses. People knew that Snorri's hot pool was south of the farm buildings, but nobody knew what to expect under the church foundation. The archaeologists had not dug for long, however, when they uncovered a stone cistern and then the remains of a smithy. These remains were all measured and photographed before being removed. The relics are now exhibited here and we can examine them better.

No one knows how long the smithy was used – the research is not complete – but all the experts are in agreement that it is an ancient smithy. The cistern for the water that the blacksmiths used to cool and temper the objects is unusually deep – considerably deeper than others that have been found in Iceland. The longest stone slab measures 80 cm in length. This is a very suitable depth for making swords! This cistern therefore appears to have been made for tempering swords and, and we can probably assume that swords were made here in Snorri's time. Be that as it may, the cistern is visible, tangible proof of some work and activities that were carried out here in earlier centuries.

One old carved altarpiece from the church dated to around 1500 is now in the National Museum. It last hung in the turf church that was demolished in the nineteenth century, the third of the church mentioned above. The altarpiece originally

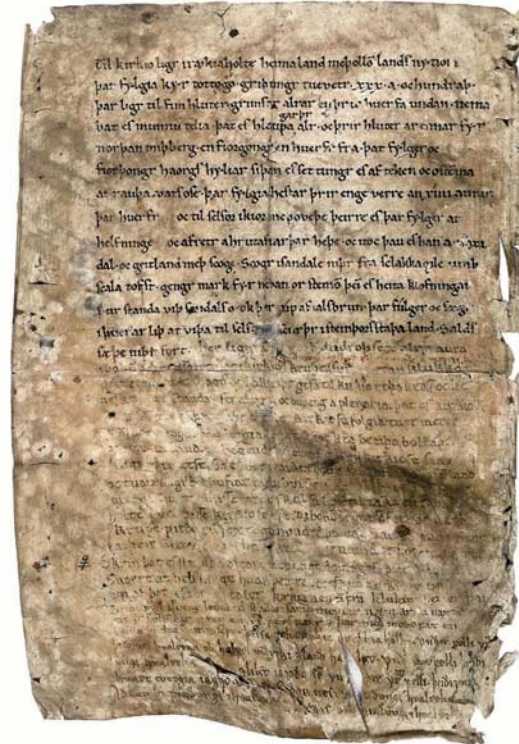


Photo 2. Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi.



adorned a larger church that stood at this site before the Reformation. We know from old inventory lists that the Reykholt Church owned many altarpieces in former times, but only this one has survived.

The Reykholt Church was dedicated to Mary, the Mother of God, the apostle Peter, Saint Barbara and Bishop Dionysius. The altarpiece is a triptych with carved figures. In the centre is Christ on the cross, with Mary and the apostle John on either side, as is traditional. On the wings are four figures: Saint Barbara with her symbol, the tower where she was imprisoned, one of the patron saints of the church, and opposite her Saint Margaret. Beneath are the archangels Gabriel with a lily and Michael with a sword. Unfortunately there is no picture of Saint Dionysius, the French saint who, as just stated, was also the patron saint of Reykholt Church.

ST. DENIS/DIONYSIUS

Dionysius, who was appointed the first bishop in Paris, died a martyr's death in 250; he was beheaded and buried where later the French royalty were buried – in the monastery of St. Dionysius, St. Denis. His history was recorded in about 830, and is preserved here in Iceland in a manuscript from the fourteenth century. His saint's day was the 9th of October. How did it happen that Saint Dionysius was the patron saint of Reykholt Church? Was he especially admired by Snorri? And if so, why? I ask these questions because Dionysius was also the patron saint of the monastery on the island of Viðey, which was founded in 1225 with the support of Snorri Sturluson. Dionysius was also the patron saint of the church on Engey, probably because of the influence of the Viðey monastery, but nowhere else in Iceland, as far as is known.⁵ Dionysius was beheaded in Paris, and the story tells that he rose from the dead, picked up his head and walked with it all the way to where he was buried. He is therefore depicted as carrying his head in his hands.

Is there some kind of connection between Reykholt and Snorri with the Bishop of Paris which needs to be examined more closely? Did Snorri travel to Paris during his years abroad, for example? We all know that Snorri was brought up in Oddi and some of the Oddaverjar had studied in Paris. You are probably all aware of the fact that Snorri's name is inlaid on the wall of the University Library of the Sorbonne in Paris, the Bibliothèque St. Genevieve, among the great writers and scholars of the world. When did the scholars in Paris start to take Snorri



seriously? Is there a path there that would be possible to trace to gain a new understanding of Snorri? This is a thought that I would like to leave with you.

REYKHOLTS CHURCH DOOR RING FROM THE YEAR 1612 (PHOTO 3)

You may say that surprisingly few historical artefacts have been preserved from this great place. One of them, however, is a church door ring, or a latch, dating from the beginning of the seventeenth century, now in the National Museum.⁶ It is of copper, engraved with the name of the Reverend Böðvar Jónsson, who served here from 1582 until his death in 1626. The year 1612 is engraved on the edge, and we can safely conclude that the latch was made in that year, probably in the old smithy.

Reverend Böðvar was a close friend of Bishop Guðbrandur Þorláksson, the Renaissance figure of the early Icelandic Protestantism who had the Bible translated and printed in 1584, a collection of psalms in 1589 – and incidentally – a collection of vernacular verses with music in 1612 – the same year as the latch was made.⁷ Later another year was added, that of 1673, and this time on the front of the latch,- when Böðvar's grandson took over from his father Jón, son of Böðvar as the fourth-generation clergy at Reykholt. Those men were forefathers of a line of literates, famous in Icelandic history, including the historian Jón Halldórsson of Hítardalur, his son the learned Bishop Finnur Jónsson, who by the way served here in Reykholt as a priest before being elected bishop, and his son Hannes Finnson, also a bishop and a polymath scholar.

I mention this latch here to remind us that the literary contributions connected with Reykholt did not die out with Snorri's Sturluson's death.



Photo 3. Þjóðminjasafn Íslands.



NOTES

- ¹ See Sturlungasaga Vol. II, Appendix: 439-440.
- ² Snorri Sturluson, catalogue, Þjóðminjasafn Íslands 1979.
- ³ Sturlungasaga, Islendingasaga, 454.
- ⁴ Guðrún Sveinbjarnardóttir, Reykholt í Borgarfirði, Framvinduskýrsla 2001, Þjóðminjasafn Íslands 2001, and Framvinduskýrsla 2002 in process.
- ⁵ Margaret Cormack, The Saints in Iceland, Subsidia Hagiographica 78, Bruxelles 1994.
- ⁶ National Museum of Iceland, file:Þjms. 3716.
- ⁷ Páll Eggert Ólason, Menn og menntir siðaskiptaaldarinnar á Íslandi, III. vol. Reykjavík 1924 og IV vol. 1926.

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