

BOOK REVIEWS

Eastern Europe in Icelandic Sagas. By Tatjana N. Jackson. Amsterdam: ARC Humanities Press—Amsterdam University Press, 2019. 228 pp.

The series, *Beyond Medieval Europe* (published by ARC Humanities Press), targets topics previously neglected in Anglophone scholarship which are related to the history of the peripheries of medieval Europe. In this regard, Tatjana Jackson's new book, her first in English, is a big success, as it presents what people on one edge of the continent, medieval Iceland, knew about the other fringe, Eastern Europe. Jackson is one of the leading Russian experts on medieval Scandinavia and its relations to the Early (or Old) Rus', and she offers now a reworked and updated version of her findings previously published for the most part in Russian. The title of the book, *Eastern Europe in Icelandic Sagas*, is a little misleading, as it mostly discusses information pertaining to ninth–eleventh-century Rus', whilst one would expect to find details in the book about other territories too, such as Poland or Hungary, even if these territories feature less frequently in the Old Norse Icelandic corpus.

Jackson begins with an introductory chapter on her aims, sources, and methodology (pp.1–17). The book is then divided into two major parts, the first and longer of which presents the place of Eastern Europe (actually modern-day European Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus in geographical terms) in the Old Norse worldview (pp.19–114), while the second focuses on the stay of four Norwegian kings in Old Rus' (pp.115–70). The research questions in both parts are clearly formulated: what do the Old Norse sources reveal concerning knowledge of Eastern Europe, and how much of this information is historically reliable? Given the nature of the source material, namely that the Icelandic sagas usually describe events from the Viking Age (or earlier) but were committed to parchment only beginning in the twelfth century (and most were written down in later centuries), the methodology section is indispensable for an understanding of the whole argument.

Jackson introduces the three main types of sources of which she makes use: skaldic poetry, sagas, and runic inscriptions. Of these, the first two receive the most attention. Skaldic poetry was usually produced by eyewitnesses or first-hand informants, and due to its metrical complexity, it hardly changed until it was written down in later centuries and thus is usually regarded as authentic. Sagas, on the other hand, are viewed today with much criticism as historical

sources due to their literary nature, the fact that they were recorded significantly later, and the fact that their authors included narrative interventions (or least to the consensus in the secondary literature). According to Jackson, the early kings' sagas, written down before the great compendium of 1220–1230, preserved authentic knowledge of the ninth-tenth-century Scandinavians about the geography of the “east” in the form of place names and navigable river routes. The later sagas, however, continued to rely on the ninth-century and early tenth-century conditions when describing events in Eastern Europe (simply copying the earlier compendium) and did not follow up on the southward advancement of the Scandinavians. In Jackson's view, this explains why places names such as Kiev (*Kænugarðr* in the sagas) do not receive prominence in the sagas and Novgorod (*Hólmgarðr*) is displayed as a capital of the Rus'.

The first part of the book vividly illustrates with a sound handling of the source material how information was transmitted and could change shape (media) during its formation from orality to literacy. More importantly, it shows that the Icelandic sagas reveal details about Eastern Europe left unmentioned in other documents. We learn that Ladoga's presentation in the sagas as a possible toll and control station where foreigners were checked and safe conduct was issued was a remnant of historical memory, as was Polotsk's strong fortress and defense system.

In the second part, the logic of applying the methodology twists a little. The Russian sources make no mention of the four Norwegian kings who visited Rus' (Olaf Trygvason, Olaf Haraldsson, Magnus Olafsson, Harald Sigurdarson). Jackson, however, feels that their presence in Rus' cannot be cast into question, since it was confirmed by the skaldic poets. It would thus be inconceivable that they did not travel to Rus'. However, any other information in the sagas which is not confirmed by skaldic poets (Jackson suggests) is either falsification or the projection of later medieval conditions on the Viking Age. Thus, the goal is not really to squeeze out every useful bit of information from the sagas (as in the first part), but to call into question anything from the prose narrative which is unconfirmed by contemporary reports. Jackson questions saga accounts with rigorous source criticism and demonstrates how the great influence and deeds of a “later-Norwegian king abroad” are exaggerated by saga authors.

Jackson notes that in a few cases not all information found in the sagas is unreliable (e.g. Harald Sigurdarson's stay and activity in Rus', such as his use of Jaroslav the Wise to bank his amassed Byzantine wealth). I would suggest that by less strict with her methodology, Jackson would have had even more positive

results. First of all, skaldic poetry was usually produced precisely to meet the demands made by the kings (and always with the intention of praising the ruler) and thus should not be taken at face value. The magical healing skill of Saint Olaf's body as recorded in skaldic poetry (p.137) is just one example of overstatement. Second, skaldic poetry was not produced about every event in a saga. This does not mean that every detail of a political history in a saga is *de facto* a fabrication. The details may not always be accurate, but sagas often present what we call "potentially believable stories," i.e. situations which probably occurred. Even if it is not possible to link them, on the basis of other sources, to a precise person or situation. In this regard, I would not immediately dismiss the possibility that a Scandinavian warlord was exacting tributes (or mustering forces) among the Chuds for a tenth-century prince in Rus', nor would I see Olaf Tryggvason's imprisonment as a reflection of fear from thirteenth-century Estonian pirates (pp.121–23), especially since the slave childhood of a future Norwegian king hardly adds anything to the "building-up" of a glorious character and thus could easily have been omitted by a saga author had it not been a well-known fact to other contemporaries.

These critical remarks notwithstanding, the book is a welcome contribution both to the wave of studies which aim to illuminate the Eastern sphere of the continent and to the branch of sagas studies that turns back to the historical reality behind this literature. Although its specialist nature possibly makes it a hard read for scholars untrained in Old Norse philology, Jackson's work reminds us of the value of consulting Russian scholarship when dealing with Icelandic sagas and the Vikings.

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