



*The Pursuit of Sigurd I of Norway*  
[Jakten på Sigurd Jorsalfare],  
Øystein Morten  
(Oslo: Spartacus, 2014).

**Review by: Karl Christian Alvestad**

*The Pursuit of Sigurd I of Norway* [Jakten på Sigurd Jorsalfare]. By Øystein Morten. Oslo: Spartacus, 2014. ISBN 9788243008441. xvii + 251 pp. 369NOK.

The difference between religious extremism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries compared to the eleventh and twelfth centuries is probably not as significant as Øystein Morten points out in the introduction of his 2014 book on King Sigurd I Magnusson of Norway (1090-1130). His book examines Sigurd, the first reigning European king who, at the age of eighteen, went on a crusade in 1108. *The Pursuit of Sigurd I of Norway* is also a pursuit by Øystein Morten through both the medieval source material for Sigurd, as well as his journey through the modern landscapes in which he travelled to and from the Holy Land. The result is a book which examines both the medieval and modern depiction of Sigurd in an attempt to find the king, his history and his personality.

The focus of the book is on Øystein Morten's journey to uncover the truth about the supposed skull of Sigurd I which is kept in the Royal Mausoleum at Akershus Castle in Oslo. As a medieval addition to the modern Mausoleum, Sigurd's skull has been a link between the modern Royal family of Norway and the founding dynasty of Norway of Harald Fairhair (c.860-933). Morten's book not only follows the author as a diary on his pursuit to find the truth about the skull in the Royal Mausoleum, but it also entwines popular style with academic content. Additionally, there are sections within chapters that explore how the medieval sources portray Sigurd, his crusade, and his reign following his return to Norway in 1111. The book is chronologically structured, examining Sigurd's life and reign from birth to death, alongside Morten's pursuit to find the truth about Sigurd's supposed skull. Morten also probes the key and crucial questions; did the crusades drive Sigurd mad? What caused his complete change of character following his return from the Holy Land? In his study, Morten approaches these ambiguities and his search for the true history of Sigurd through adopting a comparative approach when possible to the sources, and draws upon material from across the medieval world. This was a successful attempt to re-create Sigurd's life and journey. The result is a book that takes into consideration the complexities of the medieval Scandinavian sagas, as well as English, Frankish, Spanish, Byzantine and Arabic sources in its quest to discover Sigurd. Through analysing these sources Morten reveals a king whose exceptional military career and political play is very much a product of, and part of, the crusading ideology. Nonetheless, Morten also finds that Sigurd's madness, as commented on in some of the Scandinavian medieval sources, was not a product of the crusades as such, but rather that he potentially suffered from Bipolar Disorder. This would explain his determination following his return to Norway, as well

as Sigurd's fluctuating political and personal abilities in the later years of his reign. Although the starting point of the book, the skull in the Royal Mausoleum turned out to date from the sixteenth century rather than the twelfth century. Following Morten's book, however, Sigurd's life and reign appears to us more clearly than it did from just reading the Snorri's *Heimskringla*.

The bibliography is comprehensive in regards to both the primary and secondary material, and contains a full account of all the primary sources referenced in the book. Among these, one can find medieval texts such as Ibn al-Athir's *Chronicle*, Albert of Aachen, Orderic Vitalis, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Morkinskinna, Agrip, Anna Comnenos, in addition to Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskingla*. These give the reader a wider historical foundation for future research into Sigurd and his crusade.

At 251 pages, Morten's book offers a good and thorough examination of Sigurd in the medieval and modern world, whilst addressing the question as to why Sigurd - or any medieval king - is important to study in modern Norway. However, the book is only available in Norwegian, and like so much other research undertaken in Norway, inaccessible for an Anglophone audience. This is a shame since the book offers a series of insights into the Norwegian kingdom in the twelfth century, and how Sigurd's marriage can be seen in context of the power struggle between competing political fractions surrounding the Baltic in the first half of the twelfth century.

Øystein Morten's *The Pursuit of Sigurd I of Norway* is a well-written and comprehensive examination of Sigurd's life, his political context, and contributes greatly to historiography on twelfth-century Norway. It is an exceptional introduction to the cultural and political contact between Norway and the rest of the known world in the early twelfth century, as well as the foundations for the outbreak of civil war, which would last for more than 100 years, following Sigurd's death in 1130. In conclusion, this book offers an interesting approach to understanding the twelfth-century king through the use of sagas, chronicles, skaldic poetry and the journey in Sigurd's footsteps which makes his story relevant and accessible for both an academic and popular audience. The book would function well as an introduction to early medieval Norwegian history, and offers the reader a valuable insight into the complexities of twelfth-century Scandinavia.

KARL ALVESTAD

University of Winchester