

## Long Shadows

by Juliet Robinson

It is questionable whether any man quite relishes being considered the poorer shade of another. But for Snorri Haraldson whose father was more legend than man it was a particularly burdensome thing.

His father Harald had ridden the whale roads, raiding and growing his name. Men had been drawn to him knowing his fame would bring them glory. His final summer of raiding had seen him set out with four sworn ships. Snorri aged seven had stood on the shingle beach with his mother, watching the boats depart and as they vanished from sight a weight had lifted from him.

Shortly before winter two boats returned, but Harald had not been victoriously draped round the prow beast of Saebjorn; instead, he had been lain in the ship's belly, wrapped in furs and sick with wound rot. An arrow had worked its way through the rings of his mail, though the wound was small it had come to fester. Snorri's mother and the village Vulva had tried to save Harald, but he had been too far gone. He died screaming, writhing and not knowing his name. Snorri who had watched from the shadows of the longhouse had seen the fear in his mother's eyes as she tried to get his father to grip the hilt of his sword as death approached, but he would not take the blade. With no weapon in his hand and his soul freed from his body far from the battlefield it was unlikely the Valkyries had come to carry Harald's soul to Valhalla. That day Snorri learned that he had no wish to be a warrior, though it shamed him deeply, his father's death terrified him.

As Harald's only son the burden of his legacy had fallen heavily upon Snorri. He grew up in the shadow of his famed father and into the mould of the man. He had the same iced blue eyes, the jutting chin, hair the colour of dried grass and his father's frame that could pause a bear's charge.

'So like your father,' the old growlers would remark when deep into their cups, their beards thick with mead froth and Snorri could hear their unvoiced thoughts, 'but just not Harald enough.'

He did not have Harald's wanderlust or his love of the blood fray and because of this, these men didn't respect their former lord's blade-shy son. But Snorri saw himself as Loki smart and Mimir wise, he believed the Norn's had spun a different path for him. He had taken to listening to tales told by one of the village thralls, a small man named Alwin, who had been captured in a monastery raid.

Alwin was of the white Christ and Snorri saw something in his stories of his forgiving god. The promise of eternal life offered a route to glory which didn't require saga worthy deeds. As a jarl, he was expected to bring riches to his people, but Snorri was no raider. He had decided years ago as he watched his father pass that he would not die in a piss-soaked bed. But through this Christian god he sensed an easy path to silver wealth. This Christian god already held sway over their southern enemies the Franks and his foothold was strong in Albion. A shared faith would open trading networks. The white Christ gifted Snorri a way to escape his father's fate and legacy.

Alwin wished to baptise Snorri, to dunk him under the fjord and claim him for the white Christ, but Snorri was weary of this. Instead, he allowed the man to bless some water, which he then used to mark the Christ cross upon him. Wisely Snorri didn't throw the old gods to the winds; he knew his people wouldn't accept that. Instead, he slipped the Redeemer in amongst them. Something about this skewered/impaled man appealed to the women folk and they came to worship him freely. Where the women led, their men soon followed. Those who were reluctant could not help but be persuaded by the trade wealth the Christian god had opened to them.

In his final years Snorri was baptised in the river of the great city Jorsala, where the son of his new god had preached and died. As he was submerged beneath the water he felt a kinship with the white Christ whose father had also cast a long shadow.