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Stephen A. Mitchell, *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011. Pp. xiii + 368, illus. US\$49.95 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-8122-4290-4.

Reviewed by Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough, University of Durham

Mitchell opens his excellent study on witchcraft and magic in the Nordic Middle Ages with a story from Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* in which dwarves bring about the death of the giant Kvasir, the embodiment of knowledge in Old Norse mythology. After his murder, so the story goes, the dwarves tell the gods that Kvasir has choked to death on his own knowledge. With the characteristic wit and lightness of touch that runs throughout his study, Mitchell notes that "the diligent student of witchcraft . . . must necessarily feel uncomfortably at home in this story" (1) given the growing volume of scholarly literature on European witchcraft over the past forty years or so. It is not only the volume of scholarly literature on witchcraft with which Mitchell has to contend. So broad and complex is his subject matter that it would be easy to be drowned in the resulting flood. Yet through his deft and confident handling of the material, Mitchell sheds new light not only on the nature of Nordic witchcraft and magic, but also medieval Nordic culture more generally.

Mitchell's study encompasses a diverse range of sources that run the gamut from sagas to legal texts, ecclesiastical records, church art, archaeological material, and runic inscriptions. However, he does not attempt to create a one-size-fits-all picture from these disparate materials. Rather, one of the great strengths of his work is his acknowledgement of their heterogeneity, the piecemeal and random nature of their survival, their social and cultural diversity, and their extensive chronological and geographical span. Where there are conflicting traditions, he argues that they should be embraced as part of a broader social dialogue rather than understood as factual errors in need of correction: "How often," Mitchell asks, "do philologists, historians, folklorists, and other scholars working in non-living traditions commit this same crime against their data by imposing a unifying meaning without recognizing . . . the implicit debate involved?" (34).

The chapters are organised thematically — literature, mythology, law, gender — rather than chronologically ("its directness appealing at first blush, of course, but fraught with its own complications" [xi]). Naturally, at times, these categories overlap so that certain sources crop up in the context of more than one discussion. By and large, the result is a unified, interlaced whole, whereby complex threads of evidence are woven together to form a multifaceted picture of witchcraft and magic in the medieval Nordic world. Chapter 1, "Witchcraft and the Past," is a survey of the available materials and existing approaches to the topic as a whole. Mitchell begins with a discussion of the randomness of the material that survives today, referring not to databases but rather to data *middens*: "mounds of serendipitously preserved intelligence" from which we create images of the past (18). At the same time, he emphasises the rich diversity of the medieval Nordic world, and its geographical, cultural, and social

complexity. Consequently, he advocates a comprehensive approach to his subject matter, drawing on interrelated fields such as folklore, history, philology, and archaeology.

In Chapter 2, "Magic and Witchcraft in Daily Life," Mitchell explores both the pagan and Christian uses of magic in everyday life in arenas such as love, luck, health, weather, and curses. Central to this chapter is the question of whether there is a clear division between pagan and Christian magic, for as is noted, "no cultural saltation event precipitated an immediate and absolute dividing line between old and new throughout Nordic society" (43). Mitchell traces continuities and conceptual shifts from the pre-Christian to the Christian period and notes that the structures and mentalities are broadly comparable even if the contexts and frameworks differ. "May Þórr hallow this mound" fell out of use in favour of "May Michael protect his spirit"; to fashion a poppet from dough and clay was forbidden by Norwegian law while a wax image of a human taken to Saint Katarína's grave was said to have precipitated the miraculous healing of a sick man (44). Yet pagan and Christian worldviews were far from diametrically opposed, for as Mitchell emphasizes: "The Conversion stories in which pagan magic competes with Christian magic suggest that the membrane separating them was often diaphanous indeed, having mostly to do with the source of their power" (45).

In Chapter 3, "Narrating Magic, Sorcery, and Witchcraft," the focus is on how medieval Nordic authors describe witchcraft and magic, not only in the Norse-Icelandic sagas and poetry, but also in other types of literature such as courtly, historical, and ecclesiastical narratives. The Old Norse-Icelandic literary corpus contains many of the richest and most complete descriptions of magic and witchcraft, but this is also an immensely problematic body of texts with which to work — Mitchell's discussion of their pitfalls and pleasures offers insights relevant not only to the study of Nordic witchcraft, but to the study of Old Norse-Icelandic literature more generally. The second part of the chapter concerns non-Icelandic texts, including rarely explored material from provincial law codes and ecclesiastical and court writings. This includes a discussion of the Old Swedish *Siælinna thröst* ("The Consolation of the Soul"), a translation and re-working of a German original in which many intriguing magical practices are forbidden ("you shall not have yourself measured with rope or red thread . . . You shall not believe in bird song . . . not in itching your ear . . . Some people have matted hair and are thus superstitious, for you shall cut it off" [114]). Mitchell concludes that while, in isolation, such literary presentations may skew our perceptions of Nordic magic, when taken together with medieval popular and legal traditions, "these artfully composed presentations of magic . . . can indeed give us a purchase on evolving Nordic views of magic and witchcraft" (116).

Chapter 4, "Medieval Mythologies," is concerned with the development of later medieval Nordic beliefs in the habits and powers of witches often linked to relationships with the devil. Mitchell begins with by examining the complex social functions of myths: "[T]hey are often doctrinal, normative statements of belief, with currency in their culture. Myths are alive, and they resonate in the lives of the individuals who hear, tell, know, and use them" (117). This definition acts as a springboard for the rest of the chapter; a highly original analysis of medieval Nordic myths about witchcraft and magic which had by this time been documented and therefore reframed in religious texts, law codes, and annals. The chapter covers themes such as diabolical pacts, witch-rides, witches' sabbats and the popular tale of the milk-stealing witch. Intriguing visual images are scattered through the text such as Swedish church paintings of witches travelling to the mountain of Blåkulla or pilfering milk in the company of demons. Mitchell's conclusion is that, for the communities of the Nordic Middle Ages, witchcraft was "not 'merely' a theological issue but a practical problem requiring practical solutions" (144–5).

Chapter 5, "Witchcraft, Magic, and the Law" focuses on what are described as "normative documents" such as provincial law codes and witch trial records. Mitchell's analysis is framed by a series of questions — often unanswerable — but equally applicable to much of the "confoundingly ambiguous" (23) medieval evidence on which the study is built: "Who created them and for what reason? Why and by

what means have they been preserved? Are they representative? What power relationships gave rise to them? Do our consequent attempts to understand such empirical evidence — and impose meaning on it — shed useful light? Most significantly, do our readings result in views that would be recognized by the producers and consumers of our evidence?” (147). The material provides us with some intriguing legal snapshots: the case of Ragnhildr from Bergen, who fell in love with her cousin and cursed him on his wedding day (“telling the bride in front of everyone that his penis would be as much use to her as the woven belt she held rolled up in her hand” [170]); or the case of Kolgrímr who was burnt to death in Greenland for seducing a married woman with magic (171–2). Yet these can only ever be snapshots, for as Mitchell notes: “[T]he actual cases history has bequeathed us are typically fragmentary and frustratingly incomplete, jagged, with curious details, yet generally lacking larger social contexts” (173).

Chapter 6, “Witchcraft, Sorcery, and Gender,” examines the evolving relationship between witchcraft and gender in medieval Scandinavia. Mitchell opens an analysis of the “evil woman” with a late-medieval Scandinavian proverb — “an evil woman is the devil’s doornail” (176) — and goes on to examine manifestations of such women in saga literature, legal texts, and religious decorative artwork. The scenes of witches cavorting with devils are particularly prevalent in medieval church murals from Sweden and Denmark: devils riding women; women riding devils; a woman spewing into a glass as a devil penetrates her with a burning brand and a cat (perhaps the devil) licks its own bottom. The discursive framework surrounding such images is complex. Mitchell demonstrates that the relationship between gender and Nordic witchcraft in the later Middle Ages was part of a legal and cultural construct influenced by factors such as power, theology, and social attitudes from both the pre-Christian and Christian eras. Finally, in his epilogue, “The Medieval Legacy,” Mitchell looks beyond the late-medieval Nordic period and examines attitudes towards witchcraft and magic as Scandinavia entered the era of the early modern witch hunts.

This is a remarkable and highly skilful study that is not only of interest and importance to the scholar of medieval Nordic witchcraft and magic but also to those concerned with the culture and history of the Nordic Middle Ages more generally. Far from drowning in his sea of knowledge, Mitchell navigates the flood with aplomb without the slightest danger of losing his reader overboard.