

CHAPTER 5

In Quest of a Leader

Sverris saga

“Er þat ok sannast at ek skal annathvárt halda ñllum Nóregi eða láta allan ok þar lífit með.” (Magnús Erlingsson, *Sverris saga* [ÍF 30:96])

(If the truth be known, I will either possess all of Norway or lose all of it, and my life as well.)

1. *Sverris saga*

It is generally assumed that *Morkinskinna*, and subsequently *Heimskringla* III, were designed to fill the historical gap between the Óláfr sagas, down to the year 1030, and the onset of *Sverris saga*, which begins in earnest in 1177.¹ An often cited prologue tells us that the writing of *Sverris saga* was initiated by Karl Jónsson of the Benedictine monastery at Pingeyrar in northwestern Iceland very possibly in the year 1185 and under the direct supervision of King Sverrir himself.² It was completed, whether by Karl or another writer or other writers, at an unknown date, but probably before the composition of *Morkinskinna*, *Fagrskinna*, and *Heimskringla* in the 1220s.³

As we have seen *Morkinskinna* was conceived as a sort of Norwago-Icelandic history with ample coverage of the Icelandic presence in Norway. This openness is much reduced in *Heimskringla* III, which makes no overt mention of the Icelandic presence and converts the story largely into a history of Norwegian campaigning. That is the shape of *Sverris saga* as well. Indeed, we might readily imagine that the macroform of *Heimskringla* III was inspired by the military focus of *Sverris saga* and its exclusion of Icelandic components. *Sverris saga* is quite consistent in this respect. One plausible reason for the

military chronicle style in this saga is that, although the book was written by one or more Icelanders, it was first and foremost written under the personal guidance of King Sverrir. The sources were therefore in all probability Norwegian and royalist. Sverrir's guiding hand seems quite palpable in the recurrent emphasis on his almost miraculous success in the face of overwhelming odds, odds that may not have been quite so overwhelming in reality as in their literary recreation.⁴ The accounts of Norwegian history before 1177 were in all probability transfigured by legendary highlights, but in *Sverris saga* there is a clear and consistent element of interested, even self-serving, autobiography, an element underscored by Sverrir's dreams of greatness and his summary speeches.

Since both *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla* may have been cast as forerunners to *Sverris saga*, they dovetail with it chronologically. After a short prelude about Sverrir's time in the Faroe Islands and his arrival as a young man in Norway, the saga picks up where the author of *Heimskringla* III will choose to leave off, that is, with the fall of Sverrir's cousin Eysteinn meyla (maiden) at Ré (Ramnes) in 1177 and his own recruitment as leader of the Birkibeinar (as they will soon emerge) in Vermaland (Värmland). The word “recruitment” is ambiguous because it is not clear whether Eysteinn meyla's faction is recruiting Sverrir or whether Sverrir is recruiting them. There is something of Julius Caesar's reluctance to accept the crown in Shakespeare's play in Sverrir's deferential rejection of the role thrust on him and his final acquiescence only to alleged threats against his life. The mask of modesty is contrived from the outset.

Having accepted leadership only under duress, Sverrir proceeds to Vík where other supporters join his company, but he conscientiously filters these recruits to rid himself of bandits and retain only those who are devoted to his service, the total numbering a mere 280 men. With this tiny contingent he crosses the wilderness regions of Herdalr (Härjedalen) and Jamtaland (Jämtland) and marches on Trondheim after adding reinforcements from Pølamørk (Telemark). Here he wins his first battle against the customary unfavorable odds. He also acquires the beginning of a naval force and is recognized as king at the Eyraþing. He pursues his success by taking Haðaland without opposition and campaigning around the waters of Mjørs (Mjøsa). A career could hardly begin more auspiciously, but a notorious march

from Vors (Voss) to Bergen is beset by a blinding blizzard and intense cold that turn it into a near disaster and force Sverrir to retreat, eventually back to Vermaland. Once more he emerges from beyond the pale to win a victory over a local chieftain in Ælvík, only to retreat again into Vermaland before the forces of Erlingr jarl and his son, Sverrir's rival for the throne of Norway, Magnús.

From here he follows his former wilderness route and crosses into Helsingjaland (Hälsingland) and Jamtaland, where he is at first received and provisioned but is later confronted by a large army. Despite his great disadvantages in numbers he wins the victory and makes further converts. After a detour to Naumudalr (Namdalen) and the acquisition of some ships the Birkibeinar convene a council and ultimately decide to try their luck in Trondheim. Here they suffer a resounding defeat, in the course of which Sverrir is wounded. They must retreat to Upplönd (Opplandene), but Sverrir is able to convince his men to confront Magnús's advancing forces head-on. They do so and triumph once again, after which the action shifts to the east, where the opposing forces harass one another. Sverrir is encouraged to move against Trondheim once more and is able to capture a number of ships, but as he sails south he encounters a much superior force and is able to escape thanks only to a miraculously thick fog. This sequence of confrontations concludes with a great battle at Trondheim, in which Erlingr is gravely wounded and soon dies (1179). After delivering a retrospective speech over his grave, Sverrir is generally recognized as king, though he continues to have his most loyal following in Trondheim. In the meantime Magnús recoups his losses but suffers a renewed defeat at Íluvellir (Ilevollene) (1180) and must withdraw to Bergen and from there to Denmark. This retreat allows Sverrir to seize Bergen for the first time. Here he repulses an attack by the local militia, then tightens his grip on Harðangr (Hardanger) and Hordaland (Hordaland) while Magnús maintains his rule in Ælvík.

In due course Sverrir tries to extend his grasp to Ælvík, but he must withdraw when Magnús materializes from Denmark with a great fleet. Magnús presses his pursuit as far as Bergen, but here Sverrir stands his ground and routs Magnús, who soon returns to the attack but is once again bested. Sverrir, now accompanied by another son of Sigurðr munnr named Eiríkr, returns to Trondheim, where negotiations to share the royal title fail because of Magnús's intransigence, opening

the way for continued warfare. It rages on in Trondheim, and this time Magnús prevails. Although large-scale hostilities ease for a time, the narrative is replete with personal information and individual events that could only have been relayed by court insiders.⁵ When the contending parties clash once again in Trondheim, Magnús suffers a decisive defeat and withdraws to Bergen, giving Sverrir time to construct a fortress and the famously oversized vessel *Máriusúðin*.

With the situation in Trondheim appearing to be unstable, Sverrir makes a feint as if to sail north to Hålogaland, but instead he sails south, takes Magnús's forces by surprise, and captures Bergen, while Magnús makes good his escape south and ultimately to Denmark. Sverrir now seems once more to be in control, but there is an uprising against his appointed stewards in Sogn. In the meantime he has time to complete the construction of the unwieldy *Máriusúðin* and to rebuild his diminished fleet. With these ships he sails into Sognefjorden and exacts terrible revenge for his slain stewards by incinerating a hundred farms. At the same time Magnús arrives from the south with a large fleet, and the rival contenders meet at the great Battle of Fimreiti (Fimreite). The prelude, course, and aftermath of the battle are narrated in great detail.⁶ This encounter, which results in the fall of King Magnús and Sverrir's consolidation of his position as king of all Norway in 1184, is the high point in the narrative and perhaps marks the end of the original saga. But it does not mark the end of the saga we have or Sverrir's ongoing struggles, which persist for another eighteen years.

The first challenge to his throne surfaces in the person of a certain Jón, known as Jón kuflungr (cowl), who is alleged to be the son of Ingi Haraldsson. This claimant is supported by a number of chieftains in Vík and is acclaimed king at a thingmeeting at Túnsberg (Tønsberg). He had formerly been a monk on the island of Höfuðey (Hovedøy) in the Oslo Fjord—hence the pseudonym “kuflungr” and the name “Kuflungar” given to his faction. The Kuflungar are able to take Bergen and the surrounding region and drive the Birkibeinar out of Vík. The narrative becomes a little unclear at this point, but it appears that Sverrir reoccupies Bergen, leaving the Kuflungar in command of Vík. They nonetheless attack Sverrir in Trondheim, although they are not strong enough to persist and must withdraw to Bergen. Sverrir then has the better of several naval engagements, in the last of which Jón

kuflungr falls. A certain Pétr Ormsson is asked to inspect the corpse and recognizes from a scar on one foot that it is the body of his own son, and therefore a proven imposter. He is followed by yet another imposter, who calls himself Sigurðr brennir and claims to be another son of King Ingi Haraldsson. Once cornered, he readily confesses his imposture and reveals that his name is Heðinn Þorgrímsson and that he is an Icelander by birth. He is promptly executed.

The next threat is posed by a certain Símun Kárason, who sponsors the claim of an alleged and unnamed son of King Magnús Erlingsson, a mere child, but nonetheless put forward as the leader of a faction called the Várbelgir (spring hides). They are caught and mostly killed, along with their child leader, in a major naval battle with the men of Túnsberg. But this is by no means the end of it. The child candidate is soon replaced by an alleged son of King Eysteinn Haraldsson named Þorleifr breiðskeggr, but he too survives only a very short time before being killed by the local farmers. After a brief digression on the strains between Sverrir and Archbishop Eiríkr Ívarsson we learn that one more possible pretender, another son of Magnús Erlingsson named Sigurðr and sponsored by a certain Óláfr jarlsmágr (jarl's kin), comes to the fore. After recruiting support in Shetland and Orkney this contingent succeeds in wresting Vík from the Birkibeinar, together with the surrounding region. This new faction is known as the Eyjarskeggjar. Despite their early successes Sverrir defeats them in a fierce naval engagement in Flor(e)våg off Bergen; both Sigurðr Magnússon and Óláfr jarlsmágr are killed. After more ecclesiastical disputes Sverrir is now able to persuade Bishop Nikólas Árnason in Oslo to anoint him king.

This official recognition does nothing to dampen the thirst for dissension, and yet a new faction under the name of Baglar (crozier men) emerges. Their focus is on a boy named Ingi, whom they claim to be a son of Magnús Erlingsson and who is eventually acclaimed as king. After an inconclusive engagement in Sæmsfjørð (Sannäsfjorden) near Konungahella Sverrir raises troops in Trondheim and Bergen and defeats the Baglar at Oslo. The Baglar then make their way to Trondheim and capture a fortress with the connivance of one of the defenders. Once back in the south, they also kill fifty Birkibeinar in Túnsberg, although the Birkibeinar are able to counterattack. This sequence of hostilities culminates in a Birkibeinn victory in Bergen,

and, after further maneuvers, a second victory in Trondheim. As a consequence the Baglar are forced to retreat to Denmark. Renewed fighting with a much larger force of farmers in Vík ends with yet another Birkibeinn victory. This is followed up by a naval encounter off Bergen, in which the Baglar are again put to flight. The action then turns east once more to Vík and centers on the siege of a Baglar fortress at Túnsgberg, which is eventually reduced by hunger.

Soon after this final success Sverrir falls ill and succumbs on March 9, 2002, after twenty-five years of defending his claim. An unusually full obituary follows and dwells particularly on a comparison of Sverrir with his alleged father Sigurðr munnr, as if to solidify his claim to royal legitimacy one final time.⁷

Sverris saga begins with a particularly informative prologue about the authorship of the saga. It might be expected to shed real light on how the narrative came into being, but it has occasioned a great deal of disagreement about the exact meaning of the text. We must therefore preface any further discussion with a translation of the shorter, and almost certainly older, version of the prologue and some account of the problems it raises. In its entirety it reads as follows:

We begin with the telling of these events that have recently taken place and are in the memory of men who have reported this book. It will be told of King Sverrir, the son of King Sigurðr [munnr Haraldsson], and the beginning of the book is based on the book Abbot Karl Jónsson first wrote. King Sverrir himself supervised it and determined what should be written; that part of the story did not advance very far. Here something is told of some of his battles. And as the book advances his strength grows, and that strength governs the major parts. For that reason they called this part of the book Grýla [bugaboo, intimidator]. The latter part of the book was written in accord with the narratives of those men who had the events in memory, and they themselves had seen or heard of these events, and some of these men had been in battles with King Sverrir. Some of these events were secured in memory because people wrote them down immediately afterwards and they are [therefore] unchanged. But it may be that if men read this book, and are familiar [with the events], they may find that in many places there is a summary account and matters left out that are worth telling; they can still have them written down if they wish. And even if some parts

are told differently from what seems likely with respect to battles and concerning troop numbers, everyone knows it to be true that this is not exaggerated. And it seems to us more likely that reports are true when they are set down in books concerning distinguished men of old.

This prologue makes it clear that there is an earlier part of the saga called “Grýla” and a later part recounted by eyewitnesses or near witnesses, but it does not make clear where the division should be drawn. The hypotheses have therefore differed widely, with the division variously set after chapters 17, 31, 39, 40, 43, 100, or 109.⁸ The estimates of how much Abbot Karl Jónsson wrote also differ; some credit him with a few chapters at the beginning while others think that he probably wrote the whole saga.⁹ That in turn has influenced the dating of the saga, with some scholars suggesting an early date between 1204 and 1207 and others advocating a much later date after the death of Karl Jónsson in 1212 or 1213.¹⁰

The labyrinth of scholarly commentary on the prologue is too complex to rehearse in detail. An early summation was provided by Finnur Jónsson in 1920 and suggested good reasons for believing that the first part (“Grýla”) extended through chapter 100.¹¹ The notion that the first part covered only the years 1177–79 drew the derisive exclamation: “. . . so we are to imagine that he [Karl Jónsson] wrote only about two years!”¹² Finnur’s analysis of the prologue (pp. 113–17) makes several telling points. The phrasing to the effect that “that part of the story did not advance very far” is understood to refer not to a relative amount of text but to the amount of time that transpired. The locution “not very far” would be equally appropriate for two years (1177–79) or seven years (1177–84) if we consider that Sverrir’s struggle went on for twenty-five years (1177–1202). Finnur thought that the phrase “as the book advances his strength grows” would make more sense if it envisages his major success in 1184 rather than his less conclusive struggles down to 1179. He thought too that the division of the book into an early part and “the latter part of the book” would make better sense if the two parts were more or less even rather than strikingly disproportionate. Finnur goes on to argue that the real break and a tone of finality come at chapter 100 after the Battle of Fimreiti. In addition, the great speeches continue down to chapters 88, 94, and 99. Chapters 40 to 100 also share

certain narrative characteristics with the early chapters: they have the same degree of detail and precision, the same focus on routes and movements, the same focus on chronology, and the same style in speechmaking. Finnur also believed that Karl Jónsson wrote the whole saga, the first part in Norway after his arrival in 1185 and the last part in Iceland with Norwegian informants.

On the other hand, Ludvig Holm-Olsen believed that the words “that part of the saga did not advance very far” referred most naturally to a quite short narrative sequence. He also thought that he could detect certain narrative peculiarities that set the first thirty-one or thirty-two chapters apart from the rest of the saga.¹³ He therefore places the break between “Grýla” and the remaining text at this point. Egil Nygaard Brekke, who rejected much of what had previously been written, accepted Holm-Olsen’s parameters for “Grýla.”¹⁴ By contrast he departs from a late dating of the completed saga around 1220, proposed by Gustav Storm and Halvdan Koht,¹⁵ and offers a new dating between 1204 and 1208 on the basis of his belief that *Sverris saga* is a vigorous attack on the Baglar by a writer sympathetic to the Birkibeinar. The clash between these parties culminated in this period, which would therefore have been the logical moment for a propagandistic sally. The author Brekke thought would be sympathetic to the cause of the Birkibeinar was Karl Jónsson, to whom he therefore credited the composition of the whole saga. Although Finnur Jónsson thought it most likely that *Sverris saga* was completed in Iceland, Brekke favored completion in Norway in the region of Þróndalög.¹⁶ Since he attributed the saga as a whole to Karl Jónsson, he was also intent on arguing a certain degree of uniformity in the text, in contrast to Holm-Olsen’s attempt to work out a clear and separate profile for “Grýla.” Thus he devotes considerable study to the sparsely narrated period 1185–95 and advances detailed arguments for the apparent neglect of this decade.¹⁷ He also devotes special attention to the period 1179–86 (or 1179–88), which he characterizes as a “mellomledd” (link) between “Grýla” and the last part of the story.¹⁸ Since he believes that this too was the work of Karl Jónsson, he is in the somewhat awkward position of arguing that it is different but the same. Finnur Jónsson would no doubt have asked why, if the link was of a piece with “Grýla” and by the same author, it should not be counted as part of “Grýla.”

Since Brekke's monograph was a doctoral dissertation, it was also subjected to the ritual of a doctoral disputation with contributions by Hallvard Lie and Johan Schreiner, published in 1960.¹⁹ It must be said that these contributions shed more heat than light on the subject. Both critics (but Lie more so) adopted Brekke's rather aggressive tone, but they were very selective in the topics they covered (cf. Brekke's response, p. 47). Neither came to grips with the problem as a whole. This is perhaps understandable because Brekke's treatise often reads like a sequence of querulous minutiae rather than a general thesis, but the critics were no better; their comments read, figuratively speaking, as though they were reenacting the civil strife that raged under King Sverrir in the last decades of the twelfth century. The extent of Karl Jónsson's authorship, which Lárus Blöndal also thought was likely to have embraced the whole book, still seems unresolved.²⁰

Although it was Sverrir's consistent goal to be king of all Norway, he had a special attachment to the people of Þrœndalög, who were the first to acclaim him as king (ÍF 30:27). This attachment is emphasized after the great battle in Trondheim (*Kalvskinnet*) in which Erlingr skakki falls:²¹

After this many wealthy men and men of good family in Þrœndalög joined King Sverrir and many who remained at home became his friends. He placed his great confidence and trust in the Þrœndir because they had always been unreliable toward Jarl Erlingr and his rule, as was previously written concerning the dealings that the jarl had with the Þrœndir. King Sverrir always called Þrándheimr his home. He always considered the Þrœndir to be the dearest of all his countrymen, and when he spoke he always told what faithful friends the Þrœndir had been to his father King Sigurðr [munnr Haraldsson] and his brother King Hákon [herðibreiðr] and Eysteinn Birkibeinn [meyla Eysteinsson], and how they had always served under the same shield.

If Sverrir was really the son of Sigurðr munnr, the alliance with the Þrœndir would have been a natural one because they had accepted Sigurðr as king in *Morkinskinna*.²² If the paternity claim was false, it would still have been important for Sverrir to allege a special affiliation with Þrœndalög to reinforce his claim to be the son of a king in that region.

Although Þrœndalög had had no real separate status for some eighty years when Sverrir claimed a special attachment to that region, some sense of local patriotism may have lingered on. In 1917 the Norwegian historian Edvard Bull delivered an inaugural lecture in which he argued that a separate regional ideology persisted down to the days of King Hákon Hákonarson and was a contributing factor in the hostilities that prevailed in the civil war period down through the twelfth century.²³ Halvdan Koht rejected this thesis and it seems not to have been resurrected by later historians, but there nonetheless seems to be some evidence that Þrœndalög in particular cultivated a separatist profile.²⁴ One aspect of regional partisanship that Bull did not include in his argument is the reflection of such sentiments in the literature. There is in fact a separatist account of the history of Þrœndalög in the lost saga known as **Hlaðajarla saga* (the saga of the jarls of Lade). This lost text did not become a topic in the historical literature until the appearance of Gustav Indrebø's book *Fagrskinna* in 1917 and was therefore not on Bull's horizon when he wrote. There is fairly good agreement on the existence of **Hlaðajarla saga*, but there is also disagreement about the story it told. Using both *Fagrskinna* and *Morkinskinna*, I have tried to reconstruct it in outline.²⁵

The saga seems to have begun in the days of Haraldr hárfagri, like *Ágrip*, *Fagrskinna*, and in a modified sense *Heimskringla*, but in **Hlaðajarla saga* the point of departure was probably Haraldr's specific conquest of Þrœndalög and his reduction of that province to a jarldom. The distinguished jarl, Sigurðr Hákonarson gamla, figures as a wise and politic leader of his people, although he is eventually murdered by Haraldr hárfagri's sons. He is succeeded by his son Hákon, who came to be known as Hákon jarl. He is portrayed as a brilliant, albeit devious, statesman, who forms an alliance with the Danish king and is able to rule independently in Þrœndalög. In this version it is unclear how he dies. His son Eiríkr in turn becomes the most formidable opponent of Óláfr Tryggvason at Svǫlðr and is the greatest beneficiary when Norway is apportioned among the victors, but he dies from a failed medical operation in England. His natural successors are Sveinn, the son of Hákon jarl, and Hákon the son of Eiríkr himself, but one dies in Russia and the other disappears at sea. At this point the last great leader of Þrœndalög emerges in

the person of Einarr þambarskelfir, who has married Hákon jarl's daughter Bergljót. Einarr is remarkable for his devoted loyalty to King Magnús Óláfsson and his stout opposition to King Haraldr harðráði, who ultimately murders him in a darkened council chamber. Einarr stands out as a great figure and a culmination in the House of Hlaðir, and his murder is surely the low point in a decidedly mixed portrait of King Haraldr harðráði.

We can conclude that **Hlaðajarla saga* was conceived as an account of the heroic age in Prœndalög. That it was not just about individual jarls but about Prœndalög as a political entity can be deduced from the wording in both *Morkinskinna* and *Fagrskinna*, where Prœndalög is referred to as the “höfuð Nóregs,” a designation that might be translated as “the heart of Norway.”²⁶ The idea is echoed in *Heimskringla* when Jarl Sigurðr Hákonarson gamla warns King Hákon góði not to campaign in Prándheimr, “where the greatest strength of the country is found” (er mestr styrkr er landsins).²⁷

The independent status of Prœndalög ended with the death of Hákon jarl in 995, but a sense of preeminence continued for some time. When King Óláfr Haraldsson fell in the Battle of Stiklarstaðir in 1030, it was the Prœndir who took the initiative in recalling Magnús Óláfsson from Russia and Einarr Pambarskelfir became his foster father and chief adviser. When Magnús died young, the chief resistance against his successor Haraldr came from the Prœndir, spearheaded by Einarr. When Haraldr dies in England in 1066, the division in Norway persists, with one son, Óláfr kyrri, located in the east and his brother Magnús located in the north, which we may understand as being Prœndalög.²⁸ It is only because Magnús also dies young that the country is once more united. But the same pattern recurs in 1093 when Óláfr kyrri dies after a reign of twenty-seven years; Norway is again divided between Óláfr's son Magnús berfœttr in the east and Magnús's popular cousin Hákon, the son of the deceased Magnús, in Prœndalög.²⁹ Once more the king of the Prœndir dies young, but they try to maintain their independence by taking as king a certain Sveinn, son of Haraldr flettir, who, according to *Heimskringla*, was a Danish viking, clearly with no legitimate claim.³⁰ Magnús berfœttr therefore drives him out of the country. No more is heard of Prœndalög independence, but that the sentiment of special privilege stayed alive is shown by **Hlaðajarla saga*, which was

probably composed in the second decade of the thirteenth century. Norwegian unity in the eleventh century seems to some extent to have been a matter of actuarial happenstance. It was no doubt a sense of separateness and special standing that Sverrir was eager to capitalize on in *Prøndalög* so as to have a strong foothold.

The rather extended recapitulation of the narrative at the beginning of this chapter was designed not so much to convey the content as to suggest the flavor of the book. The story does not have a plot, as the later sagas about early Icelanders do, nor does it subscribe to the biographical pattern we found in the sagas of the two Óláfrs, a pattern ultimately traceable to saints' lives. Instead, it is a sequence of military dispatches or "war-time communiqués."³¹ The form reflects Sverrir's primary concern with military matters and his ceaseless campaigning from Trondheim to Bergen to Vík and back again, a restlessness remotely reminiscent of Charlemagne's uninterrupted marches, except that Sverrir was active in the winter as well as the summer. If there is an underlying theme, it might be the unification (or reunification) of Norway—Sverrir's reluctance to settle for part of the land and his insistence on controlling all three urban centers in the north-central, southwestern, and eastern areas.

This can only be a surmise because the saga does not theorize. It does not explain, for example, why, as soon as one claimant succumbs, another is immediately put forward in his place, or why the obvious alternative of peace is weighed only once and dismissed. Perhaps the implication is that this is the nature of a war zone, in which resources are constantly being confiscated and in which the affected farmers are prompt to defect, but repeated rebellion is not the only solution in such a situation. We might rather expect the people to put pressure on their warring leaders to make peace. Indeed, there are examples of such pressure in earlier Norwegian history and a documented preference for peace in the sagas.³² In the case of Sverrir's wars, however, the saga left the tantalizing problem open for modern historians to explore.³³

An important element in the supposition that "Grýla" was a rather short sequence at the beginning of the saga is the statement early in the prologue to the effect that "that part of the story did not advance very far." I agree with Finnur Jónsson and, more recently, Þorleifur Hauksson, that "Grýla" carried the narrative down to the Battle of Fimreiti in 1184, or a bit more than half the book.³⁴ The phrase "not

very far” should, as Finnur Jónsson indicated, be understood not in terms of the number of pages but rather in terms of the chronology. The year 1184 still marks only the seventh year in Sverrir’s struggle for power and there remain another eighteen years before his death in 1202. There is nothing unreasonable about describing seven years as “not very far” into his total career of twenty-five years.

The prologue goes on to describe the content of the first part with the words: “Here something is told of some of his battles.” The question that confronts the reader is which battles these might be and how many of them there were. The most important battles down to 1184 were the Battle of Íluvellir (Ilevollene) outside Trondheim in 1180, the Battle of Norðnes (Nordnes) in the outskirts of Bergen in 1181, and the Battle of Fimreiti in Sognefjorden in 1184. What these battles have in common is that they describe the action in considerable detail and assign an important personal role to King Sverrir. At Íluvellir one of Sverrir’s wings advances while the other falls back before Magnús’s onslaught, but Sverrir realizes what is afoot and personally rallies his men, who attack Magnús from the rear and rout his forces. At Norðnes Sverrir also has a personal role in rallying his men, to the extent of attaching a boathook to the ship of his marshal Guðlaugr vali so as to draw him closer into the fray. Thus in both these battles Sverrir is assigned (or assigns himself) a special part in securing the victory. That matches only too well with the role assigned to Sverrir in the prologue with respect to the writing of the book: “King Sverrir himself supervised it and determined what should be written.” King Sverrir, in his role as overseer, was clearly not shy about giving himself personal credit for these victories.

Easily the most transparent case of self-promotion is found in the description of the Battle of Fimreiti. It depicts Sverrir’s contingent as being greatly outnumbered and at a hopeless disadvantage. In so doing it echoes the end of the prologue: “And even if some parts are told differently from what seems likely with respect to battles concerning troop numbers, everyone knows it to be true that this is not exaggerated.” This echo connects the battle with the prologue and suggests that it was one of the battles the author of the prologue had in mind when he wrote: “Here something is told of some of the battles.”

King Sverrir’s role in the battle is a very strange one indeed. He is originally aboard the huge ship *Máriusúðin*, but as Magnús’s fleet

encircles this behemoth, Sverrir jumps into a small boat with another man and rows off to encourage other ships and indicate how they should position themselves.³⁵ As they circulate, one arrow flies over Sverrir's head and another strikes the side of the boat at knee level. The king's companion exclaims: "That was a near miss, lord." Sverrir gives a response that is both monumental and pious: "It's a close call when God wills it." Once again the king gives himself every possible benefit in word and deed; he casts himself as a fearless admiral in total command of a clearly chaotic tumult. The picture is, however, so odd that the reader cannot help thinking that Sverrir has not so much taken to a small boat to exert leadership as to gain mobility in case the battle should turn the wrong way.³⁶ The degree of self-interest exhibited in these battles is such that they can hardly have been composed under any auspices but the king's. The three battles fought at Íluvellir, Norðnes, and Fimreiti must therefore owe the form of their description to the supervision of King Sverrir alluded to in the prologue.

Another reason for placing the division between the first part ("Grýla") and the later part after the Battle of Fimreiti is that the rhythm of the narrative seems to build toward Fimreiti and reach a resting point after that encounter. The aftermath of the battle is marked by a long speech over King Magnús's grave (of which only a few words are quoted) and a long, seemingly concluding, speech quoted at considerable length.³⁷ There is also a concluding air about the words immediately following his speech:³⁸

After the fall of King Magnús King Sverrir went to Vik in the summer and to the farthest extent of the land and placed the whole country under his rule. No one spoke against the king's wishes. He now installed his officials over the whole country. King Sverrir was now sole ruler over all of Norway. Seven years had passed since he had been given the title of king and five years since Erlingr jarl had fallen.

At this point King Sverrir clearly thought that he had won the war. That impression is only reinforced by the following sequence of chapters from 101 to 128, which are quite sketchy in their coverage of events between 1185 and 1195. It is as if the project seemed complete after chapter 100 and the continuation was filled in only as an afterthought.

The afterthought becomes fuller again only after the Baglar come onto the scene and enliven the narrative from chapter 130 to 182.

The original concluding date of 1184 also fits neatly with the supposed date of composition. We know that Karl Jónsson came to Norway in 1185, that is, at the very time that Sverrir would have had a brief respite after the Battle of Fimreiti and before the Kuflungar became a direct threat in Trondheim in 1188. In the meantime Sverrir was able to turn his attention to such domestic matters as the excessive consumption of wine.³⁹ The years 1185–86 may therefore have been the right moment for the composition of the first hundred chapters in collaboration with Karl Jónsson.

Judging from King Sverrir's advantageous profile in this portion of the narrative we may conclude that he was the dominant participant in this collaboration. On the other hand, we can surmise that the prologue was written by an Icelander after Sverrir's death. If there is any Icelandic coloring to the book at all, we would expect to find it here. To some extent it displays only the commonplace features of Old Icelandic book prefaces, an allegation of truthfulness and latitude for the addition of matters not narrated in sufficient detail. We wish we could assess the exact valence of "Grýla" because that would tell us something about the attitude toward King Sverrir in Iceland, but etymologizing "Grýla" does not take us very far. There are, however, two factors that deserve special attention. One is the emphasis on King Sverrir in a supervisory function. Could that be meant to warn the reader that the account is not neutral? The second is the final note on the unlikelihood of the disparity in troop numbers, a matter that is picked up by a number of later critics.⁴⁰ Is the remark perhaps defensive and indicative of a certain skepticism among contemporary readers of the saga, especially Icelandic readers?

2. Baglar and Birkibeinar

After Sverrir's death in 1202 the story is carried on down to 1217 in *Bøglunga sagur*, or, more accurately, a group of fragments that were part of *Bøglunga sagur* (*The Sagas of [Birkibeinar and] Baglar*).⁴¹ The fragments were studied by Knut Helle and Hallvard Magerøy, who distinguished between a longer and shorter version. Helle thought that the short version came first, but Magerøy thought that the long version

took precedence.⁴² Bjørsvik agreed with Helle, as did the editors of the recent edition of *Böglunga sögur* and *Hákonar saga*.⁴³ Even if the longer version is older, the fragmentary state of the transmission allows us to read it complete only in a Danish translation by Peder Claussøn Friis from around 1600, later published by the Danish antiquarian Ole Worm in 1633. The full form shows us that there was a detailed account down to 1210 but only a very abbreviated summary from 1210 to 1217 (seven pages in Magerøy's edition).

The text begins with a good deal of information on personal and family relationships (pp. 3–30), but at that point the narration changes course and is modeled on the style of *Sverris saga*.⁴⁴ That is to say, it adopts a battlefield view of the continuing hostilities between Birkibeinar and Baglar.⁴⁵ There is no official détente, but there is a definite reduction in the full-scale warfare that raged during Sverrir's reign. Perhaps a certain battle fatigue can be detected after the twenty-five years of armed confrontation under Sverrir.⁴⁶ This is apparent in the absence of pitched battles, instead of which we find more occasional raiding and intermittent street fighting in the towns. The underlying pattern of alternating land and sea encounters and the counterbalancing efforts at capturing the main urban centers nonetheless persists, as does the eyewitness perspective and close-up details of the encounters. There is no precedent for this style of military reporting other than *Sverris saga*.⁴⁷ Nor did it catch on in later saga writing, for the very good reason that it was dependent on eyewitness accounts. It is assumed that the early sections of *Böglunga sögur* were written not much after 1210 so that the first-hand reports would have been abundant.⁴⁸

Toward the end of the longer version the hostilities begin to recede and the tone of the narrative changes accordingly. It no longer focuses on battles or threatening battles but on peace negotiations. King Ingi Bárðarson and the Birkibeinar treat with King Philippus Símonarson and the Baglar in an effort to dissuade the latter from using the title “king.” Some of the Baglar continue to use the title notwithstanding, but Philippus is content to forgo it and the warfare peters out. Dissension continues in the camp of the Birkibeinar, however, because Ingi's brother Hákon (Folkviðarson) galinn (the mad) aspires to the title of king. King Ingi gets wind of this ambition and, though not a gifted orator, he delivers a formal speech and gets the backing of his

followers. The matter is resolved when Hákon galinn dies in 1214. King Ingi himself dies three years later.

The sequel may be read in Sturla Þórðarson's *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*. Sturla was commissioned by King Hákon's son and successor Magnús to write his father's biography and probably finished the task in 1265. More than a half century had therefore elapsed since the composition of *Sverris saga* and *Bøglunga sǫgur*. There may still have been at least second-hand witnesses to the events at the beginning of the century, but *Hákonar saga* shows less explicit signs of the eyewitness qualities that we find in the earlier sagas. Although King Magnús commissioned the work, the author seems to have had a considerably freer hand than the author or authors of *Sverris saga*, which shows evidence of tight and biased royal control. Freedom emerges, for example, in the inclusion of a number of references to Icelandic persons and events.

Hákonar saga exhibits a new narrative style, although it reaches back to 1203, that is, to the time covered by *Bøglunga sǫgur*. The early chapters of *Hákonar saga* are in fact easier to understand if they are read in conjunction with *Bøglunga sǫgur*.⁴⁹ These chapters return to the biographic form that we found in the Óláfr sagas; they do so explicitly by comparing Hákon's early vicissitudes to those experienced by Óláfr Tryggvason.⁵⁰ After the death of King Sverrir in 1202 he is succeeded by his son Hákon, who survives for only a year. That is, however, time enough for him to beget a child with a woman named Inga in eastern Norway, and she gives birth to the future King Hákon Hákonarson. During his childhood he is cared for by a series of important figures, but, given his qualifications for the royal succession, it is something of a miracle that he is allowed to live, just as it was a miracle that Óláfr Tryggvason survived his infancy.

In the meantime Ingi Bárðarson becomes the king of the Birkibeinar and a certain Erlingr steinveggr (stonewall) is acclaimed as king of the Baglar. The great conflict between Birkibeinar and Baglar continues unabated until King Ingi dies in 1217. At this point the succession issue becomes pressing once more. It is, however, not the ongoing warfare between Birkibeinar and Baglar that interests Sturla Þórðarson; his narrative remains focused on the survival of the boy Hákon and the court intrigues surrounding him. Military history is passed over in favor of political and diplomatic history, especially the

electioneering that will determine whether Ingi is to be succeeded by his son Gutþormr, by his brother Skúli, or by the boy Hákon. Hákon's faction prevails and he is acclaimed king, but the fighting continues, with Skúli working behind the scenes to assert his claim. A compromise is eventually reached, and Skúli is granted one third of Norway, but will continue to agitate until his death in 1240.

Once Hákon has been accepted as king, he must nonetheless confront challenges in the east. He is able to make peace and an alliance with the Baglar, but factions known as Slittungar and Ribbungar rise up in their place. Hákon (or leaders acting in his name) wages a steady campaign against them down to 1227, but it is remarkable how little space is devoted to battle action, in contrast to *Sverris saga*. Only 8 of the first 143 chapters (5.5%) report such action, and they do so only in the briefest terms. A few examples will suffice to illustrate the point. At Gunnarsbær near Túnsgberg the Baglar under the command of Arnbjörn Jónsson marshal a force of 400 men against a force of 500 Slittungar. The action is described as follows:⁵¹

There was a hard battle, and there were losses on both sides, but many more among the Slittungar. Beni [the leader of the Slittungar] was on horseback and not in the battle. Arnbjörn was wounded; he was speared in the neck beneath the ear. Reverend Andrés was wounded in the cheek. When he got that wound, he flung down his shield. He was a very strong man. He took the shield in his left hand and warded them off, and with his right hand he killed everyone [in his way] with a sword called Skarði, an excellent sword. Arnbjörn plunged in and aimed at the standard of the Slittungar. Þorbjörn of Lumalond fell there, as well as his brother Helgi. More than 140 men fell there, and all of the surviving Slittungar fled. Beni got away without much credit.

The description of the battle between the Birkibeinar and the Ribbungar at Íkornahólmar is equally spare:⁵²

The Ribbungar got their ships up to Mjørs (Mjøsa) and sought out the Birkibeinar across the lake. Their king Sigurðr [son of Erlingr steinveggr] was in command together with many troop leaders. They encountered the Birkibeinar at the place called Íkornahólmar, and there was a battle. The Ribbungar had more numerous forces and were

very aggressive. But the Birkibeinar resisted stoutly, and the result was that the Birkibeinar won the victory while the Ribbungar fled.

A final example comes from a battle fought by the farmers of Heiðmörk against the Ribbungar;⁵³

And where the district leaders were located, and the most substantial levy, they rode to the place where they saw the largest number of Ribbungar. The man who carried the farmers' standard was named Jón sandhafri, and he was a valiant man. He rode with such a lack of restraint that he fell before the troops had formed up, and a number of men with him. When the farmers saw their fallen men, they turned tail so that everyone was on his own. The Ribbungar pursued them, killing as many as they could, and when they got to the northern settlements, they assembled forces once again. It proved to be the case, as the saying goes, that it is hard to stop a man in flight. Some two or three times the farmers fell into formation, but when they saw the great number of Ribbungar, they retreated. The more frightened the farmers were, the bolder the Ribbungar became. After that the Birkibeinar were on their own, and Bishop Hallvarðr went to the Ribbungar and secured a truce for the farmers with them. The king's men headed west across the lake to Þótn and from there to Túnsberg.

These are the fullest battle descriptions I have been able to find in the first 143 chapters down to the consolidation of Hákon's rule. They stand in vivid contrast to the fully articulated battle sequences in *Sverris saga*, complete with marching or sailing routes, intended strategies, troop numbers and deployments, almost obligatory speeches, and details of the action as it unfolds. The question we might pose is why the military coverage in these two sagas about Norwegian strife should differ so sharply. The brevity of the battle descriptions in *Hákonar saga* cannot be explained by Sturla Þórðarson's disinclination to write battle narratives; his detailed accounts of the Battles of Örlygsstaðir and Flugumýrr in *Íslendinga saga* prove the contrary.⁵⁴ The answer must be that no such materials were available to him in Norway. Either the decades that had elapsed since the rise and fall of the Ribbungar had erased the detailed memories of the battles or the style of history writing had changed. The latter supposition

is attractive because the decades in question cover the period of bureaucratization and diplomatic initiatives in Norway, a period in which history would have been refocused away from military and toward administrative concerns.⁵⁵ It seems quite likely that *Hákonar saga* reflects this altered perspective.

3. Echoes of Norwegian Warfare in Northern Iceland

Having reviewed the battlefield style in the accounts of the dynastic struggles in Norway, we may now cast a glance back at *Valla-Ljóts saga*. We should remind ourselves first of all that native Icelandic sagas are based predominantly on native oral traditions, both the content and, in all probability, the narrative form.⁵⁶ To the extent that these sagas reflect any influence from more recent Norwegian contacts, this influence is likely to have been superficial. There are nonetheless some aspects of *Valla-Ljóts saga* that recall the preoccupations of twelfth-century Norway. I suggested above that the Norwegian experience as described in *Sverris saga* could have rubbed off on the composition of *Heimskringla* I (p. 81). That sort of influence would have been less pronounced in the native sagas, but there may be wisps of resemblance all the same. *Valla-Ljóts saga* is cast as a contest over leadership, and that is the gist of the dynastic struggles in Norway. The leadership contest is twofold. In the case of Halli Sigurðarson it is construed as an overt challenge to the leadership in a neighboring valley, Svarfaðardalr. Halli is fully apprised of the strong leadership in this area, but he not only moves in without license but also makes a point of provoking the chieftain. He could be compared to the claimants or pretenders in the kings' sagas. We have seen that in the kings' sagas such upstarts are almost always destined to be killed, and that is Halli's fate as well.

The more central conflict is between the local chieftain in Svarfaðardalr, Valla-Ljótr, and the great chieftain in Eyjafjarðardalr, Guðmundr the Powerful. This contest is cast in entirely different terms; it is governed by equal parts of self-respect and deference, and the two chieftains emerge with reputations intact. This is less reminiscent of the initial rivalries in Norway than it is of the final peace accords between the Birkibeinar and Baglar or the Birkibeinar and Ribbungar. The contests are generally speaking about status, about who will emerge victorious and who will fail. The campaign

for success can be motivated by overweening ambition, as in Halli's case, or by prudent restraint as in the case of Ljótr and Guðmundr. The contrast between these two poles may in fact suggest the theme of the saga, a deliberate opposition between destructive ambition and constructive negotiation that opens the way for an acceptable distribution of power. It is clear that the authorial stance favors peace, and that may very well have been the sentiment of many Icelanders with respect to the civil turmoil in Norway.

There is also a territorial element in *Valla-Ljóts saga*, a feature not replicated in the other sagas about early Icelanders. The theme is particularly evident in a conversation between Halli and Guðmundr arguing the respective merits of Svarfaðardalr and Eyjafjarðardalr. Territorial questions are also touched on in the Norwegian dynastic struggles, which constantly revolve around the question of who will control the most important centers of gravity in different regions, Haraldr gilli in Bergen, King Sverrir in Trondheim, and the Baglar and Ribbungar in the east. The contest in determining what leader will be allotted which portion persists down to the pages of *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*; Skúli jarl lays claim to half of Norway but gets only a third. The kings' sagas never discuss the relative merits of these regions, but human nature may persuade us that Norwegians no less than Icelanders may have been subject to local patriotism.

Similar tonalities can be found in *Víga-Glúms saga*.⁵⁷ It is longer and more biographical than *Valla-Ljóts saga*, recapitulating the career of one northern chieftain from his distinguished ancestry down to his death. Briefly stated, it is about Glúmr's emergence from obscurity, the establishment of his credentials in his district, and his management of his chieftainship over forty years. It is a story of unlikely beginnings, not because of geographic remoteness as in King Sverrir's youth on the Faroe Islands, but because of apparently limited capacities. Glúmr grows up as a rather slow, unenterprising, taciturn boy with no interest in local business. He gives every sign of being a retarded youth. But, as in Sverrir's case, much is made of his ancestry since he is a descendant of the famous colonist Helgi magri (the Lean), who is in turn the son of an Irish princess. Glúmr's father Eyjólfur maintains the lineage by distinguishing himself in Norway and marrying the daughter of a Norwegian hersir. Glúmr's mother is therefore a woman of high standing.

Despite his unpromising boyhood Glúmr nonetheless makes his way in Norway, as his father did, and returns to Iceland still as a teenager to take up the cudgel against neighbors who are trying to dispossess his mother on a false legal pretext. Having killed one and exiled the other, he becomes fully established, to the point that his enemies, the Espheðingar, find it unlikely that they can prevail against him in the competition for status (ÍF 9:32). As in *Valla-Ljóts saga*, the theme from this point on is leadership, and the way stands open for Glúmr (ÍF 9:35): “Glúmr now gained great esteem in the district.”

The action is not confined to the home district. Glúmr marries his daughter to the chieftain in the next district to the east, Skúta Áskelsson, but the marriage does not succeed and Skúta divorces her. This leads to permanent hostility between the two chieftains and the two districts, and an attempt on Skúta’s part to ambush and kill Glúmr. The action culminates in an armed confrontation between two rival forces, but the topography prevents an actual battle. The personal hostility thus escalates into a territorial clash. Glúmr continues to prevail in his own district, more often by guile than by force of arms, with the result that *Víga-Glúms saga* is the closest thing to a picaresque story that we find among the sagas. Glúmr eventually overplays his hand and is forced off his land and obliged to move to a new home in Hørgardalr. Here too a territorial conflict ensues with Glúmr pitted against the chieftains in his former region, Guðmundr and Einarr, the sons of Eyjólfr. The result is another standoff.

The saga as a whole is about the qualities of a leader and a competition for preeminence. That theme is stated explicitly in the conclusion (ÍF 9:98):

It is said that Glúmr was for twenty years the greatest chieftain in Eyjafjørðr, and for another twenty years there was none more than his equal. It is also said that Glúmr was the most outstanding warrior in this country. Here ends the saga of Glúmr.

The sagas are not generally about competition for leadership, with the possible exception of *Eyrbyggja saga*, but that theme seems pinpointed and concentrated in Eyjafjørðr. If we look for some sort of precedent, it cannot be found in the native Icelandic sagas. More comparable are the kings’ sagas beginning with *Sverris saga*; they display a record of

repeated challenges to leadership, a competitive evaluation of armed valor and strategic skill, and alternations of regional focus.

The third saga from the north, according to Jónas Kristjánsson perhaps from Reykjadalr to the east of Eyjafjörðr, is *Reykðæla saga*.⁵⁸ It was probably written a short time after *Víga-Glúms saga* because it appears to have borrowed an episode from the latter.⁵⁹ It stands apart from the other native sagas in several respects. With the exception of the loan from *Víga-Glúms saga* it has no literary connections and gives every indication of being drawn exclusively from oral traditions, which left their mark in the form of references to oral sources and some uncertainty about alternative versions of the story. Compared to many sagas, the composition is ungainly and the narrative difficult to follow because it is made up of individual episodes that are not effectively correlated with one another. This is particularly true of the first and larger part of the saga, which is a story of repeated conflicts held together only by the salutary interventions of the chieftain Áskell Eyvindarson.

In this part of the saga Áskell is the clear protagonist. He also emerges as a model chieftain, a tireless negotiator, and a steady, even self-sacrificing, advocate of peace. To this extent *Reykðæla saga* too is about leadership, this time moral leadership in contrast to the competitive and sometimes questionable political leadership qualities exhibited by Víga-Glúmr. The moral focus of the text is overt. At the very outset the reader is told that Áskell is “the justest of men in negotiated settlements” (ÍF 10:153). This praise is confirmed not only by Áskell’s actions but also by the opinion of men in the district. A certain Hávarðr proposes that a dispute be submitted to Áskell “as should all other disputes” (ÍF 10:154). Soon thereafter a potential litigant states that he knows that Áskell would never pursue an unjust cause (ÍF 10:158). Finally, the author concurs in his own words (ÍF 10:171): “Áskell always demonstrated that he resembled few others with respect to the justice that he exercised among men and his decency [*drengskapr*] toward all.” Accordingly, when he dies, he is judged to have been a “great and popular chieftain” (ÍF 10:202).

The second part of the saga recounts events in the next generation, notably the attempts of Áskell’s son Skúta to avenge him. Skúta’s personality is quite different from his father’s, and he makes his mark chiefly by being a redoubtable adversary. His obituary is therefore

more mixed than his father's (ÍF 10:243): "And still it can only be said of him that he was an intelligent man and a great warrior, and many men were no better than his equals, though they thought highly of themselves, but not everyone thought that he was an equitable man. This is now the end of the story." Skúta is not credited with the qualities of a chieftain, neither is he disparaged. That makes it difficult to argue that the saga is designed to show contrasting sides of a moral coin. Áskell nonetheless stands out as a uniquely positive chieftain figure. His closest rivals are perhaps Ljótr Ljótolfsson and Guðmundr the Powerful in *Valla-Ljóts saga*, but they are not as fully portrayed. We might therefore conclude that, despite his awkward management of the narrative, the author raises the inquiry into the nature of leadership to a more abstract level.

The fullest and most interesting discussion of leadership can be found in *Ljósvetninga saga*, which can be dated with some plausibility to the 1220s.⁶⁰ It seems most likely to have been written in Eyjafjörðr, but it exhibits a strong bias in favor of the people around Ljósavatn to the east of Eyjafjörðr. Like *Reykðæla saga* it spans two generations, the first dominated by the great chieftain Guðmundr the Powerful and the second by his son Eyjólfur. Unlike *Reykðæla saga* the story does not celebrate a chieftain but formulates a quite devastating critique of a chieftain in the person of Guðmundr the Powerful. The criticism appears in particularly concentrated form in the semi-independent stories that form a part of the saga.

These stories are sometimes considered not to have been part of the original composition and to have been interpolated at a later date, but they accord so well with Guðmundr's characterization elsewhere in the saga that there is no reason to separate them. The first story ("Sorla þátr") tells of a young man who asks for the hand of Guðmundr's daughter and is rejected.⁶¹ The unfortunate suitor appeals to a certain Þórarinn Nefjólfsson (also known from *Óláfs saga helga*) for help, and Þórarinn is able to prevail on Guðmundr with a satirically thick application of flattery that shows just how compromised this great chieftain is by personal vanity. The second story ("Ófeigs þátr") tells how Guðmundr imposes on his constituents ("thingmen") by visiting them for a whole week with thirty followers and thirty horses, thus seriously straining their resources.⁶² They appeal to a chieftain in the east (Ófeigr), and he devises the scheme of visiting Guðmundr with the

same numerous retinue for a week to let him appreciate the burden of such a visit. Guðmundr takes the point with considerable displeasure.

The third story is rather longer and more complicated, involving a series of legal and antagonistic maneuvers in which Guðmundr is bested and shown to be a coward.⁶³ The conclusion is that his opponent Þorkell Geitisson, whom Guðmundr thought he could sweep aside with his left hand, “captured all the honor.” Another of his opponents dramatizes his defeat to his face with a stinging metaphor:⁶⁴

It seems to me, Guðmundr, that you had to use both your right and left hand against my kinsman Þorkell, and you didn’t manage even so. And I still remember, Guðmundr, when I asked you to reconcile me with Þorkell, that nobody gave me a meaner answer than you; you said that he was only half a real man and had only an ordinary ax in hand while I had a stout pike on a long shaft. I am a lesser chieftain than you, but it seems to me that it didn’t take him long to make up the difference between ax and pike.

This rebuke summarizes Guðmundr’s character: he has the status but not the stuff of a chieftain. Indeed, most of the “lesser chieftains” with whom he contends prove to be his superiors.

A general assessment of Guðmundr’s character emerges from a comparison with his brother:⁶⁵ “The brothers Einarr and Guðmundr were on poor terms with each other because Guðmundr lorded it over men there in the north.” Guðmundr’s vanity and self-promotion are revealed, somewhat involuntarily, in the flattery heaped on him by Þórarinn Nefjólfsson:⁶⁶ “Because you oversee the welfare of the countryside (at þú sér fyrir landsbyggðin), you are unwilling that a grandson should be born to such a mighty man as you.” This (somewhat opaque) compliment implies that it is a chieftain’s duty to act on behalf of his district, but Guðmundr clearly acts more in his own self-interest.

As a result there are abundant indications that he is not a popular chieftain, and the remainder of his story illustrates just how unpopular he is. The rumor is circulated that he is homosexual, a particularly damaging accusation in Old Icelandic culture. But it is almost surely authorial slander since the accusation is never echoed in the many

references to Guðmundr in other sagas. The balance of the narrative relates how he avenges the charge by exiling one accuser and killing another. But in the process he shows himself once more to lack the prowess for direct confrontation. He either relies on the counsel of others to avoid a trial of arms or he uses his men as shields when it comes to an armed encounter. The sagas are fond of describing heroics and heroes, but Guðmundr is not among them.

In the next generation his son Eyjólfur is described as more stalwart in arms but similarly arrogant. The story begins with his inequitable treatment of his brother Koðrán, whom he forces from their homestead. As a consequence he is directly characterized as “arrogant” by Koðrán’s foster father (ÍF 10:62), and he proves to be equally inflexible in his other dealings. A legal dispute escalates into a large-scale regional conflict in which the people of Eyjafjörðr and the people in the east around Ljósavatn confront each other in a regular battle involving large numbers. In this conflict it is the chieftain of the overmatched Ljósvetningar, Þorvarðr Höskuldsson, who is credited with heroic dimensions. He is introduced as an aging man, but despite personal tensions in his camp he is able to hold his own because of his strong character. His first appearance is rather perfunctory (ÍF 10:62): “He was the head of the Ljósvetningar. He was a wise and even-tempered man, well along in years.” But Þorvarðr is much better than this modest introduction would suggest. Although he is in command of a particularly fractious following, he turns out to be decisive and a master of diplomacy, illustrating exactly what a leader should be made of.

Unlike *Reykdæla saga*, in which there is no deliberate comparison of the temporizing chieftain Áskell with the aggressive chieftain Skúta, *Ljósvetninga saga* uses negative and positive paradigms to highlight chieftainly qualities, what chieftains should and should not be. In this respect it is analogous to *Valla-Ljóts saga* but far more explicit about the theme of leadership. Personal courage and valor are required, as well as an authoritative presence, but no less important are resourcefulness, prudence, and a sense of moderation.

It is curious to observe that, apart from these four sagas from the north, district leadership is not an important concern in the native sagas. On the other hand, leadership is central in the kings’ sagas, preeminently in *Sverris saga*. In the sagas covering the earlier twelfth

century the emphasis is more on leadership failure, increasingly so as time goes on and the contenders put forward prove to be either bogus or too young and inexperienced for the role. The royal succession is nonetheless the stage on which leadership was tested and, as *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* document, the Icelanders were well aware of the twelfth-century experience in strife-torn Norway. It therefore seems possible that the Norwegian wars were at least a contributing factor, along with Icelandic traditions, in the saga depiction of civil tensions in northern Iceland.

The point here is not to argue that the kings' sagas exerted a literary influence on the native sagas of Eyjafjörðr but that the Norwegian conflicts of the twelfth and early thirteenth century could have sharpened Icelandic perceptions of their own political frictions and the role of leadership in these disputes. The echo is particularly perceptible in northern Iceland and much fainter elsewhere in the country. This could be attributable to a particularly intense sea traffic between Norway and Eyjafjörðr and special access in this part of the country to the political disturbances that afflicted Norway down through the early years of Hákon Hákonarson. It is most notably the armed clash between Eyfirðingar and Ljósvetningar that conjures up an association with the partisan confrontations in Norway. The Norwegians seem not to have composed sagas, but they certainly had the stuff of sagas, as the Icelanders vividly demonstrated. It seems unlikely that the Icelanders would have absorbed and reworked this political drama without in some way being affected by it. The drama may not have had a strong impact on the substance of Icelandic history, but it certainly may have influenced how the Icelanders thought about their history. We saw in Chapter 4 that early Icelandic history writing (Ari) may have had some influence on how Norwegian history was formulated in *Heimskringla*, but it is equally conceivable that contemporary Norwegian history in the civil war period may have had some formative influence on the shape of the thirteenth-century sagas in Iceland, at least in the Eyjafjörðr region.

