

## CHAPTER 6

### A Historical Mirage

#### *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*

For when lenity and cruelty play for a kingdom, the gentler gamester is the soonest winner. (Shakespeare, *Henry V*, Act 3, Scene 6)

We are better informed about the circumstances under which *Hákonar saga* was written than in the case of any other king's saga. The so-called "Formáli" (preface) included in the great compilation known as *Sturlunga saga* tells us that the most important and fullest text in that collection, *Íslendinga saga*, was the work of Sturla Þórðarson:<sup>1</sup>

Most all the saga events that occurred here in Iceland before Bishop Brandr Sæmundarson died [1201] had been written down, but those saga events that occurred later had not been written down very much before the poet Sturla Þórðarson recounted "*Íslendinga sögur*" (the sagas of Icelanders). For this purpose he had the insights of wise men from his early days and to some extent from writings contemporary with the men who figure in the sagas. He himself was able to witness and learn of many matters that were major events in his lifetime. We rely on his telling with respect to intelligence and trustworthiness, because I knew him to be very wise and moderate.

This same Sturla Þórðarson is also identified as the author of *Hákonar saga* (see below). He was the (illegitimate) son of Þórðr Sturluson, who was one of the three most important Sturlung brothers along with Snorri Sturluson and Sighvatr Sturluson, who dominated the first four decades of the thirteenth century in Iceland. Sturla spent some of his early years with his uncle Snorri, and he too became a prolific

poet and saga writer.<sup>2</sup> In addition to *Hákonar saga* and *Íslendinga saga* he edited a version of *Landnámabók* known as *Sturlubók*. He also wrote a saga about Hákon's son and successor Magnús lagabætir, of which only a fragment survives; he is sometimes credited with other books, though with less certainty.<sup>3</sup> *Hákonar saga* is dated very precisely between 1263 and 1265 because a passage in the saga states that the book was written when Hákon's successor, King Magnús, had ruled for two years (ÍF 32:159). *Íslendinga saga* is thought to have been written rather later, closer to 1280.<sup>4</sup>

The writing of *Hákonar saga* was commissioned not by King Hákon himself but by his son Magnús. The circumstances are related in a short, ten-page text titled "Sturlu þátttr" and included in *Sturlunga saga* (II, 227–36). We are told that when King Hákon was out of the country campaigning in Scotland, Sturla learned that his son Magnús was now in charge of Norway. He fears the enmity of King Hákon and thinks that his chances might be better with Magnús.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly he sails to Bergen, but Magnús gives him less than a cordial reception, promising only to refrain from killing him, then deciding that Sturla should accompany him on a voyage south.

The first night the crewmen cast about for some entertainment, and Sturla accommodates them by reciting an otherwise unknown story called "Huldar saga." The crewmen crowd about and give the recital a warm reception. In the meantime Magnús's queen Ingilborg, who is Danish by birth, becomes aware of what is afoot. The following day she sends for Sturla and asks him to perform an encore. He proceeds to recite much of the day, earning another enthusiastic response. Under the queen's influence Magnús's icy attitude begins to thaw and he allows Sturla to recite a poem in honor of King Hákon. This too gets a warm reception and Magnús goes so far as to say (II, 234): "I think you declaim better than the pope." Sturla is now allowed to make his case, and Magnús becomes reconciled. He promises to take Sturla's part when King Hákon returns, and harmony is restored. Magnús includes Sturla in his close consultations and "assigned him the task of composing the saga of his father King Hákon, according to his own lights and the account of the wisest men" (II, 234). A direct confrontation with King Hákon is avoided because the news is received that the king has died in Orkney.

Partly because of the praise accorded him in the "Formáli,"

partly because of the literary and diplomatic skills attributed to him in “Sturlu þáttir,” and partly because of his persistent neutrality in *Íslendinga saga*, Sturla Þórðarson has acquired a special reputation as a trustworthy narrator. If we add to these acknowledgments the fact that *Hákonar saga* is a record of recent events and appears to be based on first-hand testimony, it will come as no surprise that this saga has sometimes been considered the most historically reliable of all the kings’ sagas.<sup>6</sup> The text may in fact be quite reliable with respect to such matters as chronology and the identity of the persons involved in the action. But we will see that there are reasons to suspect a far-reaching bias and partisanship in the depiction of King Hákon’s character and his relationship with the Icelanders. The often proclaimed neutrality of *Íslendinga saga* may not be a quality transferable to *Hákonar saga* for the simple reason that the latter, like *Sverris saga*, was written on royal commission and was subject to royal approval.<sup>7</sup>

*Hákonar saga* and *Íslendinga saga* are not comparable works. One served political interests, but the other looks more like a personal memoir. Memoirs are of course also subject to bias and partisanship, but *Íslendinga saga* does not seem to have the political one-sidedness that we find in *Hákonar saga*. Ármann Jakobsson has argued that Sturla Þórðarson conceived of *Íslendinga saga* as a deterrent to the internecine strife that bedeviled Iceland in the thirteenth century.<sup>8</sup> That is certainly a possible reading, but it seems less palpable than the idealization of King Hákon in *Hákonar saga*. *Íslendinga saga* seems to accept bloodshed as a fact of contemporary history, but *Hákonar saga* stands in almost militant opposition to bloodshed.

Before considering this contradiction we should take note of the fact that these two sagas are compositionally antithetical. We saw in previous chapters that the sagas about early Icelanders and the kings’ sagas are constructed in different ways. The former recapitulate serial confrontations culminating in a dramatic resolution. *Valla-Ljóts saga* outlines Halli Sigurðarson’s challenge to the local leadership and death, then works up to a tense face-off between the great chieftains Guðmundr ríki and Ljótr Ljótólfsson. *Víga-Glúms saga* recounts Glúmr Eyjólfsson’s rise to chieftainly status and his contentions with both local and extraterritorial neighbors. In *Reykðæla saga*, on the other hand, Áskell Eyvindarson’s role is not to provoke conflict but to resolve differences with chieftainly diplomacy, but he nonetheless



succumbs to wounds inflicted in an armed encounter. *Ljósvetninga saga* is largely about the discountenancing of the chieftain Guðmundr ríki and the counterbalancing vengeance he takes against three successive antagonists. All four of these stories are seen in terms of overt conflict and personal status. The action of Sturla Þórðarson's *Íslendinga saga* is cast similarly as a series of preliminary battles at Víðines, Helgastaðir, Hólar, on Grímsey, at Gillastaðir, at Sauðafell, in Hundadalr, at Bær, and at Skálaholt, all leading up to the cataclysmic battle at Örlygsstaðir. This too is a story of mounting tensions and a memorable finale.

If Sturla had chosen this type of structure for *Hákonar saga*, he would have focused more intently on the conflict between Hákon and Skúli, but we have seen that the kings' sagas subscribe to a different sense of form. They are either chronologically constructed (Ari, Sæmundr, the synoptics, and the great compilations) or they are biographically organized (the sagas of Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson and *Sverris saga*). In *Hákonar saga* Sturla Þórðarson chose, or was commissioned to elect, the biographical option in imitation of *Sverris saga*. This was the logical solution because Hákon had the longest reign of any medieval Norwegian king (46 years), and there was no dearth of narrative material. Within the biographical frame the ordering is explicitly chronological; Sturla systematically notes the passage of each year during Hákon's reign. He was also destined to carry a chronological consciousness over to *Íslendinga saga*, which is more rigorously chronological than the sagas about early Icelanders.

The chronological structure makes it easier to summarize the action phase by phase. The saga tells us a great deal about Hákon's birth and childhood, inspired no doubt by the story of Óláfr Tryggvason's imperiled infancy, to which it refers specifically (ÍF 31:176). The story then turns to the political contest for the throne. It is not at all clear why Hákon emerges as the favored candidate. His faction, the Birkibeinar, seems to have been stronger than the other factions, but an explanation of their superiority is not provided.<sup>9</sup> After his installation in 1217 he must contend with dissident groups in the east, the Baglar and Slittungar, but since he is very young (born in 1204), the military action must have been largely in the hands of field commanders. Another group of dissidents, the Ribbungar, must be



dealt with between 1218 and 1227, but that threat dissipates when their leader dies. Hákon would now appear to be secure, were it not for the presence of Skúli Bárðarson, the brother of the deceased king Ingi Bárðarson, and a strong opposition candidate for the throne.

An uncomfortable relationship between Hákon and Skúli persists down to Skúli's death in 1240. This relationship is one of the more problematical features of the saga. An attempt is made to manage the potential conflict by making Skúli a jarl (ÍF 31:190), by giving him a third of Norway (ÍF 31:267), and by arranging a marriage engagement between Hákon and Skúli's daughter Margréta (ÍF 31:227), but there is continuing friction. It has been pointed out that the author of the saga was in a delicate position because his patron, King Magnús, was the son of King Hákon but also the son-in-law of Jarl Skúli.<sup>10</sup> The author therefore needed to tread a fine line in finding a way to authenticate Hákon's position and status without detracting too obviously from Skúli's standing. He does so by claiming that the two men got on well as long as they were together, but that when they were separated, evil men availed themselves of the opportunity to draw them apart with slander (ÍF 32:18, 32, 52). The reader is left with the sense that this explanation involves the understating of a quite troubled relationship and that Skúli probably never abandoned his claim to the throne. He maintains secret communications with foreign powers that are never explained (e.g., ÍF 31:199). Ultimately he reasserts his claim and takes up arms, only to be defeated and killed by the Birkibeinar.

Although Skúli eventually succumbs, it is clear that the author allows for no hint of personal animosity between Hákon and Skúli. Hákon is not present at Skúli's killing, as the text carefully specifies, and that appears to be part of Sturla's overall policy of preserving the king from any involvement in killing whatsoever. He does not commit killings in battle and is in fact kept rather remote from the battlefield in general. His role is to issue commands, not to engage in the fray. Nor does he order executions, with one particularly significant exception (ÍF 31:316). On this occasion he orders that one of the Birkibeinar be executed because he has been *óspakr* (undisciplined), perhaps guilty of pillaging. It is this episode that prompted the epigraph at the beginning of the present chapter, words taken from a scene in which Shakespeare's Henry V approves the hanging of Bardolph because he has plundered a church object (Act III, Scene V):

We would have all such offenders so cut off: and we give express charge that in our marches through the country there be nothing compelled from the villages, nothing taken but paid for, none of the French upbraided or abused in disdainful language; for when lenity and cruelty play for a kingdom, the gentler gamester is the soonest winner.

King Henry's point is not to alienate the civilian population in an area where military actions are being conducted. We will see that this is one of the underlying themes in *Hákonar saga* as well. Sturla makes only this single exception to his idealized portrait of a merciful king, but the exception serves to emphasize that Hákon is dedicated to the protection of his civilian population. He therefore incurs no blame.

Far from being guilty of bloodshed, Hákon is described time and again as being eager to grant *gríð* (amnesty), especially if it is requested. His role is not to kill but to pardon, and this propensity is recorded ten times.<sup>11</sup> His inclination to spare lives extends to Iceland as well. When Sturla Sighvatsson visits him in 1234 and discusses the unification of Iceland, Hákon is distressed by the news of unrest and urges moderation (ÍF 32:25): "The king said that the country should not be won at the cost of killing and advised him [Sturla] to capture men and send them abroad or appropriate their territory by other means if he could." When Snorri Sturluson's son Órækja visits the Norwegian court with more news of unrest, the king expresses the fear that Sturla has proceeded more aggressively than the king had advised (ÍF 32:36). The saga makes it sound as though Hákon takes a deeper interest in the safety of the Icelanders than the Icelanders themselves.

Hákon's compassionate outlook is also emphasized on the occasion of Snorri Sturluson's killing in 1241. When Snorri's son Órækja appears before the king in 1242, Hákon forgives him for leaving Norway without royal permission, but he adds that because of his disobedience he deserves to die more than his father Snorri did. He goes on to say that "his father would not have died if he had come to meet with me" (ÍF 32:119). The king's words raise difficulties. In the first place, Hákon, who is consistently described as being averse to execution and regularly avoids it, does not hesitate to discuss the option in this passage. In the second place, we know from a passage in *Íslendinga saga* (I, 453) that King Hákon sent letters to Iceland

specifying that Snorri should either be sent to Norway or be killed. In other words, he orders an execution unless Snorri does his bidding. It is part of the cleansing of Hákon's image that this information is suppressed in *Hákonar saga*. In the latter source the responsibility for Snorri's killing is shifted to his political enemies in Iceland. *Hákonar saga* states in so many words that Gizurr Þorvaldsson is the killer (ÍF 32:119): "That same autumn Gizurr Þorvaldsson killed Snorri Sturluson at Reykjaholt in Iceland." It seems that the reader is being put off the scent and that King Hákon is being cleared of guilt.<sup>12</sup>

This possibility raises the question whether King Hákon's mercy is more an authorial stance than a reality. The stance is reinforced by the repeated instances of amnesty and the fact that the king's merciful outlook is not entirely shared by Jarl Skúli. Hákon is kept aloof from the fighting, and on the one occasion on which he seems closest to the fighting, his compassion is specifically noted (ÍF 32:107):

As fierce as King Hákon had been during the day in destroying his enemies, it was no less exceptional how merciful he was afterward in the granting of amnesty to all those who submitted to his authority.

The saga also reminds us that he enacted his mercy in revisions of the law (ÍF 32:265): "He put an end to all killings and foot-hewing within the country, and hand-hewings as well, unless there was adequate justification." Although Hákon is merciful in both policy and practice, Skúli is not exempted to the same extent. He can be present at killings (e.g., ÍF 31:244, 246), or he orders killings (e.g., ÍF 31:253; ÍF 32:55). In one case he hangs a man (ÍF 31:271) and in a particularly egregious case his followers, the Várbelgir, grant a man amnesty and then kill him anyway (ÍF 32:56).

It is only Hákon who is completely exonerated, but can we believe that he is as irreproachable as he appears? Or is his carefully managed portrait a retrospective improvement on a more mixed original? We can be quite sure that Hákon bears at least partial responsibility for Snorri Sturluson's death and, harking back to "Sturlu þátrr," we might ask why Sturla Þórðarson was so apprehensive about appearing before Hákon if the king was in fact so reliably merciful. He has been seen as a steady advocate of peace, but perhaps the saga makes the point a little too insistently in order to obscure the real Hákon.



King Hákon was not the sort of peaceable stay-at-home exemplified by Óláfr kyrri at the end of the eleventh century. On the contrary, he seems to have conducted a very vigorous, even aggressive, foreign policy. He raised large armies against Denmark and Sweden, but had the good fortune to arrive at settlements before it came to armed conflict. He reached out to the Holy Roman Empire and Spain as no previous Norwegian monarch had done. He organized a huge fleet to reconquer the Celtic possessions that the notoriously aggressive Magnús berfœttr had annexed around 1100 (ÍF 32:257). Despite the protestations of peace, it seems quite clear that Iceland was also on Hákon's territorial wish list.<sup>13</sup>

If Hákon's portrait appears in a sanitized version in his saga, we may ask who is responsible for the retrospective idealization. There is some reason to suspect that it is not the work of Sturla Þórðarson, not only because of the hostile relationship described in "Sturlu þáttur" but also because we can evaluate Sturla's writing practices from his other large book, *Íslendinga saga*. The style of this latter book is anything but idealizing. It is a notoriously sanguinary account of the conflicts in Iceland in the thirteenth century and is unsparing in its depiction of violence. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson famously tried to relativize the violence by emphasizing the cultural achievement of the Sturlung Age. He noted the estimate of 350 killings in the period and found that number not inordinate.<sup>14</sup> But the recurrent descriptions of how men are dragged out of their houses or otherwise captured and then maimed or executed in cold blood are truly chilling. There are 42 such scenes in *Íslendinga saga* with a total loss of life amounting to 76 and no attempt at extenuation.<sup>15</sup> This practice is so contrary to the authorial stance in *Hákonar saga* that we might well wonder whether the same author is at work, but it seems certain that both books were written by Sturla Þórðarson.

The answer to the puzzle can be extrapolated from a paper by Ólafía Einarsdóttir (note 7), who observed that the composition of *Hákonar saga* is likely to have been influenced by a changed political outlook under King Magnús and a retreat from the expansionist ambitions of King Hákon. The true "friðarkonungur" (peace-loving king), to use Ármann Jakobsson's term, may have been King Magnús rather than his father, although Magnús, at the age of 25, may have been too young to bear the sole responsibility for a historical reorientation.

His circle may have had an interest not only in idealizing the recently deceased Hákon but also in projecting a more peaceful policy into the recent past so as to give Norwegian foreign policy overall an air of consistency.

The influence of the court circle on the composition of *Hákonar saga* would in any case have been considerable. Although Sturla had composed at least one poem about King Hákon and would have learned something about his activities from relatives and visiting Norwegians in Iceland, he was newly arrived in Norway in 1263 and would have been entirely dependent on his Norwegian contacts for the details of his narrative.<sup>16</sup> The saga text contains a host of place names and personal names that would have been unfamiliar to him in advance. It seems unlikely that this detailed information would have been transmitted to him without also transmitting a political outlook. The orientation of the text must therefore be as much the work of the court as of the author. As “Sturlu þátrr” tells us, Sturla had gone to great pains to ingratiate himself at court, and it is unlikely that he would have squandered this effort by adopting an unapproved perspective in his formulation of Hákon’s life.

A Norwegian and royalist outlook would have been nothing novel in the succession of kings’ sagas. Such an orientation had begun with *Sverris saga* in 1185–88, some eighty years earlier. *Sverris saga* is quoted in *Hákonar saga* (ÍF 32:91), was read to Hákon on his deathbed (ÍF 32:262), and is generally thought to be the most proximate model for *Hákonar saga*.<sup>17</sup> The later saga differs from its model by devoting more space to Hákon’s birth and childhood and holding him more aloof from the fighting, but it has the same exclusive focus on a royal protagonist and the same interest in promoting an exaggeratedly positive image of him.

We have seen that *Fagrskinna* from ca. 1225 is an equally telling example of a Norwegian focus. It looks like a direct response to the Icelandic orientation in *Morkinskinna*, which is peopled by a large number of Icelandic figures whose presence sometimes compromises the Norwegian king. In *Fagrskinna*, on the other hand, there is a virtual exclusion of Icelanders despite the citation of over 250 Icelandic skaldic stanzas. We saw above (p. 66) that there is in fact just one reference to the Icelanders in a comment on the poems they presented to King Haraldr harðráði (ÍF 29:261). Although the author

made use of as many as nine Icelandic prose accounts, he mentions none of them.

Not only does the author of *Fagrskinna* suppress these sources, but we may remind ourselves that he is at pains to make the Norwegian kings better than they were in the Icelandic originals (pp. 67–69). Haraldr hárfagri is freed from the charges of tyranny that haunt him in *Heimskringla* and *Egils saga*. Eiríkr blóðøx's cognomen is explained not from the fratricide attributed to him elsewhere but from a more neutral viking activity. In other sources Hákon góði is criticized for his participation in a heathen sacrificial ritual in Möerr, but in *Fagrskinna* his participation is characterized only as an expression of good will (ÍF 29:80). *Fagrskinna* does not dwell on Hákon jarl's paganism and suppresses the ugly details of his death in a pigsty. In the story of Óláfr Tryggvason the author draws on Oddr Snorrason's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* but eliminates all the conversion atrocities in that account. Haraldr harðráði, who is deeply problematical in *Morkinskinna*, undergoes a complete transformation. As Gustav Indrebø wrote a hundred years ago: "It is hard to point out an episode or a single sentence that contains anything negative about King Haraldr."<sup>18</sup>

Thus *Hákonar saga* appears to be firmly lodged in a pro-Norwegian, pro-royal tradition going back to *Sverris saga* and *Fagrskinna*. The use of *Sverris saga* is manifest, and if it is true that the "konungatal" that was read to King Hákon on his deathbed should be identified as *Fagrskinna*, then we may guess that such a pro-royal bias was agreeable to the dying king.<sup>19</sup> The preference for a Norwegian perspective could very well have revived in *Hákonar saga* and served to exalt the monarch even above the level reached in *Sverris saga* and *Fagrskinna*. To what extent Hákon really deserves the designation "friðarkonungur" is hard to know, but we can readily believe that he would have been flattered to be seen in this way and that his successor Magnús would have been eager to promote the flattery. The portrait painted in *Hákonar saga* may therefore be less historical than it is unabashedly panegyric.

Icelandic historians and literary historians have naturally taken a special interest in the relationship between King Hákon and the medieval commonwealth of Iceland, to which Hákon put an end in 1262–64. After a period of vigorous disparagement of King Hákon's



perceived aggression against Iceland there followed a revisionist view of the king in an influential paper by Ármann Jakobsson and to some extent in the introductions to the recent Íslenzk fornrit edition of *Hákonar saga* written by Sverrir Jakobsson and Þorleifur Hauksson.<sup>20</sup> These scholars are inclined to make the Icelandic chieftains more accountable for Iceland's submission to Norwegian rule than King Hákon. Thus the historical perspective on Iceland's annexation has changed from an emphasis on external aggression to an emphasis on internal collapse.

Ármann rejects the condemnation of King Hákon common in an earlier generation and provides a reading of *Hákonar saga* that casts Hákon more as an implement of the Icelandic chieftains than as a fomenter of hostilities. He lists the traditional charges against Hákon under five headings (p. 169):

1. That he aimed to acquire rule from the outset and operated for some time in secret.
2. That he provoked hostilities in Iceland to achieve his goals.
3. That he set the Icelandic chieftains against each other.
4. That the Icelanders submitted mistakenly and not from necessity or in concert; in reality they acted against the will of the majority of their countrymen.
5. That the king imposed foreign bishops to smooth the way for his takeover.

Charges 2–4 can be dismissed for lack of hard evidence, but charges 1 and 5 can be supported from the text. Ármann argues that Snorri Sturluson (in 1220) and Sturla Sighvatsson (in 1234) were not sent to Iceland as the king's agents so much as they were motivated by their own ambitions.<sup>21</sup> He also argues that King Hákon does not bear the responsibility for Snorri's killing.<sup>22</sup> He does not devote special attention to the role of the Norwegian bishops in Iceland, but we will see that there are reasons to believe that they were complicit.

I believe that there is still a case to be made for outside aggression on the part of King Hákon, both in terms of historical precedent and from a close reading of *Hákonar saga*. Norwegian kings had long taken a strong hand in Icelandic affairs. Óláfr Tryggvason seems clearly to have been implicated in the conversion of Iceland

to Christianity. Óláfr Haraldsson was notoriously interested in acquiring Iceland, and Adam of Bremen would have us believe that Haraldr Sigurðarson (harðráði) cast an acquisitive eye in the same direction.<sup>23</sup> It was perhaps only the truly peaceable nature of Óláfr kyrri in the late eleventh century and the internal disputing of the Norwegian throne in the twelfth century that deflected the attention of the Norwegian kings from their Atlantic outpost. As soon as the dissensions between Baglar and Birkibeinar were brought under control, Norwegian ambitions abroad were rekindled. That may mean that such ambitions were never really forgotten, and they would surely have been exacerbated by the trade hostilities between Iceland and Norway in the period 1215–20.<sup>24</sup> These troubles persuade Jarl Skúli to send an expedition to Iceland (ÍF 31:229), and he gathers a great fleet, but “the men were very unenthusiastic about the expedition” and Snorri Sturluson tries to dissuade the king (ÍF 31:230). The king, at the age of 17, then delivers a prudent dissent:

“Sir Jarl,” he said, “the intention voiced here during the summer does not appear to the council (*ráðinu*) to be wise, to wit that an army should be dispatched to Iceland, for such a mission seems problematical. That country [Iceland] was settled from here, and our kin and ancestors Christianized the country and gave their countrymen an excellent new start. Most of the people are blameless with respect to us, though some of them have done our citizens harm. But it will be to everybody’s disadvantage if the land is ravaged.”

This is clearly not the teenage king’s spur-of-the-moment reaction. It is a policy statement reached by consultation with “the council.” It emphasizes common kinship and common religion, and the “disadvantage” of all concerned if there is an armed confrontation. The “disadvantage” is not specified, but it may be a euphemism for the difficult prospects of a transatlantic war with the accompanying problems of provisioning and resupply, quite apart from the alienation of a whole population and the probability that such an alienation would diminish any prospect of annexation. If this understanding of the words is correct, it suggests that the topic of annexation is not altogether new despite the phrasing. The text reads (ÍF 31:230): “This was the *first time* it was discussed by the jarl that Snorri should bring

the country [Iceland] under the king's rule." The text does not say that this was the first time the king's rule was discussed, only that it was the first time it was discussed with Snorri. In other words, the plan may have been of quite long standing, and it was now only a question of how and with whom to implement it.

The reference to "the council" suggests that there was a definite plan in place, and that plan seems to have anticipated Hákon's later actions exactly. The plan was not to alienate the Icelanders with overt military moves but to offer the chieftains incentives to collaborate with the Norwegian king. Such a plan explains Hákon's repeated indications that he is the friend of the Icelanders and his repeated efforts to enlist chieftains in his attempt to extend his rule. Ármann Jakobsson, Sverrir Jakobsson, and Þorleifur Hauksson have argued that Hákon's serious ambition to annex Iceland dates from William of Sabina's visit to Norway in 1247 and his comment that Iceland's kingless state was anomalous, but the plan seems already to have been in place in 1220 when it was discussed with Snorri Sturluson.<sup>25</sup> This might lead us to believe that annexation was not so much the teenage king's plan as a state plan, although King Hákon was destined to play the role of the iron fist in the velvet glove in due course.

Any implementation of the plan was necessarily deferred until the conclusion of the campaigns against the Baglar, the Slittungar, and the Ribbungar down to 1227, as well as the first campaign in the western islands (in the Hebrides and the Isle of Man) in 1230–31 (ÍF 32:10–16). There were also strains between the king and Jarl Skúli to be dealt with (ÍF 32:18–23). Eventually, however, King Hákon can return to the Icelandic project and does so on the occasion of Sturla Sighvatsson's visit to Norway in 1234. Sturla reports to King Hákon, who is displeased to hear of the hostilities in Iceland (ÍF 32:25). He therefore asks how difficult it would be to achieve unification (*einvald*, "single rule") and says that it would be more peaceful if just one man were largely in charge of matters ("lét þá mundu verða friðbetrá ef einn réð mestu"). Sturla answers that there would not be much difficulty if the man were hard-working and intelligent ("harðyrkr ok ráðugr"). Hákon then asks him if he would take the job, and "he said that he would risk it with the king's counsel and supervision," and with whatever honor the king would deem appropriate if he could bring it about. The king adds that the land should not be won with



killings but that Sturla should assert authority with other means and should capture men and send them back to Norway if he could. The text goes on to say that the king and Sturla had frequent discussions about this matter during the winter.

The slightly veiled talk about “single rule” hardly disguises the idea that Hákon is to be the single ruler and that Sturla should be at most his jarl. The codicil that there should be no killings is of course in line with the king’s rhetorical strategy of casting himself as the special friend of the Icelanders. This stance is reinforced two years later in 1236 when Sturla’s antagonist and cousin Órækja comes to Norway and reports to the king that the hostilities in Iceland are worse than ever (ÍF 32:36): “The king considered that Sturla had conducted himself more harshly than he had counseled him.” The success or failure of the annexation plan has clearly become the king’s ongoing concern, but no further measures can be taken for the moment because of Skúli’s overt claim to the throne (ÍF 32:52–116) and the aftermath of his death in 1240.

The next explicit reference to annexation comes in 1247 when Cardinal William of Sabina comes to Norway and crowns King Hákon. Ármann Jakobsson and the recent editors of *Hákonar saga* treat this as the crucial moment in the history of the annexation, and the text bears close scrutiny. The key passage comes at the beginning of a new chapter and reads as follows (ÍF 32:136):

The following arrangement was made for Iceland with the cardinal’s advice, to wit that the people who lived there should serve King Hákon, because he [the cardinal] thought it inappropriate that a country should not serve under a king like all other countries in the world. Þórðr kakali was then sent with Bishop Heinrekr. They were to convey this message to the general population, namely that all men should consent to the authority of King Hákon and to such tax payments as were honorable for them.

It should be pointed out that the text does not say that it was the cardinal’s idea that Iceland should have a king like every other country. Indeed, we might wonder why the cardinal should have any special interest in Iceland’s governance. What we do know is that King Hákon and his circle had had that special interest at least since

Snorri Sturluson's visit in 1220 and that he had commissioned Sturla Sighvatsson to institute *einvald* (single rule) in 1234. It therefore seems quite likely that the idea was King Hákon's and that he raised it with the cardinal in the hope of getting support from Rome. The meeting with Cardinal William was the occasion of several concessions to King Hákon's special interests, in addition to his coronation, and agreement to monarchical rule in Iceland would have been the least of these concessions.<sup>26</sup>

Any remnant of Sturla Sighvatsson's commission to unify Iceland expired in 1238 when he fell in the battle at Örlygsstaðir. There was hence a considerable lapse in the plan for annexation. The most likely aspirant in Iceland was Gizurr Þorvaldsson, who emerged victorious in the battle at Örlygsstaðir and later survived the counterattack at Flugumýrr in 1252. Gizurr visited King Hákon in 1246 and submitted his case to the king's discretion, but there is no discussion of annexation. Gizurr may have been perceived as too deeply involved in Icelandic factionalism to qualify as a force for unification. He also carried out the killing of Snorri Sturluson in 1241, and we have seen that King Hákon was reluctant to associate himself with that event. But that a pacified Iceland under one rule continued to be a priority for King Hákon is indicated by events in 1250 (ÍF 32:156):

That summer many Icelanders were with King Hákon, as was previously written, and many meetings were held about what arrangement should be made for the country [Iceland]. The upshot was that Bishop Heinrekr and Gizurr and Þorgils skarði were sent to Iceland and were appointed to those regions in Iceland to which the king had taken title. They were charged to convey the king's message to other men in the country. The sons of Sæmundr [Jónsson at Oddi] took another ship to Iceland, and they had given over their followings to the king with handclasps.

This passage is revealing because it shows that King Hákon had not been idle since the death of his agent Sturla Sighvatsson but had laid claim to some areas and had taken over the followings of certain chieftains. The relative understatement of these acquisitions again indicates that the king did not want to appear in an aggressive role. That Gizurr was in his service and scheduled for a reward is confirmed

in 1255 when Hákon gives him a command in Þrándheimr (ÍF 32:170). At the same time he sends Ívarr Englason to Iceland to back his cause (“flytja sitt erendi”) with the assistance of the bishops, “because the king had confidence in both of them” (ÍF 32:170). Ívarr spends the winter in Skálaholt and finds Bishop Sigvarðr’s efforts somewhat deficient, but he goes on to Skagafjörðr and pursues the king’s aims in collaboration with Bishop Heinrekr and Þorgils skarði, who had become the leader in Skagafjörðr. Heinrekr and Þorgils assemble all the local farmers and, together with Ívarr, urge the king’s bidding. The men of Skagafjörðr and Eyjafjörðr and most of the men in the North Quarter agree to pay the king taxes, but Ívarr nonetheless returns to Norway with the feeling that he has accomplished less than he hoped. He blames Gizurr and Þórðr kakali for the shortfall. Despite Ívarr’s dissatisfaction this passage indicates that Hákon is making progress; he has transferred the mission from deputized Icelandic chieftains to a Norwegian plenipotentiary and has won broad agreement to taxation in the north.

The next phase of the move toward monarchy comes in 1258 when the king reauthorizes Gizurr Þorvaldsson’s mission (ÍF 32:203):

With him [the king] was Gizurr Þorvaldsson. The king arranged to send Gizurr out to Iceland and gave him the title of jarl. In return Gizurr promised to pacify the land and have all the farmers pay taxes to the king as he had previously asked. Gizurr made much of the prospect that he would achieve this easily.

The king sends his retainer Þóraldi hvíti with him to monitor his progress, and additional ships with many other trusted servants of the king also make the voyage to ascertain whether Gizurr is living up to his promises. Gizurr urges the case with many commitments and is able to gain the adherence of many “good men” who swear allegiance to King Hákon. They soon learn that Gizurr has misrepresented the king’s words, but, asserts the author, they nonetheless remained loyal to the king. At this point the story is abbreviated (ÍF 32:204): “There are many tales about the dealings of the jarl and the Icelanders, which it is not necessary to write down in this account.” It was perhaps neither necessary nor politic to delve too far into this final phase of the king’s tightening grip.<sup>27</sup> We are told that the king spent the winter



of 1259–60 in Bergen. He had learned the previous summer that Jarl Gizurr had not focused much attention on representing his cause to the Icelanders. He reacts by dispatching documents to the *alþingi* specifying how much tax he wanted and what the jarl should have (ÍF 32:207). These documents are in the care of two courtiers and were read at the *alþingi*, but they caused much contention; the southerners, who were friendly toward Gizurr, and the people east of Þjórsá were most opposed to taxation. The demands therefore came to nothing.

The following year in 1261 the king dispatches Hallvarðr gullskór to Borgarfjörðr to urge the case once more and press the jarl to action. Hallvarðr has greater success, and the farmers commit to a large sum of money. Hallvarðr is credited with a handsome response to the effect that (ÍF 32:222–23) “the king did not wish that the farmers should be afflicted with such great payments; he said that the king wished the allegiance of the farmers and whatever land taxes that it would cost them no excessive burden to pay.” Despite the king’s increasingly insistent demands, his rhetorical posture of good will toward the Icelanders remains the same. Jarl Gizurr resists at first, but eventually there is a preponderance of acceptance in the north and west, so that everyone agrees to the king’s terms except the southerners east of Þjórsá and the people from the East Fjord region.

Recent expositions have tended to underplay the resistance to King Hákon’s campaign. That resistance is usually expressed in the form of royal dissatisfaction with the progress being made. As early as Snorri Sturluson’s mission of 1220 we are told that (ÍF 31:231) “Snorri made no progress with his countrymen, and he did not press the point.” Sturla Sighvatsson makes no progress in 1234, but whether that is to be explained by resistance or lack of exertion is not made clear. In 1250 King Hákon begins to send Norwegian agents to verify the progress made by Icelandic volunteers. The first of these is Ívarr Englason. He finds the efforts made by Bishop Sigvarðr Þéttmarsson inadequate, and when he returns to Norway, he blames Gizurr Þorvaldsson and Þórðr kakali for the lack of progress. In 1258 King Hákon sends a large number of observers, and they clearly report to the king that Gizurr has not effectively represented him. Gizurr’s resistance is made explicit at the end of the account, and the disagreement between northerners and southerners reinforces the

point. Since the saga was written from a Norwegian point of view, it no doubt understates Icelandic resistance, but enough indications survive to assure us that the imposition of Norwegian rule was no easy matter. The Icelanders seem to have played a waiting game, hoping that the issue would dissolve. The chieftains, inspired by a combination of political acquiescence and political ambition, appear to collaborate with the king, but once at home, they find that their countrymen are of a different mind or that other priorities are more compelling.

The history of Icelandic-Norwegian interaction in the thirteenth century is probably not a story of Icelandic chieftains courting the king's favor but a story of gradual Norwegian incursions. Snorri Sturluson (1220), Sturla Sighvatsson (1234), and Gizurr Þorvaldsson together with Þorgils skarði (1250) are dispatched as the king's agents, but they disappoint the king by making little progress. Hákon brings more pressure to bear by appointing Norwegian bishops in whom he has confidence, Heinrekr Kársson in 1247 and Sigvarðr Pétmarsson in 1254. That they are intended to work for King Hákon's cause is indicated by the fact that Sigvarðr's efforts are found wanting (ÍF 32:170). Beginning in 1250 King Hákon supplements his measures by sending Norwegian officials to implement his plans. The first of these is Ívarr Englaon, who finds fault with Bishop Sigvarðr and with the Icelandic chieftains in his report to the king (ÍF 32:170–71). In 1258 the king sends his official Þóraldi hvíti and many unnamed agents to monitor progress (ÍF 32:203). Finally in 1261 he appoints Hallvarðr gullskór to reinforce the obviously flagging attempts of Gizurr Þorvaldsson. What we witness in this sequence is mounting pressure on the Icelanders to submit to Norwegian rule, and an increasing allocation of resources to realize this goal. The gradual steps in this escalating sequence date not from 1247 when Cardinal William of Sabina gave his consent to the project but from 1220 when King Hákon tried to enlist Snorri Sturluson. If we try, as a thought experiment, to imagine that Sturla Þórðarson was personally responsible for this political campaign in *Hákonar saga*, we could suppose that he is trying to shift the initiative from the self-promoting chieftains in Iceland to the Norwegian king, but that may be an overly ingenious hypothesis, and it would certainly contradict the clear intention to project a peace-loving king. If Sturla was allowed

any personal perspective at all, it seems most likely that he wished to leave enough indications in place to make it clear that the annexation was a Norwegian project. The larger intention that controlled his hand was, however, to credit King Hákon with success but at the same time to cast his campaign in the most delicate terms and portray it as a benefit for Iceland.

The task of extracting history from *Hákonar saga* turns out not to be a straightforward matter but requires a careful weighing of what the text says and what the underlying biases are likely to be. In his 1995 paper Ármann Jakobsson took note of Jón Jóhannesson's view that King Hákon's wish to bring peace to Iceland was nothing more than a pretext (*yfirskin*). He contended that such a view could not be read either out of *Íslendinga saga* or *Hákonar saga*, "unless one takes recourse to the tried and true procedure of reading between the lines."<sup>28</sup> The art of reading between the lines without overreading between the lines is to be sure a challenge, but some reading between the lines to determine the bias is a natural part of any literary task. That the bias in *Hákonar saga* involves a persistent exculpation of the king can hardly be doubted.<sup>29</sup> That damaging information about Icelandic resistance to annexation is being suppressed seems quite likely when *Hákonar saga* tells us (ÍF 32:204): "There are many tales about the dealings of the jarl [Gizurr] and the Icelanders, which it is not necessary to write down in this account."

*Hákonar saga* is generally referred to as the last of the original Norwegian kings' sagas, although it was probably followed by Sturla Þórðarson's *Magnúss saga lagabætis*. The latter is, however, extant only in a small fragment that allows no discussion of larger patterns (ÍF 32:271–85). *Hákonar saga* must therefore be counted as the end point, written some thirty years after *Heimskringla* was completed. We may cast a glance backward and ask how this last text compares with the earlier kings' sagas and what sort of continuity it suggests. One evident departure from previous Icelandic historical writing from Ari Þorgilsson down to *Heimskringla* is an emphatic focus on the present rather than an interest in retrieving the past. In this respect *Hákonar saga* imitates *Sverris saga* rather than the early epitomes or the great compendia from ca. 1220 to 1235. *Hákonar saga* demonstrates no interest in the past or how the events described grow out of the past. To that extent it is less "historical." In the early biographical sagas,



especially the Óláfr sagas, there is an attempt to see the protagonists as the heroes of a new system and establish their Christian credentials. In *Hákonar saga* there is no effort to convey King Hákon's personal religious views or to define his position in the evolving Norwegian state. He deals with Rome as he deals with any other foreign power. To be sure, he is particularly firm about not abusing the privilege of sanctuary in churches, but that is part of the peace-loving image that the saga projects. It is a political value rather than a religious value.

The opaque quality of Hákon's religious convictions is matched by an equally opaque portrayal of his personality. There is a nice description of his playfulness as a child (ÍF 31:182), but no equivalent light is shed on his adult years. We do not know how he relates personally to his family or his courtiers. The reader is given the impression that it is the idea of kingship that is important, not the king's person.<sup>30</sup> This too is a notable departure from the orientation of the earlier sagas, in which it was a central concern to reveal what kind of an individual a given king was, for better or for worse. Perhaps by the time *Hákonar saga* was written personal portraiture had come to be considered too close to personal evaluation or even criticism to be allowable. There is a concluding description of Hákon (ÍF 32:265), as there is in *Sverris saga*, but it is not personally revealing. We might surmise that the bureaucratization of Norwegian society in the thirteenth century had made the consideration of institutions more important than the personalities of the individuals who executed state business.

Whatever the explanation, *Hákonar saga* registers losses as well as gains in the evolution of saga writing. The gains are in the area of communications, military planning (though not battle descriptions), and most particularly in the area of foreign policy and foreign initiatives. The losses are more on the literary side of the ledger, a loss in the area of narrative and dramatic articulation, a loss in personal characterization, a loss of tragic inflections, and a loss in the development of dialogue. These losses are particularly evident if *Hákonar saga* is compared to the sagas about early Icelanders, with their strong interest in individual character and their cultivation of suspense. Suspense is ruled out in *Hákonar saga* because there must be no doubt about the king's success. In both the handling of the

succession to the throne and the later contest between King Hákon and Jarl Skúli there is much latitude for drama, but in both cases the drama is minimized and Hákon's success becomes a foregone conclusion. With a stable kingship came a smoother narrative surface and a reduction in the function of literature to raise open questions and perceive differing outcomes.

