

Conclusion

It may be a little late in the narrative to raise the question of whether there really is such a thing as a “king’s saga” alongside the sagas about early Icelanders, the bishops’ sagas, the legendary sagas, and so forth. The term has not always been in the same common use that prevails today. Peter Erasmus Müller uses it eight times in his compendious *Sagabibliothek* from 1817–20 (vol. 3, pp. ix, 14, 16, 19, 21–23, 25), but he does not use it to designate a particular type of saga. Finnur Jónsson used it sparingly in his big literary history from 1923 (Danish *kongesaga*) but not in the matter-of-fact way that is current now.¹ It figures for example in Kurt Schier’s tabulation of subgroups (“konunga sögur” “Königssagas”), in which he tallies up a total of twenty-seven examples.² He reaches that number, however, only by dint of including texts that are only marginally about Norwegian kings, for example the sagas about the North Atlantic islanders, *Orkneyinga saga* and *Færeyinga saga*. He also includes *Jómsvíkinga saga*, a narrative about an attack on Norway under Hákon jarl by an independent federation of vikings from the Baltic, and a certain number of hypothetical or largely lost texts, under the heading of “related works,” as well as late compilations. I have limited myself to fifteen texts from the first two centuries of saga writing, Ari’s and Sæmundr’s lost lives of the kings, **Hryggjarstykki*, the three synoptic histories, Oddr Snorrason’s *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, the *Oldest Saga of Saint Olaf*, the *Legendary Saga of Saint Olaf*, the three compendia *Morkinskinna*, *Fagrskinna*, and *Heimskringla*, *Sverris saga*, *Boglunga sögur* and finally *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*. These are the sagas that have been most frequently studied and are the foundation of the later compilations.

They fall into two categories: chronicles with a dynastic focus on the one hand (Ari, Sæmundr, the synoptic histories, and the great

compendia), and individual biographies on the other (**Hryggjarstykki*, Oddr Snorrason's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, the various redactions of the saga about Saint Olaf, *Sverris saga*, and *Hákonar saga*). The growth of the first group is largely a matter of increasing dimensions as time goes on. The second group evolves in terms of a changing orientation, with **Hryggjarstykki* and the earliest redactions of the sagas about the Óláfrs displaying a Christian preoccupation, which gradually yields to a more secular viewpoint in *Morkinskinna*, *Fagrskinna*, and *Heimskringla*. *Sverris saga* is an almost purely military chronicle in which personal faith does not play a large part and Christianity figures more as an institutional concern. *Hákonar saga* digresses on church and state but is centrally concerned with a remarkably successful king and Norway's emergence on the international stage. Both with respect to narrative breadth and religious coloring there is a definite progression, and the thrust of my outline has been to articulate this progression.

The first task was to suggest something about the interactions between Icelanders and Norwegians in the preliterate age, a task carried out in considerably greater detail by Bogi Th. Melsteð and Hallvard Magerøy.³ The latter counted up two hundred five Norwegians who, according to the sagas about early Icelanders, visited Iceland during the Saga Age (ca. 930–1050).⁴ These visits are unlikely to have been invented because they usually serve no narrative purpose. They convey only a very partial tally of the Norwegians who must have frequented Iceland because they emerge in quite sporadic and incomplete accounts of ship arrivals. The records pertaining to Icelanders in Norway are similarly incomplete, but the report that there were three hundred (360) Icelanders in Trondheim during the reign of Magnús berfœttr (ca. 1100) gives us some idea of how numerous the crossings must have been. The available numbers would seem to justify the comment in the prologue to the *Separate Saga of Saint Olaf* to the effect that “[n]ews passed between these countries every summer, and it was then committed to memory and passed along in the form of stories.”

The transition from “news” to “stories” is of course elusive and not subject to reconstruction, but the stylishness of the narratives, in particular the Icelandic stories in *Morkinskinna*, shows that the conversion into story was an art. The interaction between Icelanders

and Norwegians must therefore have yielded a quite considerable stock of stories. There seems, however, to have been a distinct difference in style between what the Icelanders told about themselves and what they told about the Norwegian kings. The stories about kings rise to a dramatic pitch chiefly when they involve visiting Icelanders, notably in *Morkinskinna*.⁵ By contrast *Fagrskinna* and the first part of *Heimskringla* are relatively straightforward chronologies of events with a modicum of personal confrontation, dialogue, and characterization. The kings are not fully integrated into the great storytelling art of the Icelanders. This emerges from the contrast between the single-file narrative of the kings' sagas and the dramatically plotted Icelandic sagas dealt with at the end of Chapter 5, *Valla-Ljóts saga*, *Víga-Glúms saga*, and *Ljósvetninga saga*.

On the other hand, there is real analytic growth in the kings' sagas, especially in *Heimskringla*'s treatment of the two Óláfrs. In opposition to the earlier hagiographic style *Heimskringla* develops a critically probing style that explores the reasons for political failure. *Heimskringla* becomes an inquiry into the formative and disintegrative factors in the history of a nation. This perspective is peculiar to the high point in king's saga writing and is not replicated in the sagas about early Icelanders. The latter sometimes have a regional orientation, but they do not have the sort of national focus that we find in *Heimskringla*. We could go a step further and say that *Heimskringla* studies the vagaries of history whereas the native Icelandic sagas study the vagaries of personality. The contribution of the best of the kings' sagas is to move the focus away from individuals and toward an encompassing view of larger political entities. There might therefore be some justification in crediting *Heimskringla* with being a "history" in the true sense of the word, a study of trends and processes over time.

Heimskringla is not, on the other hand, the high point of king's saga narrative. That distinction is reserved for *Morkinskinna*, the first in the series of compendia. It too has something akin to a national focus to the extent that it interweaves an Icelandic viewpoint with Norwegian issues and suffuses the history of the Norwegian kings with an Icelandic consciousness. *Óláfs saga helga* in *Heimskringla* shares this perspective to a certain extent, but the dual profile is less overt and thematic.⁶ The effect in *Morkinskinna* is to provide a critical

and ironical frame for the story of the Norwegian kings and to offer the reader an ambivalent understanding of the relationship between the two countries. The author of *Morkinskinna* also had a taste for high adventure, as is illustrated by the exploits of Haraldr harðráði and Sigurðr jórsalafari in the Mediterranean and the more intellectual undertakings of the Icelanders at the Norwegian court. Finally, the author had a gift for characterization. The portraits of Magnús góði, Haraldr harðráði, and the sons of Magnús berfœttr, Sigurðr and Eysteinn, are more strongly drawn than in *Heimskringla*. To this gallery are added the magically successful and personally magnetic Icelanders in their interactions with the kings. There is an electrical quality to the narrative of *Morkinskinna* that is missing in the other kings' sagas. Indeed, the kings' sagas that comprise *Morkinskinna*, alone among the genre, suffer not at all by comparison with the best of the sagas about early Icelanders, in good measure, of course, because of the generous space allotted to the Icelandic subnarratives.

The same narrative verve did not survive in *Fagrskinna*, which systematically suppressed the Icelandic components, both the outlook and the supplementary tales. What remains is somewhat skeletal and devoid of personality, in effect an epitome. It has the air of an anthology, with an ambition not to re-imagine but merely to inform. It provides only the outlines of a saga.

In recent years *Sverris saga*, which may have been completed just before the era of the great compendia in the 1220s, has recaptured considerable interest. It is neither a chronicle of a succession of kings nor is it biographical quite in the same sense as the earlier sagas about Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson. To be sure it too is the celebration of a king, but it is more a military memoir than a life story. The problems of date and stages of composition have been so acute that until recently they have overshadowed the literary questions. Sverre Bagge did, however, weigh the question of whether it is a biography.⁷ Since I have become persuaded that the initial composition from 1185–88 extended through the first hundred chapters, I am inclined to believe that the style of the project was established from the outset. I also take seriously the remark in the prologue that King Sverrir supervised the writing and determined what should be written. I detect a degree of self-interest in the text that prompts me to classify it more as an autobiography than a biography, more akin

to Caesar's *Gallic Wars* than to Suetonius's *Lives*. It is both memoir and self-promotion.

It is hardly remarkable how little account is given of Sverrir's early years because there are questions about both his birth date and his paternity. The reader has the feeling that the uncertainties are so great that the less said about these matters, the better. The book therefore launches almost immediately into the military campaigns, and the provisional finale is the great victory at Fimreiti. Details about the composition of the remaining book are obscure; it could have been completed by one or more authors as late as 1220, but the celebratory tone had been established and remained in force.

The recent work on *Sverris saga* has been devoted not to the intricacies of the chronology but to the dominant tone of the work. The contributors have been Sverre Bagge, Þorleifur Hauksson, Fredrik Charpentier Ljungqvist, and Lars Lönnroth, and they occupy contrasting positions.⁸ Bagge considered the saga to be the story of a warrior king in an indigenous style and tradition. The others took the view that the underlying ideology is that of the *rex justus* ideal, with a strong religious underpinning. I find myself most nearly aligned with Bagge, not least of all because I believe that Sverrir himself controlled the narrative of the first hundred chapters and determined both content and tone. As I read the saga, I am struck by how occasional the Christian elements are. There are many points at which such tonalities could have been introduced, but the writer refrains. It is not so much a question of mutually exclusive viewpoints as it is a question of relative weight. There are of course Christian moments because all of the players were Christians, but these moments are largely incidental. For example, Sverrir is apt to refer to God in his speeches, but that is a formality for the consumption of his audience. Christianity in *Sverris saga* is an official position, but the saga as a whole is remarkably secular and focuses on Sverrir's individual success.

This is equally true of *Hákonar saga*, which is not only secular but evolves toward something that might be called national. After King Sverrir had nearly succeeded in reassembling Norway, it became possible to focus a national entity and a national consciousness after a century of disintegration. In practical terms this meant securing the borders against Sweden and Denmark, but it also meant seeking

recognition to the south and imposing Norwegian rule in the west, in the British Isles and Iceland. The disproportionate scholarly attention to Norway's relations with Iceland is not only a matter of Iceland's keen interest in her own history. In thirteenth-century terms the western ambitions were also a matter of expanding a Norwegian identity. With the writing of *Hákonar saga* "Norway" became a more palpable idea.

The ultimate conclusion with respect to the term "king's saga" may be that, though these sagas are regularly treated as a homogeneous group, the contours of the category are quite variable. They might equally well be treated as a loose accumulation of sagas that happen to be about kings but have distinctive identities. Thus we begin with a group of "kings' sagas" about which we can say very little (Sæmundr, Ari, Eiríkr Oddsson), progress to the sketchy synoptics (*Historia Norwegiae*, *Historia de Antiquitate*, *Ágrip*), then to the first full-fledged biographies of Óláfr Tryggvason by Oddr Snorrason and the anonymous *Legendary Saga of Saint Olaf*, both of which are awkwardly composed, before reaching the full flowering in the compendia. How this final transformation took place is as mysterious as any literary effulgence, but whatever the process, it gave us two of the masterpieces of medieval European literature in *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla*.

At the beginning of Chapter 1 I touched on the problem of when the Icelanders first perceived themselves as a separate entity, and at the end of Chapter 4 I noted a certain continuity between Ari's *Íslendingabók* and *Heimskringla* a century later. *Íslendingabók* focuses on the formation and history of Iceland; *Heimskringla* greatly expands this vision and embraces the formation and history of Scandinavia as a whole, with a special emphasis on Norway. *Heimskringla* does not dwell much on Iceland, apart from some digressions in *Óláfs saga helga*, but it does place Iceland, along with the other North Atlantic islands, in a much wider historical context.

Historians are often reluctant to use the terms "nation" or "nationalism" before the end of the eighteenth century, and yet both *Íslendingabók* and *Heimskringla* are permeated with national, or if the historians prefer, "ethnic" consciousness, a small ethnic community in the case of *Íslendingabók* and a much larger one in *Heimskringla*. Perhaps there is a crucial distinction between

the specialized modern “nation” and a more perennial “national sentiment,” but the distinctions strike this writer as exceedingly fine. At one point Anthony D. Smith dismisses the idea of nationalism in antiquity and the Middle Ages and insists “that nations are indeed modern phenomena.” He then lists four criteria for nationhood:

1. “a unified legal code of common rights and duties”
2. “a unified economy . . . and mobility of goods and persons throughout the national territory”
3. “a fairly compact territory, preferably with ‘natural’ defensible frontiers”
4. “a single ‘political culture’ and public, mass education and media system.”

If we substitute “general familiarity with the law and a common literature” for “public mass education,” these four categories provide a hauntingly appropriate description of medieval Iceland.⁹

Elsewhere Smith emphasizes the importance of the intelligentsia in promoting nationalism.¹⁰ Ari Þorgilsson was surely the leading intellectual of his century in Iceland, and the author (or authors) of *Heimskringla*, whether Snorri or others, can stake the same claim in the next century. But they are not the only writers who display a preoccupation with national consciousness in Iceland. The *locus classicus* is found in Oddr Snorrason’s *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, in a passage in which King Óláfr disparages his Danish and Swedish opponents.¹¹ The most important document pertaining to national self-assertion is *Morkinskinna*. Here the unknown writer both lays claim to literary ascendancy for Iceland, and hence intellectual leadership, but also gives visiting Icelanders and Norwegian kings an equal voice. The subject matter is Norwegian, but the tone and allegiance are Icelandic.

That *Morkinskinna* would have been understood in this way by contemporary readers seems assured by the contrasting outlook in *Fagrskinna*, which made ample use of *Morkinskinna* but provided a Norwegian counterpoise, as did *Sverris saga* when it was completed. *Morkinskinna* thus incited political and national opposition in Norway, while in Iceland it may be credited with being precedent-setting. There were probably a few sagas about early Icelanders

before *Morkinskinna* was composed ca. 1220, but we may readily imagine that the great blossoming of these sagas, in the 1220s and later, owed something to a national literary consciousness fostered by *Morkinskinna*. The subsequent writing of quasi-historical sagas forked along national lines; on the one hand it inspired a royal reaction in Norway in the form of *Sverris saga*, *Fagrskinna*, and *Hákonar saga*, and on the other it surely abetted the brilliant recreation of Icelandic history in the native sagas.