

CHAPTER 2

Early Epitomes and Biographies

“Óláfr rex Tryggvasonr, Ólafssonar, Haraldssonar ens hárfagra, kom kristni í Norveg ok á Ísland. Hann sendi hingat til lands prest þann, es hét Þangbrandr ok hér kenndi mǫnnum kristni ok skírði þá alla, es við trú tóku.” (Ari Þorgilsson, *Íslendingabók* [ÍF 1.1:14])

(King Olaf Tryggvason, the son of Olaf, who was the son of Harald Fairhair, brought Christianity to Iceland. He sent to this country a priest who was named Thangbrand and who taught people Christianity and baptized all those who accepted the faith.)

Having set the stage for the flow of historical information between Iceland and Norway, we can now turn to the texts themselves under two headings. The earliest kings' lives by Sæmundr Sigfússon and Ari Þorgilsson around 1130 are lost but have been the focus of lively speculation. The transmissions from the middle and late twelfth century are also fragmentary, but they include both short historical epitomes (the “synoptic” histories) and the first book-length sagas about King Óláfr Tryggvason and King Óláfr Haraldsson. The oral traditions about Norwegian kings and about prominent Icelanders of the same period (“sagas about early Icelanders”) would have evolved side by side in the latter twelfth century and probably influenced each other in ways that are difficult to reconstruct. The twelfth century was a period of Christian consolidation in Iceland, and that presumably determined the choice of the two conversion kings, Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson, as the first saga protagonists. It also determined the celebratory style of these narratives, but as time went on, the outlook in Iceland became less exclusively centered on Christianity and more

focused on political issues and doubts. It is this changing perspective that comes to the fore in the full-scale kings' saga compendia known as *Morkinskinna* and *Fagrskinna*. These two texts are surveyed in Chapter 3, but the third great compendium, *Heimskringla*, is covered in Chapter 4.

1. The First Initiatives

Throughout the tenth and eleventh centuries most of the interaction between Icelanders and Norwegians would have been by word of mouth, but beginning in the twelfth century there is a written record. The Icelanders not only observed Norwegian history, but also in some sense they created it. They must indeed have had a rather full picture of developments going back to the ninth century, and it is curious to note that they devoted themselves to the writing of Norwegian history rather earlier than they took on the task of recording their own history in equivalent detail. The first experiments go back to the earliest days of Icelandic writing in the 1120s. Both Sæmundr Sigfússon and Ari Þorgilsson, the fathers of Icelandic historiography, composed histories of the Norwegian kings, but they are lost and attempts to estimate their dimensions have proved inconclusive.¹ There is, however, a growing inclination to believe that they provided the basis for a group of three epitomes of early Norwegian history known as the “synoptic histories.”² If these little books suggest anything about the extent of the previous accounts, the latter must have been more than mere listings and must have afforded a real narrative impetus.

Certain mysteries attach particularly to the writings of Ari Þorgilsson. At the beginning of his surviving *Libellus Islandorum* (or *Íslendingabók*), written between 1122 and 1133, he explains that on the advice of Bishop Þorlákr Runólfsson and Bishop Ketill Þorsteinsson he expanded a first version while omitting the genealogies and kings' lives.³ It seems certain that these genealogies and kings' lives were used by subsequent writers because Ari is referred to a number of times, but there is no way of telling how extensive they were.⁴ The lost kings' lives, however, seem likely to have furnished the basis for the later synoptic histories. Perhaps the kings' lives were not transmitted for the very reason that they were subsumed in the synoptics and lost their importance. Ari's *Íslendingabók*, on the other hand, was not

subsumed in later histories of Iceland and survives in two seventeenth-century transcripts.⁵ The original undertaking was, however, twofold, embracing events in both Norway and Iceland. Which of these focuses was fuller and more important is a matter of speculation; perhaps the emphasis was more or less equal. If so, we can surmise that at the beginning of the twelfth century Icelanders still thought of themselves as being in the Norwegian orbit.

The affiliation between the two countries would have been reinforced by developments in the ecclesiastical sphere. The Icelanders converted to Christianity in the year 1000 (or 999), and Ari says explicitly that the impetus came from Norway: “King Óláfr Tryggvason, the grandson of Óláfr, who was the son of Haraldr hárfagri (Fairhair), brought Christianity to Norway and Iceland.”⁶ Ari devotes about half of his little book to early Christian history in Iceland, including the story of how King Óláfr brought pressure to bear on Iceland by threatening those Icelanders who happened to be in Norway at the time; when he hears that the Icelanders at home are reluctant to convert, he reacts angrily: “On hearing that he became very angry and intended to have our countrymen who were in Norway maimed or killed.”⁷ He relents only when two distinguished Icelanders, Gizurr Teitsson and Hjalti Skeggjason, undertake a last-ditch effort at conversion. Their mission comes to a head with tense negotiations between the pagan party and the Christian party at the Icelandic *alþingi*. The subsequent history of the eleventh century is in effect the story of how Christianity took root and came of age in Iceland.⁸ The proportions in Ari’s book reflect this preoccupation.

The foregrounding of ecclesiastical history by no means excludes other matters, however. Ari also pays close attention to secular developments, the colonization of Iceland, the founding of legal institutions, calendar issues, revisions of the laws, the discovery of Greenland, and some account of the lawspeakers. If we had the whole body of Ari’s work, it might well buttress the fine balance between the Norwegian and Icelandic elements that we find in the extant *Íslendingabók*. The kings’ lives might not have been exclusively Norwegian in focus because they may well have included some account of the impingements on Icelandic affairs by King Óláfr Tryggvason (995–1000) and King Óláfr Haraldsson (1015–30). Nor would the genealogies, whatever their shape, have been exclusively Icelandic in

focus since any rehearsal of Icelandic genealogies would have included reference to Norwegian ancestries and would have kept the family ties to the homeland alive. These family ties were close, as we learn from the later thirteenth-century sagas and their occasional stories about how warmly individual Icelanders were received by distant relatives in Norway.⁹ Kinship continued to be an important link between the two countries.

There can be no doubt, however, that the Icelanders considered themselves to be distinctively different, not just displaced Norwegians. The sources do not flow freely enough to allow a history of Icelandic national consciousness, but the very title of Ari's book, *The Book of* [or about] *Icelanders*, is an assertion of independent identity, and much of the literature we will review further along is concerned with the separate status of the Icelanders. At exactly what point the Icelanders acquired their sense of identity we do not know, but it may have been as early as 930 when they established their own legal institutions, as Ari describes in his second chapter.¹⁰

The Icelanders must have had a sense of ecclesiastical independence as well. From 1056 the bishops were nominated in Iceland and then traveled to Norway to be confirmed by the Norwegian archbishop. Most importantly they were native Icelanders from notable families in their own country and were rooted in their own traditions.¹¹ There was no Norwegian bishop in Iceland until 1238, although one Icelandic, Kolr Þorkelsson, became a bishop in Vík in the twelfth century.¹²

If the later synoptic histories made use of Sæmundr and Ari, as some scholars theorize, they might be consulted to ascertain whether they shed any light on the content of the lost sources. Two of the synoptics are plainly Norwegian, Theodoricus monachus's *Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium* and the anonymous *Historia Norwegiae*.¹³ Consequently they do not have a great deal to say about Iceland, although Theodoricus twice goes out of his way to emphasize his dependence on Icelandic informants.¹⁴ The third synoptic, *Ágrip af Nóregs konunga sögum* (*Epitome of the Accounts of Norwegian Kings*) is dated around 1190 and is written in the vernacular. Opinions on whether it was written in Norway or Iceland differ.¹⁵ The preponderant role of Icelandic writers in composing vernacular histories of Norway suggests Icelandic authorship, but

some Norwegianisms in the language of the only extant manuscript have opened the door to the possibility that the text, or at least the exemplar of the text, was written in Norway. Wherever it was written, some scholars believe that the author made use of both Sæmundr and Ari.¹⁶ *Ágrip* may therefore have inherited a good deal of its narrative from these sources, although we have no way of telling what was taken from each. A separate question is whether *Ágrip* inherited a historical perspective from Sæmundr or Ari or both.

Ágrip has a distinctively Christian outlook.¹⁷ The pagan kings who ruled before the advent of the conversion kings, Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson, are burdened with a virtual repertory of all the failings that the Icelanders attributed to their pagan ancestors. They viewed the ancestral religion, at the very least, as a set of magical practices. Thus the author of *Ágrip* devotes most of the story of the first king of all Norway, Haraldr hárfagri, to his marriage with the Finnish (i.e., Lappish, hence heathen) woman named Snjófríðr rather than to his role in the unification of Norway. He is so beguiled by Snjófríðr that he loses his mind and allows the realm to languish. So disabled is he by his *villa* (error or superstition) that he must be healed by the wise Þorleifr spaki. He is not portrayed as the great unifier, as he will be at the beginning of the thirteenth century when the religious focus of the twelfth century has given way to a more political construction of history, but rather as the frail embodiment of pagan misapprehension.¹⁸

Haraldr is succeeded by his two sons Eiríkr blóðøx (Bloodaxe) and Hákon. Eiríkr is a latter-day Cain who acquires his nickname by quarreling with his brothers and killing them. Hákon, who is known as Hákon the Good in later sources, forfeits this laudatory cognomen in *Ágrip* because, although a Christian, he too readily obliges his heathen wife, participates in heathen ceremonies, is charged with apostasy, and is not given the benefit of a Christian burial. The figure of the seductive wife, well attested in Christian lore, is reincarnated in Hákon's wife here and only here, not in the later sources, but she pales in comparison to Eiríkr blóðøx's wife Gunnhildr, who is made responsible for her husband's killings, brings about Hákon's death, and is a malevolent influence on her son, and Eiríkr's successor, Haraldr gráfeldr (Graycloak). She becomes the most notorious sorceress and evildoer in the early annals of Norwegian history.¹⁹

Gunnhildr ultimately meets her match in her male counterpart Hákon jarl. Hákon never assumes the title of king but proves to be the most quintessentially pagan ruler of Norway, as well as the most deceitful. He contrives Gunnhildr's death at the hands of the Danish king Haraldr blátǫnn (Bluetooth), but then becomes a serial seducer of women, causing the people to rise against him. As they close in, he takes refuge in a pigsty and offers his throat to be cut by a slave: "and thus a man of filthy ways ended his days and his rule in a house of filth."²⁰ The historical strategy in *Ágrip* is to construct portraits of the early pagan kings that stand in vivid contrast to the model Christian rulers Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson after 995. We may wonder whether this strategy was inherited from the earlier histories by Sæmundr and Ari. About Sæmundr we can say nothing, but the dramatic contrast in *Ágrip* seems so out of line with the carefully modulated style of *Íslendingabók* that it is difficult to ascribe to Ari. All critics agree that *Ágrip* is the work of a cleric, and it seems most likely that the distinct anti-pagan stance should be attributed to this cleric and not to the sources.

Taken together as a group, the three synoptic histories do not in fact afford much evidence that their sources were conversion-oriented. The prologue to *Historia Norwegiae* does indeed formulate the book's task as tracing the royal line and setting out the arrival of Christianity and the putting to flight of paganism ("rectorum genealogiam retexere et adventum christianitatis simul et paganismi fugam . . . exponere"), but the author does not return to this theme.²¹ The text carries the tale only as far as Óláfr Haraldsson's arrival in Norway, and the discussion of a possible continuation of the book seems inconclusive.²² Theodoricus's *Historia de Antiquitate* gives remarkably even coverage to the post-conversion kings and is not appreciably fuller on the two Óláfrs than on Magnús góði (the Good) and Haraldr harðráði. The book comes to a somewhat abrupt halt with Sigurðr jórsalafari (Jerusalemfarer). Only *Ágrip* suggests a meditated opposition between the pagan and the Christian eras. In this respect it stands alone and does not hint at a traditional opposition between pagan and Christian kings as an organizational scheme.

The fact that the synoptics may in some way connect with the lost works of Sæmundr and Ari has caused us to skip ahead to the end of the century and omit mention of a curious narrative from the

middle of the century attributed to a largely unknown Eiríkr Oddsson and referred to by the (indecipherable) title *Hryggjarstykki*.²³ This text too is lost, but parts of it were included in later compendia, and it appears to have had fuller dimensions than the lost lives by Sæmundr and Ari. Exactly how full is the question. There has been a good deal of debate on whether the text focused on the mid-century claimant or usurper Sigurðr slembir, alleged to be the son of King Magnús berfœttr (Bareleg), or whether it extended further down to 1161. The most detailed investigation by Bjarni Guðnason (1978) took the former view.²⁴ If he is right, *Hryggjarstykki* is the first real biography in Icelandic literature. It may appear strange that the first biography was allocated to an unsuccessful aspirant rather than a real king. The reason could be that, according to the later compendium *Morkinskinna*, Sigurðr slembir spent time in Iceland and might have had a following there.²⁵ Since Sigurðr died a martyr's death, the book may also have been a cross between a political chronicle and a hagiographic celebration.

Christianity was in any case a recurrent, though not a guiding, feature in twelfth-century Icelandic royal narratives. It did not become central until the emergence of the full-length biographies of Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson at the end of the twelfth century (ca. 1180–1200). These kings are credited with the final conversion of Norway and the outlying territories, including Iceland. Óláfr Tryggvason (995–1000) came first, and it can be argued that Oddr Snorrason's biography of him, written perhaps as early as the 1180s, was the first full biography of a historical king.²⁶ It falls into three parts, Óláfr's birth, youth, and early adventures, his acceptance as Norway's king and subsequent conversion activities, and finally his defeat and disappearance at the hands of an overwhelming alliance of Danes, Swedes, and dissident Norwegians at the Battle of Svölðr. The first part appears to be based on a written source closely aligned with the source used by Theodoricus in his *Historia de Antiquitate*.²⁷ The last section on the Battle of Svölðr, an event dealt with only briefly by Theodoricus and the other synoptics, is greatly expanded, presumably with the aid of oral traditions, and transformed into a suspenseful and dramatic finale.

From a Christian perspective it is the middle section on Óláfr's conversion activity that is of special importance. A few chapters of

this section continue to echo the narrative in Theodoricus's presumed source. They include Óláfr's first conversions in Norway (chapter 24), his conversion of Jarl Sigurðr in Orkney (chapter 26), the burning of a host of pagan sorcerers in a banquet hall (chapter 36), and the conversion of the Icelanders (chapter 41). But by far the greater portion of this sequence is new. There is a conversion incident in which Óláfr's pagan opponents choke on their own words (chapter 27), a sequence about holy men and women who take refuge on the island of Selja (chapters 28–30), a passage in which Óláfr converts Hordaland and Vík, including his ironical comment that the pagans should not be afraid of being dispatched to their beloved gods (chapter 31), a digression on Óláfr's twice-attempted betrothal to the heathen Swedish queen Sigríðr (chapters 32–33, 38), initial information on Óláfr's future wife Þyri, sister of King Sveinn of Denmark (chapter 39), and a further digression on how Óláfr converts the Icelanders Kjartan Ólafsson and Hallfreðr Óttarsson, both of whom are destined to figure in their own sagas (chapter 40). What all these additions have in common is a religious focus. They are either about conversion activities (including the suppression of sorcery), or about a Christian legend (Selja), or about how Óláfr avoided a heathen wife. The most eccentric addition is a completely detached incident in which Óláfr overcomes magic winds to reach the northern island of Goðey (Godøy) and hang the recalcitrant heathen Hróaldr (chapter 37). Even odder is the repetition of this episode in a variant form in chapter 55. The effect of these supplementary chapters is to profile Óláfr's Christian orientation in considerably greater detail.

The same is true of the following sequence of chapters from 42 to 60, which have no overlap with the presumed written source and are entirely independent additions. The sequence includes conversion episodes (chapters 42, 45, 52, 54, 56), superstitious encounters with heathen deities (chapters 43, 59, 60), more executions of sorcerers (chapters 44, 45), the destruction of idols (chapters 47, 54), and visions (chapters 43, 51). Scattered here and there we find a few secular matters such as Óláfr's marriage to Þyri, who has established her Christian credentials by protesting her marriage to a heathen king of Wendland with a hunger strike (chapter 46), descriptions of Óláfr's appearance and physical accomplishments (chapters 49, 50, 54), and the construction of his three great ships (chapters 39, 45, 53), but

the preponderance of Christian material overshadows these lesser matters.

Most conspicuous among the episodes is a series of forcible conversions that end in violent executions or torture (chapters 36–37, 44–45, 54–56), so that they might rather be called conversion atrocities. They are peculiar to Oddr's biography of Óláfr Tryggvason and do not recur in the sagas about Óláfr Haraldsson's conversion initiatives. Oddr seems to recount them without disapproval, presumably on the assumption that pagans and sorcerers are beyond the pale. We may nonetheless wonder whether everyone shared Oddr's indifference to his pagan ancestors. The most notable missionary in Iceland, Þangbrandr, was also purposeful and left behind a mixed reputation, but in his case there was no compelling reason for literary rehabilitation.²⁸ In Óláfr's case there was every reason to provide a sanitized version of his career. He was not only a king but also a precursor of Saint Óláfr Haraldsson, as Oddr emphasizes in his prologue by comparing him to John the Baptist.

That Oddr was not completely insensitive to violence is illustrated by chapter 57, in which Óláfr sets his dog Vígi on an Icelander named Sigurðr, who has killed one of his retainers. Another retainer protests the loosing of a dog on a man, but Óláfr persists. When the Icelander has been killed, the bishop reproves the king sternly until "the king fell at the bishop's feet and confessed his crimes to God and acknowledged that he had done wrong in committing this cruel deed, and the king performed great penance for what he had done."²⁹ Perhaps Oddr thought that mercy was more appropriate in state matters than in ecclesiastical cases involving pagans and sorcerers. The celebratory tone of the book as a whole hardly allows us to suppose that Oddr left some unflattering moments stand as a reproach to Óláfr's character. Whatever the explanations of the conversion excesses may be, it is clear that Oddr's book is more concerned with Christian issues than any earlier historical literature in Iceland. History writing has given way to Christian biography.

Because so little material has survived, it is difficult to provide a general characterization of the historical outlook in the earliest period of Icelandic literature, let us say 1130 to 1180, the latter date being the earliest plausible moment for the composition of Oddr Snorrason's book. What remains is Ari's very brief survey, fragments of

**Hryggjarstykki*, and frail inferences from the later synoptic histories. These sources do not suggest a predominant Christian orientation but rather an even balance between religious and political issues. A consistently Christian focus does not surface until the composition of the full-length biographies of the two Óláfrs. There is some evidence that the anonymous author of the *Oldest Saga of Saint Olaf* made use of Oddr Snorrason's book, although the reverse order has also been argued.³⁰ Both books belong in a somewhat wider context than we find in the earlier period because they are contemporary with the first biographies of Icelandic bishops (*Hungrvaka*, *Jóns saga helga*, *Porláks saga*, and *Páls saga*).³¹ We could circumscribe this emergence of Christian biography with the dates 1180–1210. After 1210 saga writing is reoriented with the appearance of more political kings' sagas and the first sagas about Icelanders in the Saga Age. Illustrative of this evolution is the culminating text in the sequence of sagas devoted to Saint Óláfr, the saga that figures as the centerpiece in *Heimskringla* and has often been attributed to Snorri Sturluson.³²

For the moment we will be concerned not with this surpassing version but rather with two forerunners, the *Oldest Saga of Saint Olaf*, which survives only in six short fragments, and a slightly abbreviated and interpolated version of this original known as the *Legendary Saga of Saint Olaf*. The *Legendary Saga* is much inferior to the version in *Heimskringla* and must have been written earlier, perhaps between 1200 and 1220. There are peculiarities not only in the transmission of this text but also in the narrative flow.³³ Despite the protagonist's saintly standing, the first sixty percent of the saga (sixty-six chapters) is remarkably free of Christian inflections. Whereas Óláfr Tryggvason's birth is modeled on the nativity of Jesus and his enslavement in the East is modeled on the sale of Joseph into Egypt, Óláfr Haraldsson is born in a mildly heathenish ambience with magical overtones. He is a Christian from the outset, but not explicitly so. The Christian moments are in fact few and far between and can be quickly summarized.

In chapter 12 Óláfr proves to be a more punctual presence at church services than King Knútr inn ríki (Canute or Cnut the Great) of England and is therefore viewed by the bishop as a more genuine king. In chapters 13–14 he is assisted in battle by a body of mysterious followers who are identified as "God's knights." In chapter 16 he is encircled by his Swedish enemies, but sails directly at a headland,

which miraculously splits and allows him to escape. In the same chapter he pursues his viking campaigns but is stranded and imperiled in Ireland; he vows to abandon his viking ways and is immediately refloated. In chapter 19 he learns from a hermit that he will be not only a temporal but also an eternal king. On his arrival in Norway in chapters 29–30 he sets about repairing the Christian faith, which has fallen into neglect after the death of Óláfr Tryggvason. He gives the Norwegians a choice between conversion or death, but there is no heartless itemizing of the threat as in Oddr's saga. In fact King Óláfr directly countermands violent proselytizing in chapter 52: "[H]e says that it is best for God not to have forced service."³⁴ Following this attention to the faith we find in chapters 31–36 the tale of Dala-Guðbrandr's conversion, which all scholars agree is an interpolation with a prior independent existence because, although not copied from the *Legendary Saga*, it recurs in similar form in the *Heimskringla* version of the saga. Finally, there is a mention of further conversion activity in the provinces in chapter 39. These various interludes neither cohere nor do they explore Óláfr's Christian consciousness. Instead they focus on the king's political career until he is forced to retreat before King Knútr inn ríki's onslaught in 1028.

Then suddenly, at chapter 67, the narrative takes on a different hue and becomes an only intermittently broken sequence of miracles and Christian gestures covering chapters 67–69, 72–79, 82–89. The sequence begins with the miraculous clearing of a rocky stretch on the retreat route and Óláfr's miraculous feeding of his army. As he retreats, he continues his conversion efforts and ultimately makes his way to Russia. When the regent installed in Norway by King Knútr inn ríki dies, leaving the country without a ruler, Óláfr longs to return. His march is punctuated by more miracles, his insistence on recruiting only Christian troops, acts of Christian humility and forbearance, and visions. When he falls at Stiklarstaðir, the sun darkens.

Not all the concluding chapters are characterized by Christian emphases. Some are partly or largely given over to Óláfr's military progress, how he retreats to Russia, sets out to recover his realm, is well received by the Swedish king, recruits forces, and draws up his army at Stiklarstaðir. The narrative from chapter 67 to chapter 89 in effect tells two stories, the story of Óláfr's attempted reconquest and the story of his acts of faith toward the end of his life. These stories are

not contingent on each other and seem quite separable, just as the two parts of the larger narrative, one with a secular focus and the other with a Christian focus, seem curiously disconnected. The two-track narrative of chapters 67–89 might even suggest that this portion of the saga is a Christianizing revision of a secular original matching the style of chapters 1–66. We know that the *Legendary Saga* is in fact a revised version of the *Oldest Saga* because of the addition of the story about Dala-Guðbrandr in chapters 31–36 and the addition of a long series of miracles in chapters 90–107. What these interpolations have in common is that they add a Christian focus that is ultimately responsible for the title *Legendary Saga*.³⁵ A postulated revision of chapters 67–89 with the same Christian focus as the miracle section would therefore be consistent with the known textual history.

The two interpolations and a putative Christian revision could quite possibly be from the same hand. The tale of the conversion of Dala-Guðbrandr is brilliantly narrated and not consonant with the workaday style in the rest of the saga. It must have been a separate composition by a particularly gifted writer and could have been inserted at any time. It is, however, conceivable that the Christianization of chapters 67–89 and the added miracles in chapters 90–107 are the work of one and the same writer. This speculation is of course predicated on the assumption that the secular layer in the run of chapters 1–66 came first and was available for revision.

Such an assumption need not mean that there existed a very early version of the saga; the echoes from Oddr Snorrason's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* would seem to argue that Oddr's book was composed first and the *Oldest Saga* later, hence not long before 1200. The hypothesis does, however, suggest that the textual history is more complicated than hitherto supposed. There could have been a secularly styled *Oldest Saga* interpolated and revised in one or more stages and leading to the composition of the *Legendary Saga* sometime between Oddr Snorrason's saga and the redaction of Óláfr Haraldsson's saga in *Heimskringla*. There is latitude for the revision because none of the narrative in chapters 67–89 is guaranteed for the *Oldest Saga* by the six extant fragments. We therefore have no way of telling how this portion of the story was originally transmitted. Our assessment of the textual history depends entirely on our judgment of how great the disparity is between the run of chapters from 67 to 89 and the first 66

chapters in the *Legendary Saga*. If we think that the two sequences are narratively consistent, we may be content with a single antecedent redaction and a single author, but if we judge them to be inconsistent, we may think in terms of an intermediate revision by a writer with his own special Christian orientation.

From the viewpoint of literary history we might expect the style and outlook of the *Legendary Saga* to be in line with its immediate forerunner Oddr Snorrason's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, all the more so because the former seems to have borrowed episodes from Oddr.³⁶ But if we consider the narrative skeleton of the *Legendary Saga* without interpolations and possible revisions, it reveals none of the aggressive Christianizing that runs through Oddr's book. It is indeed so secular that it might be suspected of standing in deliberate opposition to its predecessor. So much is suggested by the words attributed to King Óláfr in chapter 52, to the effect that "it is better that God not have forced service," a principle that runs directly counter to the conversion excesses in Oddr's saga. If so, we can only conclude that such religious neutrality did not satisfy the later interpolator or interpolators faced with a secular model; he or they set about recasting the text more in the mold of Oddr Snorrason's Christian biography.

If it is true that the original form of the *Oldest Saga* was largely secular, how should we fit it into the literary evolution at the end of the twelfth century? We could imagine that it was in the first instance a reaction against the religiously overburdened *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*. Or we could imagine that it is a reversion to the ideological neutrality that seems to have been prevalent before 1180 in Ari's *Íslendingabók* and **Hryggjarstykki*. Or we could view it as the first glimmer of the new objectivity that emerges in the native sagas, even in the earliest ones after 1200. Given the extreme paucity of texts and the convention of authorial reserve, it is difficult to weigh these options. Perhaps the more crucial question is how the authors of the Óláfr sagas evaluated their protagonists. We have seen that there may have been latent reservations in the sources available to Oddr Snorrason, but it is even clearer that Oddr chose to idealize and promote Óláfr as a hero and a tireless advocate of Christianity. The biographer of Óláfr Haraldsson was no less partisan. In later sources Óláfr helgi is charged with holding Icelandic hostages against their will and seeking to intrude on Icelandic territory, but there is

not a word about these incursions into Icelandic sovereignty in the *Legendary Saga*. Although the original author of the *Oldest Saga* may have done relatively little to promote Óláfr's Christian credentials, he certainly records nothing that would detract from his protagonist's reputation as a warrior, a wise ruler, and a faithful Christian.

We may therefore conclude that the first full-length histories of the Norwegian kings undertaken by Icelandic writers were in an entirely positive vein. On the other hand, we should probably not imagine that these two isolated sagas necessarily reflected public opinion. Oddr Snorrason was a monk and seems surely to have had what we would categorize as a monk's attitudes. The unknown author of the *Oldest Saga of Saint Olaf* may also have been a cleric, or perhaps just a royalist, but there could very well have been competing views of Norwegian royalty in Iceland. Indeed, the next phase of writing about Norwegian kings suggests that there was dissent as well as the panegyric streak we have seen in the Óláfr sagas.

2. Saga Morphologies

The concept of kings' lives or royal biographies dates back to the days of Sæmundr Sigfússon and Ari Þorgilsson in the early twelfth century, although the works so labeled are not preserved. The biographical form was subsequently consolidated in the separate sagas of Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson in the period 1180–1200 and was further reinforced by the appearance of the first bishops' sagas in the early thirteenth century. Biography was therefore a well-established literary type in the first two decades of the thirteenth century when the first sagas about early Icelanders came into being. It comes as no surprise then that some of these sagas also appropriated the biographic form. *Egils saga* in particular is self-consciously biographical and might indeed be understood as an anti-king's saga in its projection of a great Icelandic chieftain who contests royal Norwegian authority on an equal footing. The adoption of a biographical form in the native sagas seems to have been a peculiarly western Icelandic impulse and included two other skald sagas, *Bjarnar saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga*. *Eyrbyggja saga* is more complex, but one of the strands is a biography of Snorri the Chieftain.

Given the dominant position of the biography around 1200, it is perhaps surprising that not all the native sagas adopted this form,

but the sagas about early Icelanders, which began to be written about this time, were rarely biographical. Instead they tended to cluster around feuds and regional antagonisms, as we will see in Chapter 5. It is particularly the sagas of the north in the Eyjafjörðr region that escaped the biographical frame. They focused instead on competition for leadership and the personal qualities required for leadership. For the moment I will illustrate this type by rehearsing one of the shortest examples, titled *Valla-Ljóts saga*, perhaps from the 1220s or a little later.³⁷ It numbers no more than twenty-seven pages in the standard edition and is among the most condensed of the stories from the Saga Age, although in typical saga fashion it deals with more than one generation and a fairly numerous cast of characters.

As not infrequently in the sagas, the action begins with a mischief-maker named Halli Sigurðarson who is at home in the valley running south from Eyjafjörðr. His father dies, leaving a widow and three sons. A man of some wealth but little social standing, Tjörvi Þorgeirsson, woos the widowed mother, who consents with the agreement of two sons, but Halli withholds his agreement because of the social disparity. While performing an errand, Halli is quite egregiously insulted by Tjörvi and reacts by killing him. The killing case is settled, but the seeds of conflict have been sown.

At first Halli's future looks promising. He becomes a staunch supporter of the great northern chieftain Guðmundr ríki (the Powerful), but on a festive occasion he expresses the wish to move to the northwest to a valley called Svarfaðardalr, branching off Eyjafjörðr. The motivation seems to be partly that he has become unpopular in local disputes and partly that he has kinsmen in his present district who are more influential and relegate him to secondary status. Guðmundr tries to discourage him, noting that there are powerful rivals in Svarfaðardalr as well, but Halli is undeterred and buys land in the new region. Here he asserts himself quite wantonly against the local chieftain Ljótr Ljótólfsson. Ljótr is an exceptionally reasonable, even deferential, character, but he eventually retaliates and kills Halli. This case too is settled.

The following summer a ship with residents of Svarfaðardalr aboard, including kinsmen of Ljótr's, returns to Eyjafjörðr. Halli's older brother Hrólfr, an unsavory character, lures Ljótr's nephew Þorvarðr into a trap and kills him. Once more a settlement is reached

with Ljótr, on Guðmundr's initiative, and peace is restored. Two years later another ship arrives, this time with Halli's good-hearted brother Bǫðvarr and Halli's son Bersi. Bǫðvarr transacts business with a man from Óláfsfjörðr north of Svarfaðardalr. During the winter he goes north to collect his purchase, but on his way home his group is ambushed and both Bǫðvarr and Bersi are killed. The chieftains Guðmundr and Ljótr now consolidate their camps, and Guðmundr makes an exploratory foray into Ljótr's territory. They come face to face and Guðmundr aims a spear, a precious possession, at his antagonist, only to have Ljótr make off with the spear.

The case is subsequently brought to the *alþingi* and negotiations ensue. The key gesture on Ljótr's part is to return the valuable spear voluntarily to Guðmundr, thus ensuring that the negotiations will conclude with due deference to both chieftains: "Ljótr was considered to be a very great chieftain" and "Guðmundr maintained his reputation until the day of his death."³⁸ Guðmundr receives every token of respect and appears in a more favorable light than elsewhere in the sagas, but it is Ljótr who emerges with the greatest mark of esteem because of his moderation and judiciousness.

The author does not, however, place either chieftain in biographical relief. The period of time accounted for is a relatively short twenty-five years, enough time to allow Halli's son Bersi to come of age. There is no attempt to trace the life of either chieftain and no mention of events beyond the narrow focus of a single feud. The saga is a feud story, not a life story. If there is any other narrative principle, we might consider it to be the regional focus. The saga tells the story of a conflict between the residents of two valleys. Each group has its territory and its inner coherence, and each group is referred to as a distinctive party: "Those people in Svarfaðardalr are really coming up in the world now."³⁹ Or soon thereafter Ljótr justifies avoiding a clash with the residents of Eyjafjörðr by saying: "It would have been hard for us and we would have been overmatched against those people in Eyjafjörðr."⁴⁰ The personal clash in the feud is reinforced by a discussion of regional advantages between Halli and Guðmundr (ÍF 9:238; trans., p. 261). Guðmundr claims that Svarfaðardalr is subject to snow and hard winters, but Halli counters that food is more easily available there and that there are more opportunities for making money. The regions are seen in terms of economic advantages as well as in terms of leadership qualities.

We may wonder where this sort of regional and political contentiousness comes from since it is not present in the sagas of western Iceland. I will suggest further along that it may owe something to the history of regional and political strife in Norway. The Icelanders were in constant communication with the Norwegians at home, abroad, and on the high seas. They must have known a great deal about Norwegian history, both recent and more remote. Indeed, they could have had a rather firmer idea of Norwegian history than the Norwegians themselves, to the extent that they had undertaken the task of writing it down.

During the early period beginning with Haraldr hárfagri (ca. 873–933) down through the two Óláfrs and including the hundred years from 1030 to 1130 Norway had been ruled by a succession of largely unchallenged kings. There were exceptions to perfect unity; King Magnús Ólafsson and King Haraldr Sigurðarson had shared the throne for a short time in 1046–47, and the sons of Magnús berfœttr (Bareleg), Eysteinn and Sigurður jórsalafari, shared the rule from 1103 to the date of Eysteinn's death in 1122. In both cases there had been frictions but no outbreaks of armed hostility. That changed after 1130 when the son of Sigurður jórsalafari, Magnús, succeeded to the throne, then recognized the fraternal allegation of the Irish-speaking Haraldr gilli with the stipulation that he not lay claim to the throne. Haraldr broke the agreement, captured Magnús, and disqualified him from any further claim by blinding and maiming him, causing him to go down in history as Magnús blindi (the Blind). Haraldr in turn fell at the hands of another pretender, Sigurður slembir. Sigurður claimed to be a son of Magnús berfœttr (Bareleg). Both Magnús blindi and Sigurður slembir were killed in 1139, and Sigurður was memorialized in **Hryggjarstykki*.

This was only the beginning of a bloody tale of claim and counterclaim that lasted a full hundred years down to about 1230 when Hákon Hákonarson succeeded in making his claim to the throne secure and remained in control until his death in 1263. In Norwegian history these hundred years are known as the period of civil wars, although Gathorne-Hardy once pointed out that “dynastic struggle” might be more appropriate.⁴¹ The first attempt to fill the gap between the Óláfr sagas ending in 1030 and *Sverris saga*, which recounted King Sverrir's advent from 1177 down to his death in 1202, is the Icelandic history known as *Morkinskinna* (rotten parchment,

from the misnomer of the only surviving manuscript). But *Morkinskinna* is incomplete and breaks off in 1157. It must therefore be supplemented by *Heimskringla*, the third part of which covers the period 1030 to 1177. Thereafter *Sverris saga* carries the story down to 1202, at which point the tale is pursued in the fragmentarily transmitted *Boglunga sögur* (the sagas of the [Birkibeinar and] Baglar) down to 1217 and *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, written by the prolific Icelandic chronicler Sturla Þórðarson in the 1260s.⁴² Around 1230 the Icelanders would thus have had a written version of Norwegian history down to 1217 and presumably some oral accounts of Norwegian events from 1217 to 1230, not unlike what Sturla Þórðarson would set down much later.

In the nineteenth century Norwegian writers tried to extract the history of the period of civil strife from the Icelandic texts, and more recently they have tried to explicate the causes on the basis of economic, political, or social factors.⁴³ The sagas, both the native sagas and the kings' sagas, are difficult to use for historical purposes. The native sagas have been recast from oral transmissions with the use of literary strategies, as can be seen from the summary of *Valla-Ljóts saga* above. They are narratives with recurrent and characteristic patterns and can be studied in terms of plot. *Valla-Ljóts saga* is typical; it is a story of mounting conflicts culminating in a peaceful resolution. The kings' sagas covering the twelfth century are not patterned or plotted in the same sense, nor are they, strictly speaking, biographical like the Óláfr sagas, with the notable exception of *Sverris saga*. The lives and reigns of the kings and claimants in this period were for the most part too brief and their origins often too obscure to allow for literary formulation.

Because *Morkinskinna* is incomplete, we will begin with *Heimskringla* III, which provides an overview of the period 1130–77 organized into four subnarratives, one on Magnús blindi and Haraldr gilli as well as the interloper Sigurðr slembir (1130–39), another on the sons of Haraldr gilli (1139–57), a third on Hákon herðibreidr (Broad-Shoulders) (1157–62), and finally the tale of Magnús Erlingsson (1162–77). It is clear that there is not the stuff of biography in this seesaw sequence of rivalries. What we find instead is an account of campaigns, fleet movements between Trondheim and Bergen or between Bergen and Vík, and overland marches in every

direction, for example between what is now Sweden and western Norway or between Vík and Trondheim. Sometimes there are major battles, but sometimes the displacements lead to no real outcome.

Most of the narrative in *Heimskringla* is taken over directly from *Morkinskinna*; hence there is no mystery about the immediate source, and the fundamental questions must be put to *Morkinskinna* rather than *Heimskringla*. The most detailed information on source material can be found in the narrative of Sigurðr slembir. In this section both the author of *Morkinskinna* and the author of *Heimskringla* III refer to the lost account in **Hryggjarstykki* by Eiríkr Oddsson and reproduce the names of source persons who are mentioned in that book. According to *Morkinskinna* Eiríkr attributed special importance to the district chieftain Hákon magi: “[the story of Eiríkr Oddsson] is mostly according to the account of the district chieftain Hákon magi. He supervised the story when it was written for the first time, and he himself and his sons participated in these marches and most of the battles. The men mentioned here were known to him. And the man who wrote the tale also named several truthful men as sources for the account.”⁴⁴ This piece of information is revealing on two counts. It shows that Icelandic writers like Eiríkr Oddsson could have first-hand access to reports from Norwegian contemporaries, and it shows that these reports could come from persons directly involved in the military operations that characterize the age.

On the other hand, the information need not have been limited to Norwegian sources. In a passage not taken over by *Heimskringla* the author of *Morkinskinna* (ÍF 24:173–75) tells us that Sigurðr slembir spent a winter in Iceland with the chieftain in the northwest, Þorgils Oddason. Bjarni Guðnason calculated that Sigurðr’s stay in Iceland would have been in 1135–36, and there would already have been much to tell.⁴⁵ Another member of Þorgils’s family, Einarr Ögmundarson, who was the son of Þorgils’s cousin, also befriended Sigurðr in Norway.⁴⁶ In addition there were Icelanders present at the Battle of Hólmr inn grái (Holmengrå) in 1139, a priest named Sigurðr Bergþórsson and Klemet Arason.⁴⁷ It should be noted that Klemet was the son of another of Þorgils Oddason’s cousins, so that it may be surmised that he was fighting on the side of Magnús blindi and Sigurðr slembir. These two Icelanders fell in battle and were therefore in no position to report news of the event, but it seems not

unlikely that other Icelanders could have survived to contribute to the unusually detailed account of the battle and the aftermath.

Echoing *Morkinskinna*, the account of Magnús blindi and Haraldr gilli in *Heimskringla* III is also predominantly military in orientation. It begins with the acceptance of Haraldr as king in Túnberg (Tønsberg) and provides some information on his and Magnús's marriages, but it launches almost immediately into Magnús's resolve to dethrone Haraldr and his gathering of forces in the south. These preparations culminate in the Battle of Fyrileif (1134), prefaced by observations and dialogue in Haraldr's camp, as if someone on the scene were reporting to the author. The battle itself is visualized with the background and circumstances of the death of Haraldr's brother in sufficient detail to put us once more in mind of an eyewitness. At this point Haraldr is put to flight and takes refuge in Denmark, as is often the lot of the defeated faction in the dynastic struggles of the twelfth century. Here Haraldr is able to enlist the aid of the Danish king and then gather forces in Vík.

What follows is a vivid scene not from Haraldr's camp but from Magnús's headquarters in Bergen.⁴⁸ Magnús consults with his advisers, notably Sigurðr Sigurðarson, on what course to take. Sigurðr makes recommendations of ever decreasing efficacy, but Magnús, clearly overtaken by ill-fated indecision, chooses to do nothing. He sits tight only to be trapped in Bergen, and is then captured, blinded, and maimed so that he is disabled in the competition for the throne (1135). Haraldr thus becomes sole king of Norway. The scene then shifts to Konungahella in the east, where the author also appears to have first-hand sources because he is able to relay a very detailed account of a fierce attack on that town by the Wends. This is the moment at which Sigurðr slambir appears on the scene. He appeals to Haraldr for recognition of his kinship, but he is charged with an earlier killing and is put in irons, presumably to be executed. This setback is converted into an opportunity for a lively escape drama and a return to Bergen, where Sigurðr employs a ruse to ascertain Haraldr's exact location and kill him in bed, a scene once again rendered in precise detail (1136). Sigurðr now lays claim to the kingship but is rejected by the local population and must withdraw to Hjørðaland and Sogn. Here he succeeds and is acclaimed king.⁴⁹

What is remarkable in this sequence of events is the close

visualization of the central scenes. These details must ultimately derive from persons who actually witnessed them, whether they were Norwegians such as Hákon magi, Icelandic recruits such as Sigurðr Bergþórsson and Klemet Arason, or leading participants such as Sigurðr slembir himself. The details seem not only to be first-hand but also to have been colored by vivid narrative conventions such as dramatic dialogue and a stress on imminent fate. We find examples of this in Magnús's exchange with his adviser or the heroically tinged escape of Sigurðr slembir from captivity. History has palpably crossed into story. Occasionally there is some factual information on genealogy or family, but the emphasis is chiefly on mobilization and maneuvers by land and sea, at Fyrileif, in Vík, in Bergen, and ultimately in Hordaland and Sogn. Haraldr gilli and Sigurðr slembir succeed for a time through mobility, while Magnús fails through immobility, and each phase of the action is apt to culminate in a regular battle.

This pattern persists in the section on Haraldr gilli's sons by three different mothers, Sigurðr (by Þóra), Ingi (by Ingiríðr), and Eysteinn (by Bjaðǫk).⁵⁰ Here the sequence of battles or major encounters includes the Battle of Minne (1137), in which Ingi's adherents defeat the followers of Magnús blindi, the Battle of Hólmr inn grái (1139), in which Magnús blindi and Sigurðr slembir are killed, and an urban skirmish in Bergen (1155), in which Sigurðr Haraldsson falls. The interstices are given over to matters such as Magnús blindi's gathering of forces, his persuasion of the Danish king Erik Emune to join an ill-fated attack on Norway, Sigurðr slembir's raids, Ingi's appeal to his brother Sigurðr for help, and Eysteinn's alienation from his followers and subsequent death. There are a few pages on personalia, for example the birth and early adventures of Erlingr Kyrpinga-Ormsson (later Erlingr skakki) who becomes the dominant figure in the next generation, the begetting of Hákon herðibreiðr (another future claimant), a visit to Norway by Cardinal Nicholas, and two Olavian miracle stories, but the tale is clearly dominated by armed clashes and the uneasy relations among the brothers.

They manage well enough as long as they are under the tutelage of their chief councilors (ÍF 28:330), but, as they attain maturity, their relationship deteriorates: Sigurðr is suspected of plotting the death of Ingi's ally Óttarr birtingr, Sigurðr and Eysteinn combine in an attempt to exclude Ingi from his share of the throne, and there are violent

clashes between Ingi's chief confidant Grégóriús Dagsson and Ingi's two brothers, leading finally to the death of both.

Here too there are several episodes that show the imprint of eyewitness reporting, as in the earlier narrative. One such is Sigurðr slembir's killing of Ingi's redoubtable retainer Benteinn Kolbeinsson. Benteinn prepares to defend himself in his doorway and the attackers shrink back, but Sigurðr, undismayed, rushes in, lays his victim low, and emerges with his head.⁵¹ At the Battle of Hólmr inn grái the death of Magnús is described in close detail and the death of Sigurðr slembir in horrific detail, such that some of his enemies choose not to witness it.⁵² The death of Óttarr birtingr is particularly notorious because the author tells us what he could not have known, namely what passed through the victim's mind just before he was struck down. He thought the whistling of the descending weapon was a snowball, not the sort of information that would have been accessible to a witness, even though there was one.⁵³

Interesting in a similar way is the begetting of Hákon herðibreiðr. King Sigurðr rides by a house and hears a woman (she turns out to be a serving woman) singing beautifully. He enters the house and fathers a child with her. This too is not likely to have been verifiable by a witness, but the farmer in the household seems to be aware of what is happening and takes it on himself to provide carefully for the woman. Finally, the death scenes of both King Sigurðr and King Eysteinn are narrated in specific detail, but these were more public events.

That there may have been Icelandic as well as Norwegian witnesses is not altogether speculative, least of all at the Battle of Hólmr inn grái. We have seen that there were Icelandic participants present on this occasion (ÍF 24:205), and *Heimskringla* III reinforces the point:

Hallr, the son of Þorgeirr Steinsson, a physician, was a retainer of King Ingi and was present at these events. He reported to Eiríkr Oddsson, who wrote this story. Eiríkr wrote the book titled **Hryggjarstykki*. In that book it is told about Haraldr and his two sons and about Magnús blindi (the Blind) and Sigurðr slembir right down to the time of their death [1139]. Eiríkr was a wise man and spent a long time in Norway during this period. He wrote some of the story according to the district chieftain Hákon magi in the service of the sons of Haraldr's sons. Hákon and his sons participated in all these disputes and councils.

And Eiríkr names other men who told him about these events, men who were wise and truthful and were close by so that they heard about or witnessed the events; some of it he wrote on the basis of what he himself heard and saw.⁵⁴

This is perhaps the clearest account of transmission from Norway that we can find anywhere in the saga texts, but it is not the only evidence of ready communication between Norway and Iceland. *Prestssaga Guðmundar Arasonar* tells us that in 1158 the distinguished northern Icelandic chieftain Þorvarðr Þorgeirsson went to Norway and, after an inauspicious beginning, became a retainer of King Ingi's.⁵⁵ His devotion was such that on his return to Iceland after Ingi's death in 1161 he vowed never to serve another king because none was Ingi's equal. He also urged his brother Ari not to join the faction opposed to Ingi. As a consequence Ari allied himself with Erlingr skakki and died in his service. The saga author mentions three battles in which Erlingr fought against Hákon herðibreiðr and defeated him.⁵⁶ Both Þorvarðr and Ari would therefore have been fully informed about King Ingi and his brothers.

Hákon herðibreiðr tries to make good his claim to the throne but is repeatedly checked. His story covers only three or four years from his rise to his demise at the Battle of Sekk (Sekken) in 1161. Like the sons of Haraldr gilli, Hákon is acclaimed as king at the very young age of ten and is therefore still a young teenager when he succumbs four years later. His short life amounts to nothing more than a sequence of defeats. Ingi's lieutenant Grégóriús puts his men to flight in Konungahella, and they must be content to raid in the Mœrr districts, which had never before suffered invasion. They also have designs on Bergen but must fall back in the face of unfavorable odds. They suffer a second defeat against Grégóriús and Erlingr skakki at the Gautelfr (Götaälv) and this encounter is described at length with the inclusion of extended speeches. They are routed again by Ingi and Grégóriús in Vík, then suffer further losses at Saurbýir (Sörbygden). In a lesser skirmish at Fors (Fossum) Grégóriús falls and Ingi foresees his own end, which occurs at Oslo when Ingi is still only twenty-five years old.⁵⁷ Hákon now becomes king, but his success is of short duration, as is told in the concluding section of his tale.

Icelandic participation is once more highlighted in this short

succession of military clashes. At the first battle at Konungahella an exploit is attributed to a certain Hallr Auðunarson, who is addressed by Grégóriús as an Icelander (ÍF 28:348–49). When Grégóriús falls at Fors (Fossum), it is noted that he was not only the greatest of the Norwegian chieftains but also that he was especially good to Icelanders.⁵⁸ There must therefore have been other Icelanders in his following. Finally, in connection with the battle at the Götaälv two stanzas are quoted from a poem that Einarr Skúlason composed for Grégóriús and bears the title “Elfarvísur.”⁵⁹ Einarr may or may not have been present, but he seems to have been fully apprised of the event.

In the final section of *Heimskringla* III Erlingr skakki emerges as the leading figure and is able to put his son Magnús on the throne despite a lack of royal lineage on the male side. Like Haraldr gilli, Magnús blindi (the Blind), and Sigurðr slembir before him, Erlingr seeks to strengthen his hand by appealing to King Valdemar of Denmark. In exchange he offers Valdemar the rule of Vík, a move that contributes further to the dissension in Norway. In the meantime Hákon herðibreiðr is declared king in Trondheim, but in a move south he must retreat in the face of an attack by Erlingr in Túnsberg and return to Trondheim. The decisive moment comes in a naval battle off the island of Sekk (1162), in which Hákon is defeated and killed. That allows Magnús Erlingsson to claim the whole of Norway, but no sooner has one claimant been disposed of than another rises in the person of Sigurðr, the son of Sigurðr munnr (the son of Haraldr gilli), who has been fostered by a certain Markús in Upplönd (Opplandene).

The forces of the two claimants clash variously, but the promoters of Sigurðr lose decisively at Ré (Ramnes), although Sigurðr himself is able to escape. The reprieve is brief, and the district chieftain Níkolás Sigurðarson is eventually able to track down Sigurðr and his foster father Markús on the island of Skarpa off Bergen and execute them. Erlingr takes advantage of this success to consolidate his position, come to terms with Archbishop Eysteinn Erlendsson, and have his son anointed king (1164).

There follows the story of how Erlingr manages to satisfy the Danish king Valdemar despite the fact that the Norwegians refuse categorically to submit any part of Norway to his rule. In the meantime yet another (unnamed) pretender is put forward in Upplönd, but is

forced to flee to Denmark, where he succumbs to an early death in 1169. But, as always, there is no shortage of claimants. The next one is Eysteinn meyla, who claims to be the son of Eysteinn Haraldsson. He is able to recruit supporters, who come to be known as Birkibeinar (Birchlegs) because they are so impoverished in the wilderness that they must cover their legs with birch bark. Despite this unpromising start Eysteinn succeeds to the point of being acclaimed as king in Trondheim, but he is ultimately defeated by King Magnús and is killed as he takes refuge in a farmer's house (1177).

Like the previous narratives, this one is dominated by military activities, especially up to the time when Sigurðr Sigurðarson is killed at Ré. The battle descriptions are long on planning, tactical maneuvers, and battle oratory. Once again we must believe that these details are most easily explained as accounts provided by participants. And once again there is evidence of Icelanders who were present at the engagements. Þorvarðr Þorgeirsson's brother Ari, mentioned above, was in the service of Erlingr skakki and is said to have fallen in 1167. He would have been a good source of information about Erlingr's campaigns up to that time.

In addition we may take note of Þorvarðr Þorgeirsson's nephew Einarr Helgason, who, according to *Sturlu saga*, went abroad to serve with Magnús Erlingsson and fell at the Battle of Ílúvellir (Ilevollene).⁶⁰ Einarr could have been a source of information down to 1180 when that battle was fought. These individuals suggest that there was a regular flow of ambitious young men from Iceland to Norway in the twelfth century. Some of them undoubtedly chose to engage in trade, but others seem to have been attracted to the military life and could have told much about the civil turmoil in Norway. It should also be pointed out that there were literary aspirations in the family of Þorvarðr Þorgeirsson and that campaign stories from Norway could have been conveyed on parchment as well as by word of mouth.⁶¹

This was most prominently the case in *Heimskringla* III, which is the favored source for historians who write about the twelfth century in Norway. Not only is it more complete than *Morkinskinna* but it is also connected with the magic name of Snorri Sturluson, who may very well be the author and who had plentiful sources of information from Norway. On the other hand, it must be conceded that the latter parts are a rather dry chronicle despite the dramatic military

action they narrate. The style of narration has changed radically in comparison to the sagas of the two Óláfrs. We are given only military fragments and little sense of the personalities of the various kings and the issues they confront. There is no sign of the narrative breadth that we find in the story of Óláfr Haraldsson in *Heimskringla* II. Exciting narrative seems not to have been the product of eyewitness accounts but rather of the telling and retelling over time, in the course of which the stories seem to have improved and become more dramatic. In addition, *Heimskringla* III is almost disappointingly nonpartisan, offering little in the way of opinion or explanation. We will see in the next chapter that *Morkinskinna* offers substantially more.