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The Sagas of Norwegian Kings (1130–1265)

An Introduction

THEODORE M. ANDERSSON

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Kings (1130–1265)*

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THEODORE M. ANDERSSON

ISLANDICA LIX

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Contents

List of Maps	vi
Preface	vii
Abbreviations	xi
Chronology of Early Norwegian Kings	xiii
CHAPTER 1	
Medieval Contacts between Norway and Iceland	I
CHAPTER 2	
Early Epitomes and Biographies	25
CHAPTER 3	
The Character of Kings: <i>Morkinskinna</i> and <i>Fagrskinna</i>	51
CHAPTER 4	
An Imperiled World: <i>Heimskringla</i>	75
CHAPTER 5	
In Quest of a Leader: <i>Sverris saga</i>	105
CHAPTER 6	
A Historical Mirage: <i>Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar</i>	133
Conclusion	155
Notes	163
Bibliography	183
Index of Authors and Titles	197

List of Maps

Central and South Norway	xiv
Map no. 1 of Iceland: Saga Age ship landing sites (ca. 930-1050)	23
Map no. 2 of Iceland: Thirteenth-century landing sites	24

Preface

The purpose of the present volume is to provide the nonspecialist with a first orientation on the category of Icelandic sagas known as “kings’ sagas.” They are so titled because they typically, though not exclusively, recount the lives of the Norwegian kings from ca. 900 down to the thirteenth century. Two short Latin histories of these kings were written by Norwegians in the twelfth century, but the more extended vernacular histories, with one possible exception, were the work of Icelanders in the period 1130 to 1263. They reached their fullest and liveliest form in the three so-called “compendia” between ca. 1220 and ca. 1235.

After 1200 the extended kings’ sagas were in competition with the sagas about early Icelanders (“family sagas”). The latter are much better known and more easily available in modern translations. The kings’ sagas are less well known outside of Scandinavia, where there is of course a living interest in the earliest native kings. The interaction between kings’ sagas and “family sagas” has not been much discussed but is touched on in several chapters below. The “family sagas” have, on the other hand, elicited a large critical literature and avid appreciations for more than a century. This introduction is part of an attempt at correcting the imbalance. It is intended for general readers and does not presuppose any linguistic skills. As a consequence quotations appear only in (my own) English translation. The bibliography nonetheless includes studies in other languages for those who wish to pursue the subject further.

Though small in compass, my orientation is heavily freighted with obligations. Most importantly it was carried out under the auspices of a fellowship from the Mellon Foundation. That sponsorship allowed me to venture well beyond the confines of academic libraries in the United States. It enabled me to spend July of 2012 in Iceland and benefit from the expertise of my Icelandic colleagues Ármann Jakobsson, Gísli Sigurðsson, Guðrún Nordal, Gunnar Karlsson, Helgi Þorláksson, Sverrir Jakobsson,

Torfi Tulinius, and Úlfar Bragason. I am particularly indebted to Helgi Þorláksson, who drove me to the site of the most important western harbor site at Hvítá, and to Gísli Sigurðsson, who gave me the use of his office in the Stofnun Árna Magnússonar while he was on summer vacation. One of the following chapters was drafted there. The study of medieval Iceland is more than ever centered in Iceland, and the opportunity to consult with these colleagues was of great value to me. My Mellon grant also allowed me to attend the Fifteenth International Saga Conference in Aarhus in August of 2012. I read a paper related to the first chapter in the present book and profited greatly from the lively discussion that ensued. Most of all a week's attendance at a broad range of papers kept me more up to date on saga matters than I would otherwise have been.

Before the onset of the Mellon grant I had treated myself to a month's stay in Ithaca, New York, where I could avail myself of the wealth of materials in Cornell's Fiske Collection, which has a long history of fostering Icelandic studies in the United States. Patrick Stevens and the particularly kind staff of the Kroch Library patiently accessed journal after journal on a daily basis, and that material figures prominently in what follows. I am also indebted to the staff of Green Library at Stanford, especially to Mary Louise Munill, who procured a seemingly endless stream of books and papers from at home and abroad, and to Chris Matson and his reference colleagues for sharing the tricks of their trade and making Green such an agreeable center of learning. They make academic work not only possible but delightful.

In addition, I am much indebted to Patricia Carbajales and her staff of Geographic Information Systems in the School of Earth Sciences at Stanford. They gave me many patient lessons in computer mapmaking and enabled me to produce, however imperfectly, the maps of medieval Icelandic harbors that appear at the end of Chapter 1. Finally, I am beholden to my colleagues Anthony Faulkes and Alison Finlay, who sent me a preprint of the second volume of their new translation of *Heimskringla*, which made it possible to include page references. They also kindly allowed me to use the map of medieval Norway in their first volume, which is now reproduced at the beginning of this book.

At the last minute, when my manuscript was ready for production, I made the acquaintance of two colleagues, whose dissertations intersect to some extent with the present book: Verena Höfig ("Finding a Founding Father: Memory, Identity, and the Icelandic *landnám*") and Ann Marie

Long (“The Relationship between Iceland and Norway *c.* 870-*c.* 1100: Memory, History and Identity”). Both generously gave me access to their dissertations, and I have added them to my bibliography. On the other hand, since both are important contributions and will hopefully appear in print before long, I have refrained from detailed references that would anticipate their results and have included only a couple of general references (with their permission) in Chapter 1.

T.M.A.
Palo Alto, CA
January, 2015

Abbreviations

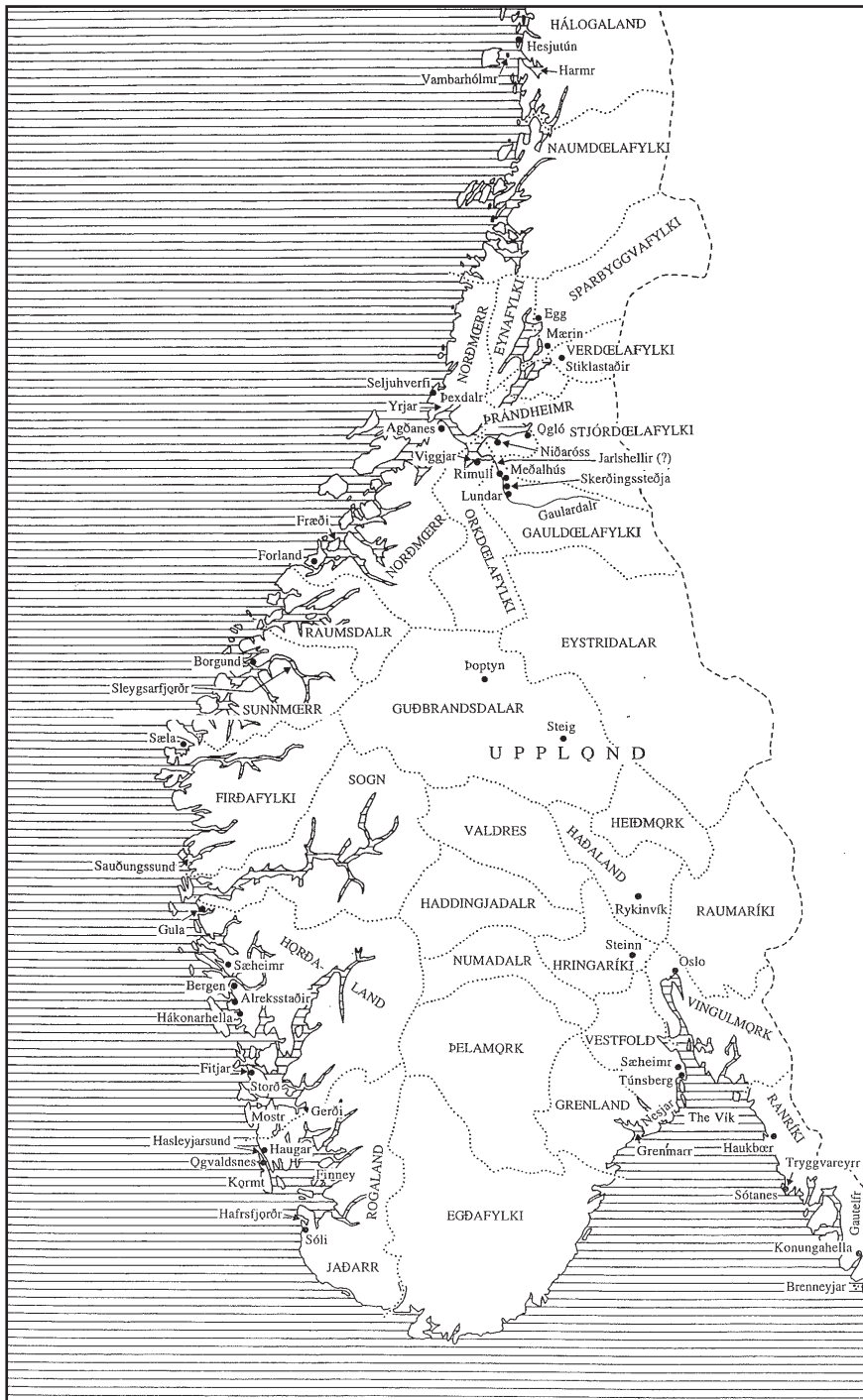
- ANF *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*
BA *Bibliotheca Arnarnaganaeana*
Bps. *Biskupa sögur*, gefnar út af Hinu íslenzka
 bókmenntafèlagi (Copenhagen, 1858)
ÍF *Íslenzk fornrit* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag)
 Vol. 1 (pts. 1 and 2): *Íslendingabók; Landnámabók*.
 Ed. Jakob Benediktsson (1968).
 Vol. 2: *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*.
 Ed. Sigurður Nordal (1933).
 Vol. 3: *Borgfirðinga sögur*. Ed. Sigurður
 Nordal and Guðni Jónsson (1938).
 Vol. 4: *Eyrbyggja saga*. Ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson
 and Matthías Þórðarson (1935).
 Vol. 5: *Laxdæla saga*. Ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1934).
 Vol. 6: *Vestfirðinga sögur*. Ed. Björn K.
 Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson (1943).
 Vol. 7: *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*. Ed. Guðni Jónsson (1936).
 Vol. 8: *Vatnsdæla saga*. Ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1939).
 Vol. 9: *Eyfirðinga sögur*. Ed. Jónas Kristjánsson (1956).
 Vol. 10: *Ljósvefninga saga*. Ed. Björn Sigfússon (1940).
 Vol. 11: *Austfirðinga sögur*. Ed. Jón Jóhannesson (1950).
 Vol. 12: *Brennu-Njáls saga*. Ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1954).
 Vol. 15 (pts. 1 and 2): *Biskupa sögur*. Ed. Sigurgeir
 Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson, and Peter Foote (2003).
 Vols. 23–24: *Morkinskinna*. Ed. Ármann Jakobsson
 and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson (2011).
 Vol. 25: *Færeyinga saga; Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar eptir*
 Odd munk Snorrason. Ed. Ólafur Halldórsson (2006).

- Vols. 26–28: *Heimskringla*. Ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (1941–51).
 Vol. 29: *Ágrip af Nóregskonunga sǫgum; Fagrskinna—Nóregs konunga tal*. Ed. Bjarni Einarsson (1985).
 Vol. 30: *Sverris saga*. Ed. Þorleifur Hauksson (2007).
 Vols. 31–32: *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar; Þóglunga saga; Magnúss saga Lagabætis*. Ed. Sverrir Jakobsson, Þorleifur Hauksson, and Tor Ulset (2013).

- JEGP *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*
 MHN *Monumenta Historica Norvegiae: Latinske kildeskrifter til Norges historie i middelalderen*
 NHT (Norsk) *Historisk Tidsskrift*
 NVAOA Avhandlingar utgitt av Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi i Oslo
 NVAOS Skrifter utgitt av Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi i Oslo
 SI *Scripta Islandica*
 SUGNL Samfund til udgivelse of gammel nordisk litteratur

Approximate Dates of Reign of the Early Norwegian Rulers

Haraldr hárfagri (Fairhair)
(late ninth century through the early tenth century)
Hákon góði (the Good) (934–60)
Haraldr gráfeldr (Graycloak) (960–75)
Hákon jarl (975–95)
Óláfr Tryggvason (995–1000)
Eiríkr and Sveinn (sons of Hákon jarl) (1000–1015)
Óláfr Haraldsson (Saint Olaf, Óláfr helgi) (1015–30)
Knútr inn ríki (Canute or Cnut the Great) (1028–35)
Magnús góði (the Good) (1035–47)
Haraldr harðráði (Hardrule) (1046–66)
Óláfr kyrri (the Quiet) (1066–93)
Magnús berfœttr (Bareleg) (1093–1103)
Eysteinn Magnússon (1103–23)
Óláfr Magnússon (1103–15)
Sigurðr Magnússon (1103–15)
Haraldr gilli (1130–36)
Magnús blindi (the Blind) (1130–39)
Sigurðr Haraldsson (1136–55)
Ingi Haraldsson (1136–61)
Eysteinn Haraldsson (1142–57)
Sigurðr slembir (1136–39)
Hákon herðibreiðr (Broad Shoulders) (1157–62)
Magnús Erlingsson (1161–84)
Sverrir Sigurðarson (1184–1202)
Hákon Hákonarson (1217–63)



Central and South Norway

CHAPTER I

Medieval Contacts between Norway and Iceland

Magnús biskup kom til Íslands um alþingi, ok kom í Eyjafjörð ok reið til þings, ok kom þar þá menn váru at dómum, ok urðu eigi ásáttir um eitthvert mál, en þá kom maðr at dóminum, ok sagði at nú riði Magnús biskup á þingit; en menn urðu svá fegnir þeirri sögu, at þegar gengu allir menn heim. En biskup gekk síðan út á hlaðit fyrir kirkju, ok sagði þá öllum mönnum þau tíðendi, er gjörzt höfðu í Noregi, meðan hann var utan, ok þótti öllum mönnum mikils um vert málsnilli hans ok skörungskap. (*Hungrvaka* in Bps. vol. 1:76–77)

(Bishop Magnús came to Iceland [in 1135] at the time of the *alþingi* and arrived in Eyjafjörður and rode to the Thingmeeting, where the men were gathered at the court and could not settle a particular case, but a man went to the court and said that Bishop Magnús was riding to the Thing; the men were so delighted by this news that they all immediately went home. Then the bishop went out on the pavement before the church and told everyone what had happened in Norway while he was abroad, and everyone was much impressed by his eloquence and intelligence.)

Iceland has, by European standards, a short history, but the Icelanders developed very early an extraordinary interest in, and gift for, writing history, not only their own but that of the neighboring Scandinavian countries as well, especially Norway. According to their own records the settlement of Iceland took place in the period 870–930, and just two centuries later they undertook the project of writing their history back to the time of the settlement.¹ The first extant account is found in a little book by Ari Þorgilsson known as the *Libellus Islandorum*

(or *Íslendingabók* in the native language in which it was written). The preserved version of the book refers to another lost redaction that included genealogies and lives of the (Norwegian) kings.² Ari's booklet is dated to the 1120s (or before 1133: ÍF 1.1:xviii), and it took another century for Icelandic writing to reach its full flowering with the book-length biographies of Norwegian kings and the book-length tales about the Icelandic Saga Age (ca. 930–1050), as well as biographies of Icelandic bishops and translations of Latin and French texts. Much of this material is familiar only to specialists, but the native accounts of the Icelandic Saga Age, which I will refer to as sagas about early Icelanders, have become justly famous because of their literary distinction, and they have an international readership.³

The sagas about Norwegian kings are also remarkable, but they do not have quite the dramatic force or the skill in characterization that set the native sagas apart. They are nonetheless among the most readable of European chronicles. Since they touch on events elsewhere in Scandinavia, they are quite well known to Scandinavian readers, especially in Norway, where they provide a narrative frame for the medieval phase of national history writing. Outside of Scandinavia they are considerably less well known. Until recently two of the major historical compilations, *Morkinskinna* and *Fagrskinna*, had not been translated into English, but they both became available in 2000 and 2004.⁴ As a consequence the early history writing about Norway and some high points in Icelandic literature are now more accessible. It is the object of the present survey to trace the evolution of this material and make the development similarly accessible. Up until now the study of the so-called kings' sagas has been intimidatingly arcane, with a strong emphasis on textual relationships that cannot always be established satisfactorily because there are too many gaps in our information.⁵ The kings' sagas should not, however, be the exclusive property of the philologists; they are also exceptional narratives, and at some point the focus should be shifted away from the scholarly puzzles and toward a more inclusive consideration of literary history.

Before adjusting our perspective in this direction, we must provide some information on the relationship of the Icelanders to the Norwegians and ask how they came into the possession of so much knowledge about Norway. A simple answer is that many of them came originally from Norway and continued through the tenth,

eleventh, and twelfth centuries to have closer ties to Norway than to any other country. This generalization is based in the first instance on a remarkable collection of genealogical information known as the *Book of Settlement* (*Landnámabók*).⁶ It circles the island and records the settlement of 430 men and women. In most cases the origin of these settlers is not specified, but 130 of them are said to have come from Norway, and it may be assumed without too much license that many others were Norwegian as well.⁷

Although the information in the *Book of Settlement* is incomplete, it certainly suggests that the immigration to Iceland was predominantly Norwegian. It is in any case clear that Old Norwegian became the universal language of Iceland.⁸ There is a rare mention of Celtic or German speakers in the sagas, but these languages were not generally spoken or understood.⁹ Norwegian law granted the Icelanders special privileges in Norway, and the Icelandic laws reciprocated.¹⁰ It is also clear that down through the thirteenth century the Icelanders considered themselves to be closely related to the Norwegians, and they prided themselves on a distinguished ancestry in Norway. There is an interesting passage in “Gísli þátrr Illugasonar” suggesting that the Icelanders could consider themselves no less the “thanes” of the king of Norway than the Norwegians themselves.¹¹ Pride of lineage reaches a high point in a little story about Halldórr Snorrason, the son of the distinguished figure Snorri the Chieftain, in the first half of the eleventh century. King Haraldr harðráði (Hardrude) dismisses the commander of one of his ships (“a man of great ancestry”) in order to put Halldórr in his place. The man who has been deprived of his command protests: “It did not cross my mind that you would choose an Icelander and demote me from command.” But the king is quick to defend Halldórr: “His ancestry in Iceland is no worse than yours is in Norway, and not much time has elapsed since those who now live in Iceland were Norwegian themselves.”¹² Whether this incident ever transpired or not, it is unmistakable evidence of Icelandic self-esteem.

In recent years a small literature has grown up around the idea of national identity in Iceland. The question posed is this: When did the Icelanders first begin to think of themselves as such, as an entity quite distinct from the Norwegians, with whom they shared language and ancestry? The discussion was engaged a hundred years ago when Bogi Th. Melsteð assembled a variety of saga passages that showed

quite effectively that the Icelanders viewed themselves as a separate people.¹³ The defect in this evidence is that it dates from a later period in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and may not tell us much about national consciousness in the tenth and eleventh centuries. A recent historian, Sverrir Jakobsson, has suggested that a sense of regional affiliation may have been a more dominant sentiment and that a firm sense of national identity may have set in as late as 1262–64 when Iceland was annexed by the Norwegian crown and the two countries became more conscious of their identities.¹⁴

On the other hand, it is clear from the historical compilation known as *Morkinskinna* (ca. 1220), to which we will advert in the third chapter, that the Icelanders had a rather insistent sense of themselves, especially in contrast to the Norwegians.¹⁵ The only question is how far back in time this competitive streak extended. It would not be unreasonable to suppose that the Icelanders had some feeling of separation and independence as soon as they acquired their own laws and political institutions around 930.

Whatever the bonds were between Iceland and Norway, and whenever they loosened, they would have been maintained by the regular sea traffic that passed between the two countries each summer. The prologue to the *Separate Saga of Saint Olaf* (ca. 1230?) takes special note of the information that would have passed along this route (ÍF 27:422):

In his [Harald Fairhair's] day Iceland was settled, and there was a great deal of travel from Norway to Iceland. News passed between these countries every summer and it was then committed to memory and passed along in the form of stories.

The author of the prologue goes on to say that these stories would have been subject to the vagaries of memory, but that the skaldic stanzas pertaining to them would have been stable provided they were correctly recited.¹⁶

The immigration into Iceland cannot be quantified on the basis of the *Book of Settlement*, but on the shipping that plied the waters between Norway and Iceland after the initial settlement some rough conjectures can be ventured.¹⁷ Half a hundred sagas and shorter narratives about the Saga Age (ca. 930–1050) yield no fewer than

243 mentions of landing sites and harbors around the island, as the appended map (no. 1) shows. The word “harbor” is no doubt an overstatement since there were as yet no proper harbors. As *Egils saga* informs us, any quiet bay or inlet could serve as a landing place (ÍF 2:97):

It happened, while Þórólfr had been abroad and while Skalla-Grímr was living at Borg, that one summer a merchant ship from Norway arrived in Borgarfjörðr; at that time it was the general practice to draw merchant ships up in rivers or mouths of inlets or little bays.

At first the ships from Norway would have transported settlers, and, as we will see further along, there could have been some later settlers. When the settlement was complete, however, most of the traffic would have been commercial. Norwegian merchants, who are frequently mentioned in the sagas, would have arrived in the summer, concluded trade agreements, and overwintered in Icelandic homes.¹⁸ As Iceland grew more populous, trade presumably became regularized. Map 2 at the end of this chapter shows that in the thirteenth century, judging by the evidence of *Sturlunga saga*, the number of landing sites was radically reduced while there was a very substantial growth in the importance of the main harbors in the north (Gásir), the west (Hvítá), and the southwest (Eyrar). The evidence assembled below shows that these harbors had in the meantime become major markets and magnets for the people in the surrounding areas.

Since the sources of our information are Icelandic, not Norwegian, they tell us a great deal less about landing sites in Norway. The sagas normally state only that a given ship arrived in Norway, without specifying the exact location. If the location is mentioned, it is usually Trondheim, and it is only in the thirteenth century that Bergen acquires parity with Trondheim. What exactly can be deduced from these maritime connections is the subject of what follows.

The frequent mention of landing sites in medieval Iceland is indicative of the travel to and from that nation, but it does not specify the intensity of the circulation between Iceland and Norway. It does not tell us how many ships made the crossing, or how often. Nor does it necessarily tell us anything about the interaction between the crews that landed and the local population. There are nonetheless

indications that the traffic was considerable. Passages in *Kristni saga* and *Hungrvaka* tell us that at a date calculated to be the summer of 1118 thirty-five ships arrived in Iceland.¹⁹ *Hungrvaka* reads as follows:

That summer thirty-five ships came to Iceland, and in the autumn eight went to Norway after Michaelmas [September 29]. In the process the population in Iceland grew so greatly that there was a great food shortage in many districts.

Kristni saga adds that many were shipwrecked or went down at sea so that only eight made it back, with none arriving before Michaelmas.

There are puzzles in these passages. In the first place the people aboard the thirty-five vessels appear not to have been traders but immigrants, since they did not all return, and their numbers seem to have created a food crisis. If there were twenty or twenty-five persons aboard each ship, the influx would have numbered perhaps seven hundred to nine hundred people, with perhaps two hundred on the eight ships that returned. Six or seven hundred new souls could well have strained the food resources if they were concentrated in a particular region.

If thirty-five ships were by any chance an average over three summer months, we could deduce that there was a ship arrival every two or three days, but we are no doubt meant to understand that thirty-five ships were far in excess of the average. There is only one comparable passage. The author of *Eiríks saga rauða* (ÍF 4:202) attributes a statement to Ari Þorgilsson to the effect that in 985 twenty-five ships left from Breiðafjörður and Borgarfjörður for Greenland. Fourteen of them arrived, while the others were driven back or perished. This too was a colonizing fleet and would have been atypical.

There are two other passages that may give us some idea about the population exchange between Iceland and Norway. Bogi Th. Melsteð cited two texts stating that in the days of King Magnús berfœttr (Bareleg) (1093–1103) there were three hundred (= 360) Icelanders in Trondheim.²⁰ The figure is given in connection with a story about the Icelander Gísl Illugason, who kills a Norwegian in King Magnús's retinue and is clapped into irons. The point of the story is that the Icelandic contingent in Trondheim is large enough to mount an

effective opposition to the king and release Gísl from custody long enough to give the future bishop Jón Ógmundarson time to assuage the king's wrath and gain clemency for his countryman. Melsteð warns of the possible exaggeration in the figure of 300 (or 360 in long hundreds), but on the other hand, the writers would not have set the figure so high if it were not believable.

The two texts referred to by Melsteð are Gunnlaugr Leifsson's life of Bishop Jón, which must have been written before Gunnlaugr died in 1218, and a version of the *Saga of Magnús berfættr*. As Jonna Louis-Jensen indicates, the two texts are scribally connected so that we are not dealing with independent versions.²¹ Melsteð noted that the 300 to 360 Icelanders in Trondheim would have accounted for rather more than ten ships. Since it seems apparent that almost all Icelandic ships before the thirteenth century sailed to Trondheim rather than putting in at a variety of Norwegian ports, ten ships or more at a given moment may not have been an unrepresentative number.

Turning to the outward course, we must also ask how many Norwegians are likely to have visited Iceland. Most of the references to Norwegian shipping involve only trading vessels doing business and then overwintering until the following summer, but there are two telling exceptions to this rule. One is a report from *Prestssaga Guðmundar góða* relating that Ari Þorgeirsson had a following of thirty Norwegians at an assembly meeting in 1164.²² The most striking exception is a passage in *Íslendinga saga* for 1217 recounting that Snorri Sturluson rode to the *alþingi* (Allthing) with a following of 600 (720) men, of which eighty were Norwegians.²³ This was the year before Snorri's first voyage to Norway. The large number of Norwegians can therefore not be attributed to recruiting efforts in Norway.

Whatever the explanation may be, there must have been eighty Norwegians in western Iceland willing to enter the service of an Icelandic chieftain. They would not have been landowners or tenant farmers, and by 1217 it is unlikely that there would have been continuing waves of immigration. They could conceivably have been Norwegian merchants for whom Snorri had procured winter lodging so that at the end of the winter they felt they were enough in his debt to associate themselves with his causes. We will see below that Norwegian winter guests sometimes took part in their hosts'

armed enterprises. To acquire allies from abroad on such a large scale is, however, unexampled and suggests that Snorri must have had a farsighted and well-planned recruitment policy involving special attentiveness to Norwegian visitors as a perhaps previously unexploited resource. Since such a large following at the *alþingi* was effectively viewed as a potential fighting force, we may also ask whether Snorri considered Norwegians to have special military value. We will see that Norwegian merchants were viewed as a good source of weapons and armaments, and they may also have had the reputation of being skilled in the use of such equipment.

The possibility that there were 300 (360) Icelanders in Trondheim in 1118 and that there were eighty Norwegians available for armed service in Iceland in 1217 may be atypical and not close to the average. An alternative approach to the problem would be to consider the frequency with which the Icelanders and Norwegians traveled to each other's countries. We can be reasonably certain that ships passed both ways virtually every summer, although there is a record of one summer when no ships arrived in Iceland (1187).²⁴ On the other hand, there is a high probability that many arrivals and departures went unrecorded.

One type of evidence is the reference to traders who habitually set sail, presumably most every summer. The usual formula is that such and such a man was a “*farmaðr mikill*” (a great seafarer). Thus *Eyrbyggja saga* (ÍF 4:76) recounts that a certain Þóroddr skattkaupandi “was a great seafarer and owned seagoing ships.” *Laxdæla saga* (ÍF 5:70) characterizes Þorleikr Høskuldsson in terms of his long maritime experience: “Þorleikr Høskuldsson had been a great seafarer and spent time with distinguished men when he was on trading ventures before he settled down, and he was regarded as a man of high standing.” In the same saga Helgi Harðbeinsson also has seaman's credentials (ÍF 5:164): “Helgi was a big strong man and a great seafarer.” Similar phrasing can be found in *Gunnlaugs saga* (ÍF 3:106), *Laxdæla saga* (ÍF 5:171), *Gísla saga* (ÍF 6:16), *Fóstbræðra saga* (ÍF 6:124), “Þorvarðar þátrr krákunefs” (ÍF 6:371), and *Vatnsdæla saga* (ÍF 8:71, 78, 122).

Sometimes the reference to sea traffic is quite general, as in *Laxdæla saga* (ÍF 5:130): “When summer came, ships circulated from country to country.” More often the generality is applied to a particular individual. Thus it is said of Hrafn Qnundarson in *Gunnlaugs saga* (ÍF 3:61): “When he had come of age, he traveled from country to

country and was well thought of wherever he went.” *Bjarnar saga* (ÍF 3:111) echoes *Laxdæla saga* (ÍF 5:171) in referring to Þorkell Eyjólfsson: “Among them is named the distinguished man Þorkell Eyjólfsson, who was married to Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, for at that time Þorkell was engaged in travel and was always highly regarded at King Óláfr’s court when he was abroad.” In *Heiðarvígja saga* (Jón Ólafsson’s transcript) Hallr Guðmundarson is introduced with the words (ÍF 3:251): “Hallr was always engaged in trading ventures; he was intelligent and an excellent fellow.” *Eiríks saga rauða* is still more explicit about a certain Einarr Þorgeirsson (ÍF 4:203): “Einarr was engaged in seafaring from country to country and it served him well; every winter he was always either in Iceland or Norway.” The same saga is somewhat more succinct on Þorfinnr karlsefni (ÍF 4:218): “Þorfinnr was engaged in trading voyages and was thought to be a good seafarer.”

Grettis saga is particularly rich in references to seafarers. Ásmundur hærulangr Þorgrímsson is one example (ÍF 7:34): “He sailed to various countries and became a great and wealthy merchant.” Haflíði at Reyðarfell is another (ÍF 7:48): “He was a seafarer and had a ship in circulation.” Grettir’s uncle Jökull Bárðarson is a third example (ÍF 7:117): “Jökull was a big strong man, and a very arrogant man; he was a seafarer and very quarrelsome, but a stalwart man for all that.” Gísli Þorsteinsson is also a seaman (ÍF 7:188): “He was a seafarer and came out to Hvítá the summer when Grettir had been in the mountains for a year.” The outlaw Grímr gets a brief but storied mention (ÍF 7:205): “Grímr later became a seafarer, and a great story is told about him.” A reputation for seamanship can even turn into a cognomen, as in the case of Steinn Þorgestsson’s grandfather, who was called Steinn mjökisglandi (ÍF 7:244) or “Steinn the inveterate sailor.”

Perhaps the best-known merchant in the sagas is Oddr Ófeigsson in *Bandamanna saga*, who makes a great fortune by trading (ÍF 7:297):

He pursues this activity for a time and his situation develops in such a way that he becomes the sole owner of a merchant ship and the greatest part of the cargo. He now engages in trading voyages and becomes a very wealthy man. He is most often in the company of distinguished men and is highly regarded abroad. It gets to the point that he owns two merchant vessels engaged in trading, and it is told that there was no man of equal wealth engaged in trading at that time.

Similar passages, though less elaborate, may be found in *Vatnsdæla saga* (ÍF 8:71, 78, 122), and the cognomen “víðförlri” (widely traveled) is attached to the name of Þorvaldr Koðránsson (ÍF 8:124). His exploits are detailed in two separate stories (ÍF 15:251–100).

The phrasing used in the classical sagas recurs in the texts that are usually regarded as postclassical, for example in “Orms þáttir Stórolfssonar,” where we learn that Ásbjörn þrúði Virfilsson was a great traveler (ÍF 13:406): “Ásbjörn grew up now. And as soon as he came of age, he took to voyaging to various lands, and he acquainted himself with the customs of others and was much honored by all chieftains.” In *Króka-Refs saga* (ÍF 14:129) a certain Gellir is described as a “great seafarer” who voyaged between Iceland and Norway, and, finally, in the same saga a man named Bárðr in Haraldr harðráði’s retinue undertakes voyages to Celtic countries and Iceland (ÍF 14:138).

This is only a sample of such passages. They make it clear that trading was an attractive option for able and ambitious young men, an option that could pave the way to fame and fortune. Exactly how many young men availed themselves of the option, and how often, cannot be calculated, but it seems to have been a regular undertaking. When they went abroad, they mingled with foreigners, as in the case of Ásbjörn Virfilsson’s learning new customs, but they did not of course travel alone. They would have had perhaps two dozen shipmates as eager to experience the outside world as they were. They might have stayed in one place, for example Trondheim, but it was just as likely that they separated and acquired different information from different locations. In exceptional cases traders made the passage and returned the same summer, but the usual pattern was for them to overwinter in the country of destination, housed by local citizens or, in limited numbers, at the king’s court. What men in winter quarters could have learned about their host country during a stay of nine or ten months is hard to compass. A crew of twenty or more would have learned a generous multiple of what each individual learned, and what the 300 (360) Icelanders in Trondheim in 1118 or the eighty Norwegians in Snorri’s retinue in 1217 would have known and conveyed to others is well beyond reckoning.

The passage from the prologue to the *Saga of Saint Olaf* quoted above (p. 4) shows us that the news from abroad was refreshed every

summer and that some parts were converted into stories. The passage from *Hungrvaka* that serves as an epigraph to this chapter illustrates just how eagerly the news was received.²⁵ It tells how Magnús Einarsson was elected bishop in 1133 and went abroad in 1134 to be confirmed in Norway. He returned to Eyjafjörðr in 1135 and rode to a thingmeeting, causing so much excitement that business was temporarily suspended while Bishop Magnús mounted the pavement in front of the church to deliver the news: “And then the bishop went out onto the pavement in front of the church and told everyone the news of what had happened in Norway while he was abroad, and everyone was much impressed by his eloquence and wisdom.” The bishop would no doubt have elaborated the details subsequently in smaller groups as time went on. As it turned out, this was a crucial moment in Norwegian history and marked the beginning of the period of civil strife that lasted nearly a hundred years. The king with whom Bishop Magnús stayed was Haraldr gilli (1130–36), who was killed the following year. His rival, King Magnús Sigurðarson, had been blinded in the same year as Magnús’s visit in Norway (1135) and was killed by another pretender in 1139. Political news was no doubt prominent in Bishop Magnús’s narrative.

Bulletins from Norway would have been plentiful chiefly because of the regular circulation of trading vessels. As we have seen, the merchants normally spent the winter in Iceland and would have had more than enough leisure to satisfy Icelandic curiosities. The fullest account we have of such a merchant visit is “Pátrr Hrómundar halta,” a little story of ten pages (ÍF 8:305–15) devoted wholly to a merchant visit at Borðeyrr in Hrítafjörðr that turned out badly. Indeed, the local people suspect that their visitors are more vikings than merchants and have nothing but pirate goods for sale. As a consequence they decline to engage in trade and prefer to ride to other districts for this purpose, suggesting that enough trading vessels were on hand to provide a choice. The local people are also reluctant to provide lodging, but the merchant (or pirate) captain puts pressure on a certain Þórir Þorkelsson to take them in. Before doing so, Þórir obliges them to take an oath not to cause trouble, the only time we hear of such an oath, and stipulates further that they provide their own provisions and eat in a separate house, thus inhibiting the normal communications that might be expected to thrive in such a situation. The oath does

not prevent the captain from bestowing familiar attentions on Þórir's handsome daughter Helga. When Þórir protests, the captain converts his attentions into a marriage proposal, and Þórir feels compelled to agree.

In the meantime five stallions disappear from the farm of Hrómundr Eyvindarson, and suspicion falls on the traders. Hrómundr confronts them to no avail, but he is able to have them all outlawed at a meeting of the *alþingi*. Fearing the consequences, he fortifies his house, but the traders attack all the same. Though they are beaten off, Hrómundr loses his life in the encounter. The story illustrates in a particularly extreme form what social pressures could bedevil a merchant visit: mutual suspicions, housing difficulties, unwanted contacts with the local women, and even armed confrontation. But there would have been regulated contacts as well.

Hœnsa-Þóris saga tells the story of how a merchant captain named Qrn is rejected by the local chieftain but is befriended and taken in for the winter by Hersteinn Blund-Ketilsson. Qrn develops such a close relationship with his hosts that when Blund-Ketill is falsely summoned for theft, Qrn is outraged and looses an arrow into the crowd of summoners. That arrow becomes the catalyst for all that follows. But personal relationships are variable and other stories about the reception of Norwegian traders are less benign. In *Vatnsdœla saga* (ÍF 8:47–48) Ingimundr Þorsteinsson takes in an irascible trading captain named Hrafn but covets his valuable sword. He therefore lures him into a temple carrying his sword against the prevailing law, then extracts the sword from him as a legal forfeit.

As can well be imagined, a ready source of friction was the quality of the goods offered for trade or the quality of the payment made for them. A sale was often made in the fall and payment collected in the winter or spring. In *Ljósvetninga saga* (ÍF 10:5) a certain Forni in Hagi takes in the Norwegian co-owner of a merchant ship named Sigurðr. Sigurðr sells goods to an unreliable customer named Sölmundr, but in the spring Sölmundr complains about the quality of the goods and refuses to pay. When Sigurðr and his sympathetic host ride out to deliver a legal summons, Sölmundr kills Sigurðr with a spear cast and is subsequently outlawed in perpetuity.

Since the action in *Ljósvetninga saga* takes place in the vicinity of the great trading center in Eyjafjörðr (Gásir), it is perhaps not

surprising that much of the story hinges on trading troubles. A visiting merchant named Helgi Arnsteinsson stays with the great chieftain in Eyjafjörður, Guðmundr ríki (the Powerful), and buys cloaks from a scamp with the name of Þórir Akraskeggr (ÍF 10:21–23). Just as Helgi is about to sail, he discovers that the cloaks are defective and leaves them with Guðmundr as evidence for a prosecution. The prosecution succeeds and Þórir is outlawed. Yet a third case is related in connection with the story of Vöðu-Brandr, who prevails on his father to lodge Norwegian merchants, treats them well, and in return is given passage to Norway (ÍF 10:125–26).

From the same general region as *Ljósvetninga saga* is another two-generational saga, *Reykðæla saga*. It too suggests how differences arose in connection with visiting merchant vessels. In one case two ships arrive in Eyjafjörður, one at Knarrareyrr on the east side of the fjord and one at Gásir on the west side. Steingrímur Þrónólfsson arranges to buy lumber from the first, but Vémundr kǫgurr Þórisson is so eager to have the lumber that he deceives the merchant into believing that Steingrímur has decided to purchase lumber from the other ship at Gásir and no longer needs the initial purchase (ÍF 10:172–75). Steingrímur learns of the deception and seizes the best lumber, causing one of the several serious differences that beset his relationship to Vémundr. In this instance no blame is laid at the door of the Norwegian merchants.

In another instance merchants again become the pretext for hostility (ÍF 10:205–11). A ship arrives at Húsavík with the understanding that the Norwegian merchants will be lodged with Glúmr Geirason, but Glúmr is a little delayed in meeting them, allowing a certain Þorbergr höggvinnkinni to make a competitive offer of hospitality, at the same time deprecating Glúmr's resources and willingness to play host. The Norwegians feel committed and hesitate, but finally they agree to the new offer. When Glúmr finally arrives, they are reluctant to renege on the new agreement and decide to stay with Þorbergr. In the meantime Þorbergr plants a mare in Glúmr's barn and lets it be known that the animal has been stolen and that Glúmr is the most likely thief. He forms a search party to uncover the mare and invites the Norwegians to participate, but they are suspicious and decline. The mare predictably turns up exactly where she was planted and facilitates a charge of theft. Þorbergr next assembles a party to

summon the alleged thief, and this time, rather unaccountably, the Norwegians agree to take part. Fighting breaks out, as it often does when summons are delivered, and all the Norwegians are killed.

The competing offers of lodging in this story are interesting because they suggest that housing Norwegian merchants over winter could be advantageous. There is a hint about negotiated terms in a passage we will discuss below, but the most common form of compensation was a very valuable gift at the conclusion of the stay. There may, however, have been other advantages that were less tangible, for example the formation of personal bonds and connections, or even the expectation that the winter guests would also become allies. So much is suggested by the seemingly rash participation of the Norwegian merchants in Þorbergr's feud with Glúmr. Norwegians in Iceland would most often not have had family bonds, but winter quarters may have been one way of integrating them into the social fabric.

Such integration could already have been effected in cases where merchant enterprises were collaborative efforts involving both Icelanders and Norwegians. Thus in *Vápnfirðinga saga* (ÍF 11:28–30) a ship arrives in Vápnafjörður co-captained by the Iclander Þorleifr inn kristni and a Norwegian named Hrafn. Þorleifr returns home and Hrafn is invited to overwinter with Brodd-Helgi Þorgilsson, but Hrafn alleges an incompatibility of temperament and approaches Geitir Lýtingsson instead. On a later social occasion Hrafn is mysteriously killed; Brodd-Helgi and Geitir decide to share his property, but before they can do so, Þorleifr seizes it and returns it to Hrafn's heirs in Norway. This is clearly seen as a scrupulous act, and we can conclude from the incident that on this occasion Þorleifr's business association weighs more heavily than his local connections in Iceland.

More incidental cases of overwintering traders can be found in *Droplaugarsona saga* (ÍF 11:175–76) or in *Njáls saga*. In the latter a ship captain from Vík named Hallvarðr hvíti (the White) spends the winter with Gunnarr Hámundarson and constantly urges him to go abroad himself (ÍF 12:74–75). Hallvarðr is a very experienced traveler and claims to have visited all the countries between Norway and Russia, including Bjarmaland (Permian, the Kola Peninsula). One can only imagine the canvases that a winter's storytelling would have opened up before Gunnarr's inner eye. He seems at first not to be altogether captivated, but on Njáll's advice he decides after all to seek

fame and fortune. Another rather minor episode finds a Norwegian named Auðólfr under the roof of Gunnarr's antagonist Otkell (ÍF 12:133). Auðólfr takes a fancy to Otkell's daughter and is therefore eager to please his host. This inclination leads him to participate in a hostile encounter with Gunnarr, in which he succumbs (ÍF 12:138). The romantic theme recurs when Flosi and his allies need passage abroad. Flosi knows of a Norwegian merchant from Trondheim who desires the hand of an Icelandic woman but can only obtain her if he agrees to settle in Iceland. Flosi is therefore able to effect an exchange of land for the Norwegian ship. Marriage is perhaps the ultimate form of social integration, and we will appreciate the full extent of that integration in the case of Kári Sǫlmundarson below.

Sturlunga saga does not add greatly to the information on overwintering, but a passage at the beginning of *Guðmundar saga dýra* does suggest an evolution in the practice.²⁶ In the winter of 1184–85 three Norwegian ships are drawn up in Eyjafjörður. Kolbeinn Tumason is the chieftain in Skagafjörður, to the west, and because it is a famine year, he sets a high rate of compensation for overwintering, part of which will be his. This price setting indicates that the informal compensation arrangements described in the Saga-Age texts had been replaced by a more regularized system determined by the chieftains. In this episode the Norwegians find the stipulated rate in Skagafjörður too high and choose to find their lodging farther east. Three of them are taken in by a certain Teitr Guðmundarson, although it is not quite clear whether he is resident in Eyjafjörður or Reykjadalr. In any event Teitr gets on well with his guests and elects to go abroad with them the following summer.

Later in the same saga two groups of Icelanders confront each other at the encampment of a Norwegian ship presumably at Gásir.²⁷ The passage shows that the Norwegians set up camp on land until such time as they find winter quarters. Two of them are taken in by the opposing Icelandic factions. The Norwegians laugh at the high and mighty behavior of the posturing Icelanders, but they appear not to be involved in the hostility. This information on a Norwegian encampment is supplemented by an incidental remark that the chieftain Þorvaldr Snorrason was in a booth at a thingmeeting where Norwegians had made camp.²⁸ We can only assume that Norwegians attended thingmeetings also for commercial purposes.

Commercial dealing continued to provoke quarrels in the Sturlung Age, most notably in the great trade dispute of 1215–20, which fell just short of warfare.²⁹ There would have been lesser collisions as well, as in 1227 in the case of the Norwegian trader Þjóstarr who becomes involved in a disagreement with his Icelandic debtor Bjarni Árnason. Þjóstarr is restrained at first but eventually runs a spear through Bjarni.³⁰ He is also involved in internal hostilities.³¹ Norwegian merchants would have been implicated in Icelandic hostilities in any event because they appear to have been in the arms business. At one point in *Porgils saga skarða* it is mentioned specifically that Eyjólf Þorsteinsson goes to Gásir to procure weapons from a Norwegian ship.³²

It is not always explicit that a Norwegian guest is an overwintering trader. In these cases we may refer to the individual simply as the household Norwegian. In *Bjarnar saga*, for example, we learn that a Norwegian is in Þórðr Kolbeinsson's company and participates in an attack on his enemy Björn (ÍF 3:179). Why he was there is not explained. At the end of the saga there is a list of the men who participated in the killing of Björn, including a Norwegian (ÍF 3:208). This may or may not be the same Norwegian. If it is, we must imagine a visit of more than a single winter's duration.

Laxdæla saga provides a story of mutual hospitality that does not turn out well (ÍF 5:77–83). Óláfr pái (Peacock) travels to Hordaland and stays with a Norwegian named Geirmundr gnýr. The hospitality is good, but when Geirmundr shows up without warning to accompany Óláfr back to Iceland, Óláfr is reluctant, apparently sensing that no good will come of it. Geirmundr persists and Óláfr accedes, duly offering the Norwegian reciprocal hospitality. Geirmundr promptly takes a liking to Óláfr's daughter Þuríðr, but Óláfr, still sensing trouble, refuses a marriage. Geirmundr once more persists and in effect bribes the girl's mother, who in turn persuades Óláfr. The marriage takes place, but the couple is not compatible and Geirmundr prepares to leave without wife and child. Before he can make good his departure, however, Þuríðr steals his prize sword and refuses to return it. Geirmundr lays a curse on it that foreshadows the tragic high point of the story. This failed connection with a Norwegian is the obverse of the heroic tale of Kári Sölmundarson in *Njáls saga*.

Totally undeveloped are the references to Norwegians in the

company of Þorsteinn Ingimundarson in *Vatnsdœla saga* (ÍF 8:73) and Brodd-Helgi Þorgilsson in *Vápnfirðinga saga* (ÍF 11:48). In the first instance the Norwegian is referred to as “his Norwegian.” That may suggest a service relationship rather than a winter guest, but it is hard to know. The case may be clearer in *Njáls saga* (ÍF 12:147) where we learn that Egill Kolsson had “received” or “taken in” two Norwegians named Þórir and Þorgrímr. The verb “receive” or “take in” certainly suggests that they were winter guests, but again we cannot be certain.

In a passage in *Þorgils saga skarða* we saw an indication that weapons were among the merchandise offered for sale by Norwegian traders (note 32). We might speculate further that the manufacture of weapons was more advanced in Norway than in Iceland.³³ The Norwegians would, for example, have had easier access to imports and manufacturing techniques from England, France, and Germany than the Icelanders. Suggestive are the stories in which Þorsteinn Ingimundarson in *Vatnsdœla saga* covets the valuable sword of his Norwegian guest Hrafn (ÍF 8:47–48) and the importance attached to Geirmundr’s fateful sword in *Laxdœla saga* (ÍF 5:77–83). If the Norwegian weapons were considered to be of particularly high quality, it may also be the case that the Norwegians were thought to be particularly adept in their use. It is not just the eighty Norwegians in Snorri Sturluson’s service in 1217 or the almost thirty Norwegians in the following of Ari Þorgeirsson when he returned from campaigning in Norway in 1162, but the frequency with which Norwegians are engaged in internal Icelandic conflicts that suggest a special warrior role (note 22). The heroic dimensions of Kári Sǫlmundarson are of course the example par excellence, and we will return to them, but there is a significant number of more peripheral campaigners.

Peripheral indeed is the moment when, in *Heiðarvígja saga* (ÍF 3:261—Jón Ólafsson’s transcript), a certain Narfi seeks the loan of a special weapon from a relative because he has been challenged to single combat by a Norwegian. The challenge is a mere fiction, but it is devised in such a way as to suggest that one must be well armed to confront a Norwegian. In *Fóstbræðra saga* (ÍF 6:209) two Norwegians are foremost in the final attack on Þorgeirr Hávarsson; both inflict great wounds before succumbing. In *Grettis saga* (ÍF 7:241–43) a young Norwegian arrives by ship while Grettir is isolated

on Drangey. Grettir's antagonist Þorbjörn ǫngull hires him to scale the cliff and attack Grettir because he is a particularly adroit climber. His attack does not succeed, but then, as now, Norwegians were no doubt reputed to be skilled mountaineers. The most celebrated example is Óláfr Tryggvason's rescue of a man frozen with fear on a cliff face in coastal Norway.³⁴ Finally, as in *Fóstbræðra saga*, Norwegians participate in the final confrontation between Helgi Ásbjarnarson and Helgi and Grímr Droplaugarsynir, two on the side of Helgi Ásbjarnarson and one on the other side (ÍF 11:163–65). Norwegians seem to be a regular feature of culminating moments in the sagas.

A case in which the borderline between temporary residence and household obligation is blurred can be found in *Njáls saga*. Gunnarr's antagonist Egill Kolsson takes in two Norwegians named Þórir and Þorgrímr (ÍF 12:147). They are specifically characterized as being "good fighters and brave in every respect." When Egill sets out against Gunnarr with a company of fifteen, he asks the Norwegians to accompany him as well, but they protest that they have no quarrel with Gunnarr, and Þórir ironizes the need for a company of fifteen against only three men.

At this point Egill's wife enters the scene and declares that her daughter Guðrún has shamed herself by sleeping with a man who does not dare to support his "kinsman" (or "in-law"). This raises the question of Þórir's status: is he merely a winter guest or has he become a member of the family? The girl's mother goes on to label him a "ragr maðr" (a cowardly, unnatural man); that is enough to ensure the participation of the Norwegians, although they foresee that they will not return (ÍF 12:154–55). Þórir inflicts a fatal wound on Gunnarr's brother Hjortr at Knafahólar but is immediately killed by Gunnarr (ÍF 12:158–59). Þorgrímr survives for the moment but succumbs at the siege of Gunnarr's house after delivering a famous quip (ÍF 12:187). This sequence is interesting because it illustrates several issues pertinent to visiting Norwegians: it shows that they could be notable warriors, that they could become almost completely integrated, and that they could also suffer the perils of their new domestication.³⁵

Whereas we encounter Norwegians only here and there in the Saga-Age texts, they appear with increasing frequency in *Sturlunga saga*. In *Prestssaga Guðmundar góða* a certain Helgi Skaftason is

killed because he has burned the ship of a Norwegian named Páll (or Brennu-Páll).³⁶ In the same year the Icelandic chieftain Þorvarðr Þorgeirsson is, however, able to extract self-judgment for the killing and earns great repute.³⁷ In 1180 a ship transporting Ingimundr Þorgeirsson and his foster son, the future bishop Guðmundr Arason, set sail for Norway from Gásir and was blown back west by a contrary wind. One day a Norwegian named Ásmundr sounds the alarm, warning that he hears the crash of breakers.³⁸ We can imagine that many if not most of the ships plying the route between Norway and Iceland had mixed crews and passengers. The amount of time available for communication will have depended on weather conditions, but when a replica of the Gokstad Ship sailed from Oslo to America in 1893, Captain Magnus Andersen reported that there was leisure for reading.³⁹ The twelfth-century equivalent would have been talk and storytelling.

When Ingimundr finally reaches Norway, he is plundered by some court retainers. He himself is eager to keep the peace, but his relatives and companions thirst for revenge and are able to kill four of the offenders.⁴⁰ The throne claimant Jón kuflungr finds in favor of the Icelanders. The following year, back in Iceland, a Norwegian kills a certain Snorri á Völlum.⁴¹ Qnundr Þorkelsson shelters the killer and secures passage for him abroad, leading to dire consequences and his own burning in his house. In *Guðmundar saga dýra*, in which that burning is described,⁴² Norwegians sever the hand of a certain Skæringr Hróaldsson, and Guðmundr extracts composition from them.⁴³ In yet another passage from 1212 a Norwegian warns of imminent fighting, but his warning is brushed aside until it is too late.⁴⁴

From 1215 to 1220 there was a sequence of trade disputes between Icelanders and Norwegians leading to the killing of Ormr Jónsson, his son, and others.⁴⁵ In connection with the raid on Sturla Sighvatsson's residence at Sauðafell in 1229 a Norwegian named Eyvindr brattr is mentioned prominently.⁴⁶ He figures again in an attack on men in Kópavík in Arnarfjörðr.⁴⁷ In 1237 another Norwegian is mentioned in the following of Þorleifr Þórðarson.⁴⁸ In 1239 Norwegian merchants are present at an encounter in Hlöðuvík and threaten to intervene, but they are dissuaded.⁴⁹ In *Þórðar saga kakala* at the Battle of Haugsnes in 1246 a Norwegian named Eysteinn hvíti (the White) marshalls the

troops of Brandr Kolbeinsson,⁵⁰ and in *Svínfellinga saga* a Norwegian named Fjárgarðr participates in the hostilities between Sæmundr Ormsson and Ögmundr Helgason in 1250.⁵¹

In most of these instances the mention of Norwegian participation in internal Icelandic disputes is quite incidental. The Norwegian referred to in a given account was sufficiently involved to have his name remembered, but we have no way of telling how close or of what duration the connection was. In only two cases are we somewhat better informed. One is the story of Gunnarr Þiðrandabani, which is told both in “Gunnars þátr Þiðrandabana” (ÍF 11:195–211) and in *Fljótsdæla saga* (ÍF 11:264–88). The action begins with the arrival of two Norwegian merchants in the East Fjords, named Gunnarr and Þormóðr. They are taken in by Ketill þrymr, whose household includes a foster son named Þiðrandi Geitisson, a promising and popular young man. Þiðrandi is by chance in the company of a small group bent on delivering what should have been a peaceable summons against a debtor in Ketill’s household. As the group arrives, a playful skirmish breaks out between the summoners and the debtor. The matter becomes serious when the debtor spurs Ketill to action, and he promptly kills one of the summoners. The Norwegian Gunnarr is in turn incited by a woman in the household and, based on misinformation, he has the misfortune of killing the young man Þiðrandi.

Þiðrandi’s brother Þorkell takes charge of the mission of vengeance for his dead kinsman and, resorting to a ruse, he extracts information on the hideout of the Norwegians. Þorkell and his followers dispatch one of them, Þormóðr, in short order, but Gunnarr escapes and takes refuge with a certain Sveinki Þórisson, who in turn sends him to Helgi Ásbjarnarson, where he spends the winter. During the following summer Gunnarr is outlawed and Helgi Ásbjarnarson is killed. Helgi’s widow Þórdís therefore decides to send Gunnarr west to Helgafell. Here he will be under the protection of Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, who is about to marry her fourth husband Þorkell Eyjólfsson. Þorkell is determined to rid the household of Gunnarr, but Guðrún, with the aid of Snorri the Chieftain, prevails and succeeds in defending her refugee. Eventually she is able to procure passage back to Norway for him, and he sends gifts of gratitude both to her and to his savior in the East, Sveinki Þórisson. He also invites Sveinki, who has now

become vulnerable in Iceland, to join him in Norway. He does so and spends the rest of his life in Norway, where he is generously provided for by Gunnarr.

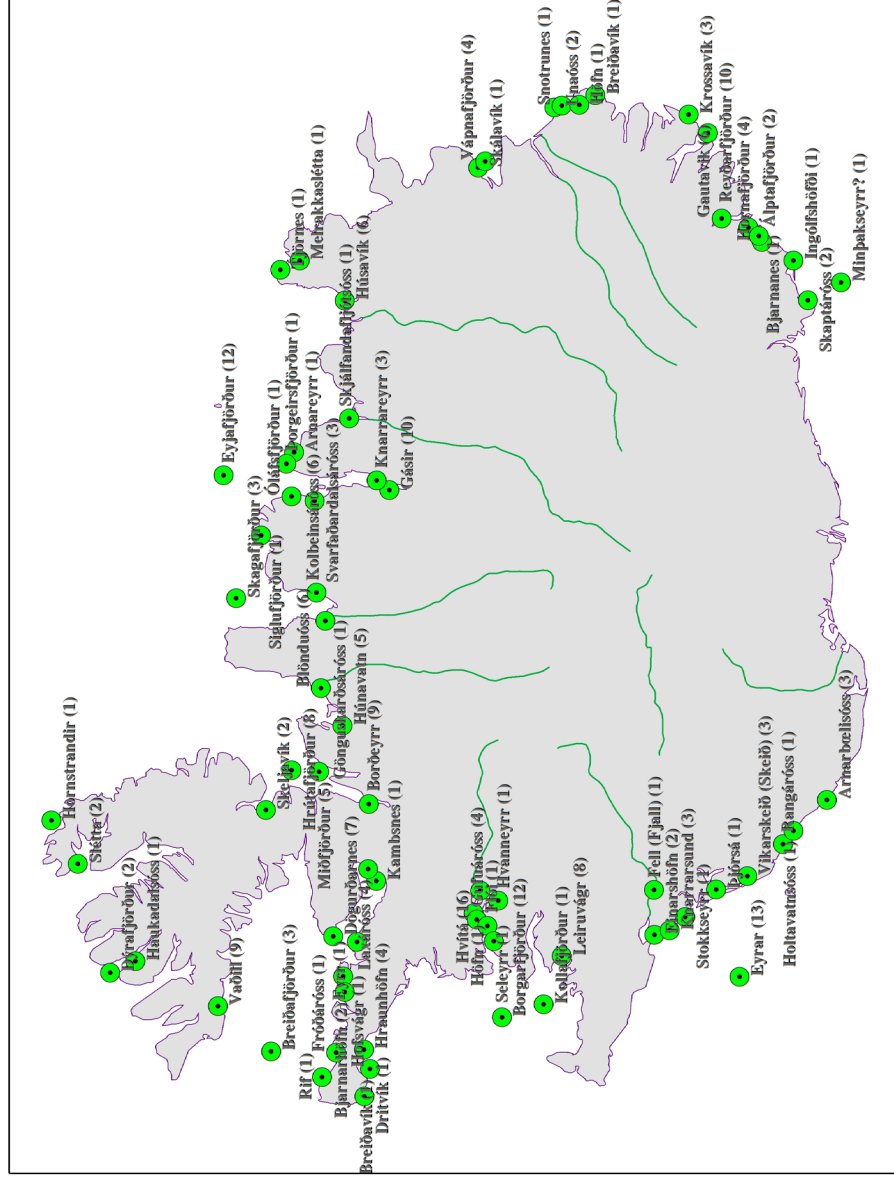
This story recounts more than just a winter's stay for a visiting Norwegian merchant. Gunnarr becomes acquainted with leading figures in both eastern and western Iceland, personages of such stature as Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir and Snorri the Chieftain. His travels familiarize him with many places across the breadth of Iceland, and his experiences give him an uncomfortably close familiarity with Icelandic law and feud practice. These experiences provide us with some sixteen moments of breathless suspense in the surviving story, but the recollection may have provided rather more entertainment in Norway, especially since it could be supplemented by the eyewitness Sveinki Þórisson.

The other extended narrative about a Norwegian is the tale of Kári Sölmundarson in *Njáls saga*. Kári could well have been the central figure in his own saga. He is not a visiting merchant but a warrior errant who is introduced into the story when he gallantly takes the part of Njáll's sons, who have come under attack by seafaring vikings. In turn the brothers Helgi and Grímr join him in a Scottish campaign before they go on to Norway. Here too Kári leaps to their defense in dangerous dealings with Hákon jarl. Their adventures continue in a joint harrying expedition, at the conclusion of which Kári accompanies them to Iceland. He stays the winter, marries Njáll's daughter Helga, and sets up housekeeping at the southern extremity of Iceland at Dyrhólmur. In effect he becomes a naturalized Icander. He is therefore involved in all the family events pertaining to Njáll, including the final burning of his house, from which Kári is the only known survivor. As such he carries out a bloody revenge and acquires a stature quite comparable to that of Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi (ÍF 12:335).

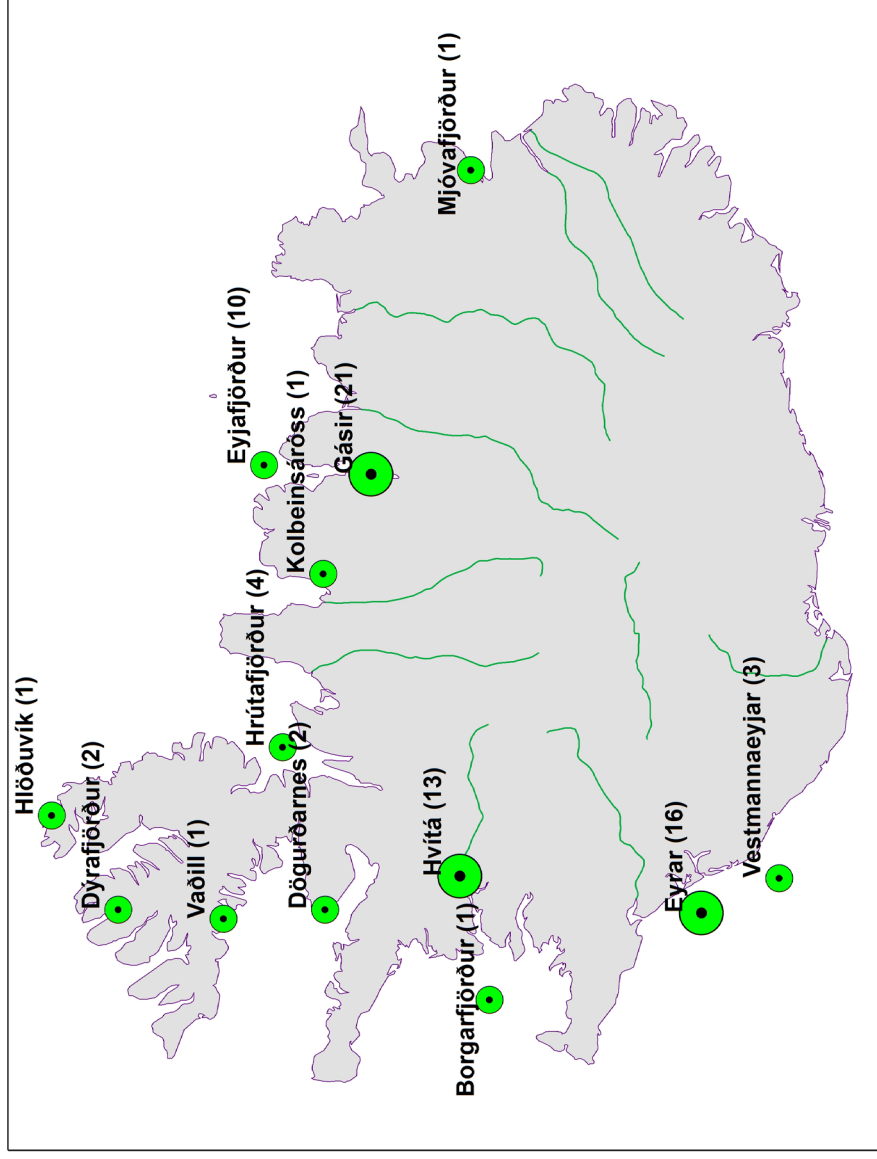
There is some doubt as to whether we should consider Kári as a Norwegian. The *Book of Settlement* (ÍF 1.2:382) tells us that Kári's grandfather Þorbjörn jarlakappi, though Norwegian in origin, sailed from Orkney and settled in Iceland. One of his sons was Sölmundur, Kári's father. When Kári first introduces himself to Njáll's sons, he says only that he is coming from the Hebrides (ÍF 12:204). There is no evidence that he lived in Norway, and the only evidence that he is not

Icelandic is that he is not so categorized and that he appears to have no property in Iceland. Perhaps we should consider him a resident of the North Atlantic. Indeed, though our information is almost exclusively from Icelandic sources, we should perhaps expand our perspective and consider the merchants and raiders taken as a group, especially in the early period, as a North Atlantic community. The circulation of information would have embraced Greenland, the Faroe Islands, Ireland, England, Scotland, and the British islands as well as Norway and Iceland, although Norway figures far more prominently on the Icelandic horizon than any of the other destinations. We must also consider that linguistic affinities would have made the Norse-speaking communities much more accessible to each other than the English- and Celtic-speaking communities.

We can conclude that in the period from the Icelandic settlement down to the thirteenth century there was a constant presence of Icelanders in Norway and Norwegians in Iceland. The interchange would have been considerably more extensive than the sagas suggest because ship arrivals are registered only sporadically. During the summers and the overwinterings in both countries there would have been a free flow of news and information, and the high points would have solidified into story, as the prologue to the *Separate Saga of Saint Olaf* states. There is no process of addition or multiplication that will allow us to quantify the communications, but their availability enabled the Icelanders to write Norwegian history from the days of Sæmundr Sigfússon and Ari Þorgilsson in the early twelfth century down to the great compilations of the early thirteenth century. We must next explore how the Icelanders viewed Norwegian history and in what terms they cast their perceptions.



Map no. 1 of Iceland: Harbors and landing sites in Iceland mentioned in sagas and tales about the Saga Age (ca. 930-1050). See pages 4-5.



Map no. 2 of Iceland: Number and distribution of harbors and landing sites in thirteenth-century Iceland, from evidence in *Sturlunga saga*. See page 5.

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 sǫgum* (*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 (Bloodax) 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 Bøðvarr and Halli's son Bersi. Bøðvarr 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 Bøðvarr 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 *Böglunga 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 herðibreiðr (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 slëmbir. 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 slëmbir 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 slëmbir. 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 Hordaland 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 (Sörbygdén). 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.

CHAPTER 3

The Character of Kings

Morkinskinna and *Fagrskinna*

“Áhugi á mannlýsingum hefur áhrif á formgerði sögunnar; lýsing konunganna verður saga Noregs.” Ármann Jakobsson, *Staður í nýjum heimi* [2002], 181)

(Attention to personal characterization determines the shape of the saga; the characterization of the kings becomes the history of Norway.)

Morkinskinna

Beginning a little after 1030, *Morkinskinna* covers the same span of history, at least up to 1157, as *Heimskringla* III, and was in fact the chief source for the last part of *Heimskringla*.¹ It is nonetheless distinctly different because of a series of stories usually referred to as *þættir* (strands). These stories most frequently focus on Icelandic visitors to the Norwegian court and are typically lively and humorous. They are often thought to be later interpolations into the text because they do not recur in the sibling redactions in *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*, but Ármann Jakobsson has urged us to view them not as separate stories but as integral parts of the narrative as a whole.²

Their placement suggests that they have a summarizing or distilling function. Thus the “Story of Hreiðarr” is positioned near the end of the life of King Magnús the Good and illustrates the king’s common touch, his protectiveness, and his popularity with all classes. Similarly, the “Story of Halldórr Snorrason” is positioned near the beginning of Haraldr harðráði’s reign in Norway and pinpoints the striking contrast between King Haraldr and his predecessor King Magnús. Like the “Story of Hreiðarr” it focuses on a king and an Icelandic,

but it is considerably more pointed. In the “Story of Hreiðarr” King Magnús treats his Icelandic visitor with impressive forbearance and kindness, but in the “Story of Halldórr” King Haraldr mistreats and even cheats his faithful, albeit temperamental, Icelandic retainer quite unscrupulously. These interactions provide latitude not only for projecting admirable and less admirable royal qualities but also for emphasizing the importance and status of Icelanders in general. King Haraldr suffers by comparison with his coregent Magnús but also to some extent by comparison with his Danish rival Sveinn Úlfsson (Svend Estridsen), and this contrast is neatly abstracted in the “Story of Auðunn.” The relativity of royal standing is further tested in the “Story of Brandr the Open-Handed.”³ The Icelander Brandr gives Haraldr a rather bold lesson in generosity, although in Norse literature generosity is usually the prerogative of kings. The irony is further driven home by the explicit attribution of kingly qualities to Brandr, who is deemed worthy to be king of Iceland (ÍF 23:231).⁴

Even the story of how a young Icelander comes to Haraldr’s court and narrates the king’s adventures in the Mediterranean, the story that is perhaps most likely to be considered a separable digression, may claim a larger relevance.⁵ The Icelander is apprehensive about Haraldr’s reaction as he listens to a version of his own story, but the king judges that the teller has gotten the story exactly right. That may be the point of the story. It not only serves to sum up Haraldr’s early career but may, with a little semantic stretch, be understood as an oblique suggestion that it is the Icelanders who possess a true account of Norwegian history.

Another episode resembles the tale of Halldórr Snorrason since it returns to the theme of spurned or unrequited service. The Icelander Þorvarðr krákunef (Crow’s Beak) offers Haraldr a sail, but the king turns it down curtly, asserting that he has previously had a bad experience with an Icelandic sail.⁶ In contrast, Eysteinn orri of the distinguished clan of the Arnmœðlingar entertains Þorvarðr and readily accepts a gift of the sail, conferring a better reward than King Haraldr would have. The moral seems to be that a well-intentioned Icelander should not be underrated because he can go on to greater acknowledgment, or, once more generalizing, Icelandic success is not contingent on the Norwegian king.

Parallel to the little stories about Icelanders at court, though not

counted among them, is the narrative about the Norwegian chieftain's son Hákon Ívarsson. In due course this tale was developed into a full saga, of which only fragments have survived.⁷ In the context of *Morkinskinna*, however, it has a force similar to the Icelandic stories, such as the one about Halldórr Snorrason, because it illustrates the perils of taking service with King Haraldr. Hákon provides brilliant military support and is promised a distinguished marriage and a jarldom, but King Haraldr reneges, and Hákon must make his fortune in Denmark. Thus the "Story of Halldórr Snorrason" at the beginning and the story of Hákon at the end bracket a biography of King Haraldr that shows him to be an unreliable lord. It also elaborates on the experience of Icelandic retainers in the service of King Haraldr.

The supplementary stories cluster toward the end of Haraldr's life and combine to shed a particularly concentrated light on his character. Chief among them is the story of Sneglu-Halli (Sniping Halli).⁸ This is perhaps the most detailed and the most persistently amusing of all the auxiliary stories. They typically focus on one or two incidents, but the skald Halli is the protagonist of no fewer than five incidents. He sails into Trondheim by Agðanes (literally the promontory of Agði—a mythological giant?). As he does so, he encounters another ship and is addressed provocatively by a fine-looking man in a red cloak, who asks him whether old Agði has screwed him. Not at a loss for words, Halli replies in the negative and suggests that Agði is waiting for a better man (his interlocutor of course). The exchange has no further repercussions but sets the tone. Halli then introduces himself at Haraldr's court, where the distinguished Icelandic poet Þjóðólfr Arnórsson is also present. Þjóðólfr is jealous of his prerogatives and a certain tension between the two skalds soon surfaces. But before it comes to a head, Halli manages to alienate the king.

As the king's retinue walks down the street, Halli veers off to enter a house and gobble up some porridge, clearly a laughably inferior food. The king is displeased but defers his wrath until the evening when his courtiers are once more gathered in the royal hall. Here he orders the dwarfish Frisian Túta to cross the hall floor carrying a roasted pig to Halli, with the stipulation that Halli will lose his life unless he composes an appropriate stanza before the pig arrives. Halli recites the required stanza and is restored to the king's good graces, then avails himself of the truce to ask permission to declaim a poem

in the king's honor. Haraldr inquires whether he has ever composed a poem before, and he admits that he has not. Haraldr appeals to Þjóðólfr for advice and is told that Halli is lying because he did once compose a poem about the cows he herded as a boy. Halli retaliates by telling a story about Þjóðólfr's youthful "Ashcan Verses" and adding a spitefully funny story about how Þjóðólfr took revenge against a calf that caused his father's death by eating it. The matter is about to come to blows, but King Haraldr imposes peace.

The next incident provides an elaborate account of how Halli gets the best of the great chieftain and bully Einarr fluga (fly), who prides himself on never paying compensation for a killing. Einarr relates that he killed an Icelander on a ship that he suspected of poaching on the Lapp trade. Halli goes into a mock depression, pretending that the victim was his kinsman. He also enters into a wager with a courtier to the effect that he can extract compensation from Einarr. He fails twice to impose his will on Einarr, but in the third attempt he contrives a dream in which he is visited by the skald Þorleifr, who had once brought terrible distress on Hákon jarl Sigurðarson with incantatory magic.⁹ King Haraldr now intervenes to warn Einarr that he should not risk the same fate and should pay up. Einarr tries to trick Halli with an overpayment, the acceptance of which would make him criminally liable, but Halli is far too sly to be taken in and wins his wager.

In the final sequence Halli goes to Denmark and wins another wager by betting that he can silence a tumultuous thingmeeting. He does so by making a nonsensical announcement that puzzles everyone and causes them to desist from whatever they are doing and fall silent. From Denmark Halli travels to England where he earns a great surplus reward from the king with yet another ingenious trick.

There is no doubt truth in Ármann Jakobsson's contention that these little stories are not just random Icelandic intrusions in the kings' sagas but contribute no less importantly to the royal portraits. The story of Sniping Halli, however, comes closest to challenging that proposition. The tale is clearly centered on Halli, whereas there is very little about King Haraldr. He figures as a peacemaker between Halli and Þjóðólfr in the first phase, but he figures not at all toward the end. Nor is his one conciliatory moment consonant with his jocular obscenity at the outset or his mortal threat against Halli. It seems

most likely that there was a completely independent tradition about Halli that was added in for its own sake. The contention between Halli and Þjóðólfr shows that it is firmly rooted in Iceland, but even if it is only marginally about King Haraldr, it may still say something about the interface between Iceland and Norway.

We may note first of all that the story runs counter to the two most unflattering commonplaces voiced by the Norwegians about the Icelanders. The Icelanders are taxed with being slow and having an unrefined diet (they are “suet-eaters”).¹⁰ Halli mocks the latter charge when he exaggerates it by digging into too much porridge, and he belies the charge of slowness by being uniformly quick-worded and quick-witted. At the very outset he wins the miniature flyting with King Haraldr and he later exhibits an ability to compose verse instantaneously. Far from being slow-witted, he is exceptionally resourceful in devising tricks to get the best of more powerful men. But why would a king’s saga devote so much space to an Icelandic trickster?

Unlike Ármann Jakobsson, we might inquire not into the question of how Icelanders fit into royal biography but rather into the question of how Norwegian kings fit into an Icelandic frame of reference. The Icelanders in *Morkinskinna* are not incidental; they are active participants and a major presence. In the Óláfr sagas the authors were in some sense invisible royal servants. In *Morkinskinna*, on the other hand, the author claims a substantial part of the stage for his countrymen, who consequently have a not inconsiderable impact on the story line. Haraldr’s narrative might have been different if he had not had the benefit of his Icelandic lieutenant Halldórr Snorrason. Halldórr and the master diplomat Auðunn are serious participants in the shaping of events, while Hreiðarr and Halli are more humorous counterparts. They control not the events themselves but the discourse about the events, the tone of the story. That is no trivial function because the words *are* the story; without the words there would be no story. At some point between the adulatory sagas of Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson and the ironical style of *Morkinskinna* the Icelanders seem to have reconceived themselves as the voice of Norwegian history, in effect to have taken possession of Norwegian history. They converted passive reporting into active formulation. They accordingly allotted an important role to such

Icelandic spokesmen and skilled practitioners of the word as Sniping Halli.

Two other stories in the cluster at the end of the long saga about Haraldr harðráði reinforce the ability of Icelanders to manage both words and events suggested in the tale of Sniping Halli. In the story of Stúfr the Blind King Haraldr arrives unexpectedly at the residence of a farmer who is entertaining Stúfr as a winter guest.¹¹ Stúfr is the son of one of Snorri the Chieftain's foster sons and a descendant of the celebrated Guðrún, daughter of Ósvífr, best known from *Laxdæla saga*. He therefore has a distinguished lineage in Iceland. His first exchange with King Haraldr plays on the cognomen of Haraldr's farmer father Sigurðr Sow compared to his own ancestry. It therefore recalls Halldórr Snorrason's claim of genealogical equality with King Haraldr's commander at the beginning of the saga and serves to emphasize once more the status of the Icelanders. Despite this implied challenge Stúfr, who is a notable skald, gains Haraldr's favor with the recitation of multiple poems. The scene suggests that the Icelanders were quite conscious of their skaldic accomplishments and quite aware of the fact that this skill gave them special access to Norwegian history. Stúfr is in fact so successful with his recital that King Haraldr goes to the unprecedented length of granting two boons even before learning what the request will be. Stúfr's success demonstrates just how disarming the Icelandic command of the word could be.

The following story about the Icelandic trader Oddr Ófeigsson is more complex.¹² Like parts of the story about Sniping Halli it is a tale of triumphant trickery. Oddr cruises in northern Norwegian waters and, despite his warning not to do so, his men engage in forbidden trade with the Lapps. Oddr's ship is searched by the royal agent Einarr fluga, whom we met in Halli's story, but Oddr is able to conceal the contraband. The ship then comes to the attention of King Haraldr himself, who conducts three successive searches. Once again, with the help of a Norwegian friend named Þorsteinn, Oddr is able to outwit the king and make good his escape.

The conclusion, however, is not an altogether happy one. After his escape and return to Iceland, Oddr imprudently sends Þorsteinn a gift of horses, thus making his collusion clear to King Haraldr. The king retaliates by ordering that Þorsteinn be executed, but such is the man's popularity that he is able to get away and never return.

The story is therefore in part about a special relationship between an Icelander and a Norwegian who escapes the king's authority. We may be reminded of the relationship between Egill and the Norwegian chieftain Arinbjörn in *Egils saga* or the relationship between Halldórr Snorrason and his Norwegian friend Bárðr earlier in the saga of King Haraldr. The message seems to be that, although Icelanders may be at odds with the Norwegian king, they may nonetheless have stalwart supporters in Norway. The Icelandic relationship to Norway is not contingent on the king, and a special association between Icelandic and Norwegian men of high standing may transcend loyalty to the king.

There is a passage in *Morkinskinna* that takes special note of King Haraldr's assistance to Iceland in a time of famine.¹³ The passage could be taken to signal the Icelandic author's approval of the king, but the situation may be more complicated. It is often pointed out that the semi-independent stories about Icelanders in *Morkinskinna* cluster predominantly in the saga of King Haraldr harðráði; see for example the back of the dust jacket in the recent edition of *Morkinskinna* (ÍF 23).¹⁴ I am not, however, aware that scholars have posed the question of why this should be so. As we have seen, the rather numerous stories about Icelanders raise questions about King Haraldr. They may constitute a considerably more reserved view of the king than the isolated passage on the Icelandic famine.

That history could take a jaundiced view of King Haraldr is strikingly illustrated by Adam of Bremen's contemporary *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*, which gives a negative review of Haraldr's rule. Adam was of course writing from the viewpoint of Denmark, where Haraldr's raiding activities will have left decidedly negative memories. Adam twice adverts to the idea that Haraldr extended his tyranny to Iceland.¹⁵ There is nothing in the abundant Icelandic sources to support such a contention, but it is clear from all the sagas touching on Haraldr that he, in contrast to his predecessor King Magnús, conducted an aggressive foreign policy, especially in Denmark and England. Adam adds Orkney, and Haraldr's campaign against Hákon Ívarsson takes place in Sweden. It is therefore by no means improbable that Haraldr may have cast a colonial eye toward Iceland, as Óláfr Haraldsson had done in the past and Hákon Hákonarson would do again in the thirteenth century. Annexation may have been a recurrent plank in the Norwegian

platform. If that is the case, it is not surprising that the Icelanders cultivated a store of somewhat acidic tales about King Haraldr. Stories about disaffected Icelanders were also destined to surface in the saga of Óláfr Haraldsson in *Heimskringla*, and here too they were colored by dissent.¹⁶

Although the stories of a compromised king are concentrated in the saga of Haraldr harðráði, there are similarly weighted stories in the latter part of *Morkinskinna*. The most pointed of these is the story of the Norwegian in the Swedish borderland (Bohuslän) named Sveinki Steinarsson.¹⁷ The story is attached to the reign of Magnús berfœttr, who in some way resembles Haraldr harðráði and reenacts his career. He brooks no internal dissent and is aggressive on the foreign front in Sweden, Denmark, and the British Isles. Magnús is eager to bring the independent chieftain Sveinki to heel and dispatches three highly placed delegates to impose his will and collect taxes. At the local assembly meeting an unidentified man (who turns out to be Sveinki himself) rises to voice not altogether transparent proverbs that clearly deprecate the king and his delegates. After a third more threatening demand Sveinki sheds his disguise, denounces the king's messengers as thieves and cowards in a long, disparaging tirade, then gives the order to attack. The king's delegates must flee for their lives.

This denunciation of royal authority echoes the confrontation between the people's representatives and the Swedish king Óláfr Eiríksson in the version of Óláfr Haraldsson's saga found in *Heimskringla*.¹⁸ Here too the people wield the decisive word, and royalty must acquiesce. The episode in *Heimskringla* is consigned to the remoteness of Sweden, but to the extent that we may generalize the antagonism between king and subjects, we can apply it to the Norwegian king as well. The hostility between the Norwegian king and his district chieftains is one of the themes in the saga of Óláfr Haraldsson and leads ultimately to the king's fall at Stiklarstaðir. The story of Sveinki Steinarsson recapitulates this conflict in a somewhat altered form; instead of a situation in which the people's spokesmen triumph over the Swedish king, we find a confrontation in which a chieftain, speaking the language of the people in a particularly unfiltered version, demeans the king's representatives. The people's delegate Emundr at the Swedish court speaks to the king in metaphors that must later be deciphered. Sveinki deciphers his own popular

proverbs in a most uncompromising and damaging way. In both confrontations the forms of address escalate from cautious indirection to outright condemnation.

Initial moderation is the required style in dealing with kings. Sniping Halli's liberties at the court of King Haraldr have caused him to be compared to the European court jester because any approach to the king demands special license.¹⁹ A good example is found in the story of Brandr Vermundarson, who, confronted by the king's repeated and excessive extraction of gifts, replies not a word but eventually sends him a one-sleeved cloak that prompts him to deduce that he is being accused of having only an arm to take and no arm to give. The same sort of charade recurs in the story of Stúfr the Blind, who contrives to make the king guess at what Stúfr is suggesting about the king's ancestry. Riddles are a proper way to make contact with a king because they avoid dangerous directness and at the same time flatter the king's intelligence.

If a direct affront to the king becomes necessary, it must also be neutralized. Thus Auðunn is put in the position of declining to give King Haraldr his polar bear, but he later repairs their relationship by making a brilliantly worded presentation and bestowing a lavish gift.²⁰ Personal negotiation is a universal theme in the sagas; whether at law, in amity, in enmity, or in negotiating with kings one must weigh one's words carefully and strike just the right balance between diffidence and firmness.²¹ The sagas suggest that this was an art in which the Icelanders excelled.

The story of Sveinki is a two-act play, or, if we give the aftermath equal weight, a three-act play. The first act ends in a fierce confrontation, the second act negotiates the differences, and the third act provides the resolution. King Magnús clearly cannot accept the humiliation of his ambassadors or his own loss of face. He therefore sets sail for the east, recruits three district chieftains, and marches against Sveinki, who is well armed and prepared for battle. At this point the three district leaders offer the king their services in negotiating a peaceful settlement. They make their way three times between the opposing lines bearing offers of compromise. Each time they slightly misrepresent the demands of the opponents so as to mollify their hard positions and make the terms offered by each less unacceptable to the other. Both Sveinki and the king suspect that there is some

manipulation afoot, but they accede. That is the point. Both want a settlement, but neither wants to surrender an iota of authority. It is up to the negotiators to read these sensibilities correctly and arrange what both leaders want secretly but cannot agree to openly. It is the negotiators who are the heroes of the story, and negotiation is the most crucial value. Negotiation trumps rank. As the story of Auðunn and his polar bear, and indeed *Valla-Ljóts saga* as well, illustrate, the Icelanders must have thought of themselves as, and aspired to be, skilled negotiators.

King Magnús berfœttr meets his death in an ill-conceived invasion of Ireland and is succeeded by his three sons Sigurðr jórsalafari, Eysteinn, and Óláfr. Óláfr dies young, leaving his older brothers Sigurðr (1103–30) and Eysteinn (1103–23) to share the throne. Their reign is the occasion of yet another elaborate negotiation involving King Sigurðr and the district chieftain Sigurðr Hranason. This time the contention is not political but personal. King Sigurðr sends Sigurðr Hranason's brother-in-law Ívarr abroad on a pretext, then proceeds to take Ívarr's wife (and Sigurðr Hranason's sister), the beautiful Sigríðr, to bed. Sigurðr Hranason reacts angrily and tells King Sigurðr in no uncertain words that he deserves none of the great honor he enjoys.²² The king retaliates by calling Sigurðr Hranason a thief, with the justification that he has appropriated too much of the Lapp tax that he has been licensed to collect. Sigurðr denies the charge firmly and is surely innocent, but he feels imperiled and leaves the court to seek the protection of King Eysteinn. In the meantime King Sigurðr continues to rage and brings a suit against Sigurðr Hranason for the alleged theft.

It emerges that King Eysteinn is considerably more skilled in the law than his brother and therefore leads the defense. There is a great deal of quibbling over the proper venue for the case, and Eysteinn is able to quash three successive initiatives at three different locations. When King Sigurðr still persists, Eysteinn invokes a rule to the effect that a charge cannot be brought again after it has been disallowed three times. King Sigurðr departs in wrath, and, although the legalities have been exhausted, there is every prospect that the quarrel will continue. At this point Sigurðr Hranason takes matters into his own hands and throws himself on King Sigurðr's mercy in order to prevent a national crisis arising from the enmity of two kings. King Sigurðr

imposes an enormous payment of fifteen gold marks, five to each king (Óláfr is still alive), with Óláfr and Eysteinn to be paid first. Sigurðr Hranason borrows five marks and approaches first Óláfr, then Eysteinn, but both make him a gift of their shares, freeing him to offer the five marks to King Sigurðr. The king, chastened by the generosity of his brothers, also chooses to make a gift of the money to Sigurðr Hranason and put an end to the dispute.

At the bottom of the system of negotiation in the sagas is the law, and that substructure rises to the surface in the story of Sigurðr Hranason. But the law is not the solution. Indeed, King Eysteinn's secretive manipulation of the law is not much more admirable than King Sigurðr's unjustified charge against Sigurðr Hranason. As in the story of Sveinki Steinarsson we are confronted with leaders who will not give an inch. The law cannot heal the division, only the superior diplomacy of the falsely charged Sigurðr Hranason, who is willing to endure the humiliation that neither of the principals can stomach. Like the negotiators in the story of Sveinki he brings the dispute to a peaceable conclusion. Toward the end of the century *Njáls saga* will reinforce the idea that peace is not in the law but in personal values that transcend the law.²³

The study of the kings' sagas has more often focused on how the texts relate to one another than on the kings themselves. This priority is dictated partly by the need to establish a literary chronology before extracting a historical narrative and partly by the failure of the kings' sagas to provide much insight into the royal personalities. King Magnús berfœttr is a case in point. There is only one brief characterization, which does no more than summarize the story: "King Magnús became a great chieftain when he became the sole king of Norway, a commanding man and severe, both at home and abroad."²⁴ About all we can say about Magnús is that he is warlike. He begins his career by imposing his rule on the people in the region of Trondheim, who have declared in favor of a rival for the throne, a certain Sveinn. This is an echo of the aspirations for independence that were an important theme in the reign of Haraldr harðráði and led to the killing of the Þrændalög chieftain Einarr þambarskelfir. Magnús concludes his campaign by hanging the dissident chieftains Steigar-Þórir and Egill of Forland. Steigar-Þórir has a long history of ambiguous, not to say duplicitous, behavior and may not engage the

reader's sympathy greatly, but Egill is another matter. He is a valiant and upstanding gentleman who is admired by everyone, even King Magnús, though too late. His death confers no credit on the king, who is so angry that his councilors do not dare to intercede for Egill. Unlike the councilors in the story of Sveinki, they do not take matters into their own hands. Both stories illustrate that Magnús is a choleric personality who stands in need of judicious advisers.

The remainder of Magnús's saga is about warfare. He raids in Danish territory in Halland, mounts a major expedition in and off Scotland, and conducts an unsuccessful campaign in Sweden, where his forces must surrender to King Ingi. The hostilities conclude with a meeting of the three Scandinavian monarchs and a surprisingly easy peace agreement, but Magnús's temperament undergoes no change as a result of this pleasing solution.²⁵ On the contrary, in the style of his grandfather Haraldr harðráði he undertakes an ill-advised campaign to the west, this time to Ireland, where he falls in battle. He leaves behind a record as a redoubtable, if not always victorious, warrior, but quite unlike his father Óláfr kyrri he reigns neither long nor peaceably.

Magnús's warrior genes are passed along to his son Sigurðr jórsalafari, memorable chiefly for an astonishing expedition through the Mediterranean, but this early success is not duplicated by his subsequent reign. A prophet in Constantinople foretells that his life will be shaped like the lion, stout in the forequarters but tapering in the hindquarters.²⁶ Sigurðr, like Magnús, is choleric, as his dispute with Sigurðr Hranason illustrates, but in his case that trait is transformed into a mental condition that produces fits of madness in later life. No direct link is suggested, but the warrior life does trace a trajectory of declining fortunes in both Magnús and Sigurðr jórsalafari. Sigurðr's brother Eysteinn fares a bit better because he devotes himself to improving institutions in Norway, as is emphasized in a famous flyting in which the two brothers compare their accomplishments.²⁷ On the other hand, Eysteinn's legal machinations against his brother do not place him above suspicion. In analogy to Magnús berfœttr's prudent advisers, Sigurðr jórsalafari's jarl Sigurðr Hranason emerges as the correct appraiser of the situation and the real leader.

Advice is a major theme in *Morkinskinna* from beginning to end.²⁸ The saga begins with an account of King Magnús Óláfsson, who is recalled to the throne while still under age and is therefore fostered by Einarr þambarskelfir and, to a lesser degree, Kálfr Árnason. Much of

the decision-making would appear to lie in their hands. The critical moment is when Magnús comes of age and begins to contemplate revenge against the people in Þrændalög who rose against his father and killed him at Stiklarstaðir. Before this can transpire, another important adviser enters the scene in the person of the Icelandic skald Sighvatr Þórðarson, who is commissioned to talk reason to Magnús in an extended poem, much of which is quoted. The author of the story dwells on this delivery with particular fondness, presumably because it dramatizes the moment at which the Norwegian king yields to Icelandic guidance and goes on to become the most unblemished of the kings in early Norwegian history. It is Icelandic advice that smooths the way for him.

This pattern recurs at the end of the extant portion of *Morkinskinna*. The last three kings to be commemorated are Sigurðr, Eysteinn, and Ingi, the sons of Haraldr gilli. They also come to the throne under age and get along well enough as long as their foster fathers are alive and can hold them in check. But when they mature, they part ways and join conflict. The manuscript is incomplete and does not transmit the final details, but they were probably quite similar to what we find in *Heimskringla*. We know in any event that Ingi Haraldsson survives longest and benefits from the advice of Grégóriús Dagsson, whose decisive intervention brings about the fall of King Sigurðr. The third brother, Eysteinn, is killed by a pursuer who is cast as something of a freelance assassin, on whom much opprobrium is heaped, although we cannot be sure how unimplicated Ingi really is. In any event, it seems clear that Ingi wins out in some measure because he has the best adviser.

In the central part of the compilation by far the greatest space is devoted to the career of King Haraldr harðráði. During his early adventures in the Mediterranean he has two very noteworthy lieutenants, Halldórr Snorrason and Úlfr Óspaksson, both of them Icelanders. They were presumably not only great warriors but also important advisers to their Norwegian overlord. But when Haraldr is installed as king, he seems to make a special point of not taking advice. A vivid example is a mishap at sea. Halldórr warns the king that he is headed straight for a skerry and should change course, but Haraldr ignores the advice and fetches up on the skerry. In addition the king proves to be ungrateful for Halldórr's earlier services and fails to pay out a proper reward in full. The result is a falling out

and a hostile parting. It redounds to the credit of King Magnús that he heeds an Icelander's advice and therefore to the discredit of King Haraldr that he refuses to do so.²⁹

Icelanders are omnipresent in *Morkinskinna* and constitute a compelling reason for supposing Icelandic authorship. Their role is most conspicuous in the adjunct stories in which an Icelander comes to the Norwegian court and becomes involved in dealings with the king. The question we might pose is whether these episodes, probably transmitted as independent stories, have some advisory function in the text as a whole. As noted above, the story of Halldórr Snorrason can be understood in part as a critique of a Norwegian king who does not know how to reward a valuable Icelandic retainer. The humorous tales of Hreiðarr and Sniping Halli may in turn be understood as parodies that appear to accede to Norwegian prejudices about Icelanders only to countermand them by revealing the sagacity hidden beneath a clownish exterior. These two characters might also be taken to lampoon the elegance of Norwegian court life by contrasting it to the common touch cultivated in Iceland. King Magnús responds in an exemplary way, King Haraldr rather more falteringly. When Sniping Halli is compared to a court jester, we should remember that the jester at his best is an educational figure, licensed to tell the truth, if only obliquely. Hreiðarr and Sniping Halli may act the fool, but they are worth listening to.

In the stories of Stúfr the Blind and the anonymous Icelander who tells the tale of Haraldr harðráði's early adventures, we are shown that the Icelanders have a rich store of poetry and history, enough to rivet a Norwegian audience for long hours. In short, the Icelanders are the bearers of tradition and the caretakers of literature. The adventure story told at Haraldr's court is particularly important because it demonstrates that the Icelandic version of history is correct. The Icelanders are not just storytellers but conveyers of the truth, and that is a high calling. In addition to their intellectual contribution, the Icelanders have practical gifts, for example Hreiðarr's spontaneous skills in handicraft.³⁰ In the tale of Ásu-Þórðr, which we have not reviewed here, the protagonist proves to be an outstanding international trader who can hold his own against difficult odds and some local disapproval in Norwegian society. Oddr Ófeigsson is able to evade the Norwegian policing of the Lapp trade and trick the king

himself in the course of secreting the contraband assembled by his crew against his better advice.

Surely the most ambitious, as well as self-aggrandizing, stories are those of Brandr Vermundarson the Open-Handed and Auðunn with his polar bear. As we saw above, Brandr is able to instruct King Haraldr on courtly etiquette without uttering a word. Over time the Norwegians evolved formal rules to govern approaches to the king, and they set some of them down in a treatise in the middle of the century.³¹ But the Icelanders, though less accustomed to the royal presence, would also have developed various forms of circumspection. These would have included understatement, oblique wording, or even wordlessness. Auðunn is also a man of few words, except for a brief burst of eloquence at the very end, but his mission turns out to be even more exalted because it is a matter of international diplomacy. Auðunn is able to kindle a glimmer of understanding between the two archenemies King Haraldr of Norway and King Sveinn (Svend) of Denmark.

In assessing *Morkinskinna* we must read the tone as well as the content. The characterization of the kings and the interspersed adjunct stories about Icelanders are opinion pieces that amount to a commentary on the kings. With the writing of *Morkinskinna* the composition of kings' sagas is no longer an exercise in eulogy or a chronicling of military clashes but has become a critical, even subversive, analysis. As *Fagrskinna* will show, however, critical evaluations could cut different ways.

Fagrskinna

The research on *Fagrskinna* has been relatively quiet, not for lack of interest but because a century ago in 1917 Gustav Indrebø wrote a magisterial treatise that addressed most of the important questions.³² On major matters he arrived at conclusions that have stood the test of time remarkably well. He established that *Fagrskinna* is a digest of written sources with only slight and occasional recourse to oral traditions. He suggested a date around 1225, and no one has deviated much from that suggestion. On the old question of whether *Fagrskinna* is Icelandic or Norwegian he offered the compromise solution that the author was an Icelander working under Norwegian

auspices in the Proendaløg region. That still strikes me as the most plausible solution.

He also showed that the author leaned heavily on *Morkinskinna* and argued that the latter part of *Heimskringla* made use of *Fagrskinna*, although the earlier parts did not. Perhaps the least compelling argument is that *Fagrskinna* was composed under the patronage of King Hákon Hákonarson. Indrebø detected a strong bias against Jarl Skúli Bárðarson, but we will see that Skúli could also be cast as the patron.³³ There is in any case no doubt that the text betrays a strong Norwegian and a strong royalist perspective.

We have seen that the point of view in *Morkinskinna* is quite clearly Icelandic, to the extent that the book might be considered a dual Icelandic/Norwegian project somewhat distanced from the Norwegian kings, who are the sole concern of the *Fagrskinna* author.³⁴ In the latter book the Icelandic presence has disappeared almost completely; there are no adjunct stories about Icelanders and there is only one reference to Icelanders. It is copied out of *Morkinskinna* [*Flateyjarbók*] and notes the importance of Icelandic poems as sources: “There is a great saga of King Haraldr [harðráði] set down in the poems that Icelanders presented to him.”³⁵ The role of Icelanders is in fact confined to the use of their verse. There is no other reference to their authorial capacity despite the fact that all the prose sources for *Fagrskinna* were Icelandic sagas or compilations: Ari (?), Saemundr (?), **Hryggjarstykki*, Ágrip, Oddr Snorrason’s *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, the *Oldest Saga of Saint Olaf*, **Hlaðajarla saga*, *Jómsvíkinga saga*, and *Morkinskinna*. *Fagrskinna* is simply a composite and a consolidation of all the Icelandic narratives available around 1225, and that may give us a clue about the underlying motivation for the work.

Perhaps some high-ranking Norwegian knew that there was an extensive literature on the Norwegian kings available in Iceland and undertook to sponsor an epitome for use in Norway. The most logical author of such an epitome would have been an Icelander who knew both the prose works and the verse tradition. We have seen that there would have been no scarcity of Icelanders in Trondheim, and one or another of them may have been qualified to assemble such a book.³⁶ The task would have required a full library of Icelandic texts, and we may ask whether this library would have been available in Trondheim or whether the commissioned author would have had to return to Iceland either to carry out the project there or to bring

the missing books back to Norway. The preparations could have been quite elaborate. However the project was organized, it seems clear that it was well defined and perhaps tightly supervised by the Norwegian sponsor or sponsors. The commission entailed both radical and consistent abbreviation, which is most obvious in the use of *Morkinskinna*, and a rigid adherence to a favorable portraiture of the Norwegian monarchs.

This positive bias is first and most obviously in evidence in the section on Haraldr hárfagri, which contrasts with the mixed reviews of Haraldr in the Icelandic sources, notably *Egils saga* and to a lesser extent the first part of *Heimskringla*.³⁷ The Icelandic reservations about Haraldr stem from his perceived tyranny in dealing with Norwegian chieftains, who either succumb or are forced into exile, in some cases to become Icelanders with jaundiced memories. *Fagrskinna* is colored neither by provincial dreams of independence in the separate regions of Norway nor by adverse memories in Iceland. Haraldr hárfagri's sons, Eiríkr blóðøx and Hákon góði, are also vindicated in comparison to earlier accounts. Like other writers, the author of *Fagrskinna* chooses to exculpate Eiríkr and inculcate his wife Gunnhildr. He also frees Eiríkr from the implications of his cognomen "bloodax," usually explained by his killing of his brothers.³⁸ Instead, this author attributes the name to Eiríkr's career as a fierce viking (ÍF 29:79). In the case of Eiríkr's brother and successor Hákon, the only blot on his record is that he participates in heathen sacrificial rituals in Moerr. According to the author of *Fagrskinna*, however, his participation is motivated only by good will (ÍF 29:80). At the moment of death he repents not only of this breach but also of his differences with his kinsmen (ÍF 29:94).³⁹

An instance of vindication on a par with the story of Haraldr hárfagri is the section on Hákon jarl Sigurðarson. His trickery is masked by an entertaining narrative in which he outwits his Danish rivals, an episode quite in line with the anti-Danish sentiment that Indrebø isolates in *Fagrskinna*.⁴⁰ The author does not dwell on Hákon's paganism, which haunts a number of other sources, and suppresses the compromising details of his death in a pigsty.⁴¹ In retelling the story of Óláfr Tryggvason the author had a book-sized account by Oddr Snorrason at his disposal, but, true to the mandate of brevity, he reduced the dimensions to a mere eighteen pages in the ÍF edition, including the space required to explicate sixteen stanzas.

A remarkable change that Indrebø does not comment on is the elimination of all the conversion details in Oddr's saga. The author of *Fagrskinna* is aware of these activities and refers to them obliquely: "About this Christian mission there were many and protracted tales before this great benefit came about."⁴² This omission suppresses the least attractive part of Óláfr Tryggvason's career, his torture and execution of pagan countrymen. In Oddr's account a Norwegian king is pitted against other Norwegians, but in *Fagrskinna* it is tempting to believe that the national principle overrides the religious principle and that the author wishes to avoid any trace of internecine conflict. This instinct is also in line with the author's secular orientation and his downplaying of religious themes.

The secular emphasis is most palpable in the section on Saint Óláfr. Saga readers are accustomed to the idea that Óláfr Haraldsson was the all-important figure in the history of the Norwegian kings. Not only was he the subject of two of the earliest royal biographies, the *Oldest Saga* and the *Legendary Saga*, but his position in *Heimskringla* overshadows all the other kings before and after him, both in length and depth. Here the other kings' lives are secondary to the point of being only a prelude or a postlude to the central figure of Saint Óláfr. Indrebø was somewhat uncertain about what version the author of *Fagrskinna* used as a source, whether it was the largely lost *Oldest Saga*, the extant *Legendary Saga*, or the almost entirely lost version by Styrmir Kárasen.⁴³ If it was the *Legendary Saga*, the secularization of that text is remarkably extensive and consistent. We have observed that the *Legendary Saga* falls rather neatly into discrete sections, the first a political account of Óláfr's rise to power and the second an account of his approaching fall with an emphasis on his religious devotion and a focus on miracles. Thus, if the *Legendary Saga* as a whole was the source, it is evident that the author of *Fagrskinna* systematically cut away the second part.

The alternative possibility is that the author of *Fagrskinna* worked from a redaction of the *Oldest Saga* that did not include the religious aspects, and that these intonations are the specific additions of the author responsible for the *Legendary Saga*. There is no way of demonstrating that the latter part of the *Legendary Saga* was as faithful to the *Oldest Saga* as the earlier chapters. If the author of *Fagrskinna* used a secular version of the *Oldest Saga*, he persisted

in that style, but if he used a text akin to the *Legendary Saga*, he resolutely pruned away the religious material just as he did in the story of Óláfr Tryggvason.⁴⁴ In both cases he seems to have opted for a political account rather than a celebration of Christian allegiance. We do not know whether this viewpoint was imposed by a secular sponsor or by the author's own priorities, but it is difficult to suppose that the auspices were ecclesiastical, as they seem to have been in the case of *Ágrip*.

Another notable feature of the section on Óláfr Haraldsson is the total exclusion of Icelanders. As Indrebø summed it up: "The Icelanders, about whom the *Legendary Saga* tells so much, as usual get no mention; only their poems are included."⁴⁵ Indrebø notes in particular that Þormóðr Bersason, who plays such an important role toward the end of Óláfr's story, is not so much as named. We will see below that such omissions raise interesting questions about the orientation and plan of the *Fagrskinna* author.

In *Morkinskinna* the lives of King Magnús Ólafsson and King Haraldr Sigurðarson are interwoven, but in *Fagrskinna* they are dealt with separately and in succession. Indrebø noted that Magnús was the "godliest" king in the text, but he is perhaps not so much godly as a model of moral rectitude.⁴⁶ As Indrebø points out, the author follows and approves the depiction found in *Morkinskinna* rather than creating an independent portrait. The portrait of Haraldr Sigurðarson, however, is altogether different and is calculated to suppress a whole series of negative traits found in *Morkinskinna*. As Indrebø contends, "It is hard to point out an episode or a single sentence that contains something deprecatory about King Haraldr."⁴⁷ The most compromising narrative on Haraldr in *Morkinskinna* is the story of his interaction with the great chieftain Einarr þambarskelfir, whom he envies and eventually murders, together with his son Eindriði, in a darkened council chamber. The author of *Fagrskinna* systematically reduces the king's culpability to whatever extent he can.

The exoneration of royal behavior is less evident in the later sections, but there are persistent examples. Thus the author of *Fagrskinna* drops the story of Sveinki Steinarsson, which was so clearly detrimental to the reputation of King Magnús berfœtrr (Bareleg) in *Morkinskinna*. He also excises the episodes that diminish the standing of Sigurðr

jórsalafari in his later years, including the symptoms of madness, and he modifies the invidious comparisons of King Ingi and his brothers Sigurðr and Eysteinn that are a regular feature of the other sources.

It emerges from what has been said that the three most conspicuous innovations in *Fagrskinna* are abbreviation, the downplaying of Icelandic contributions, and a pro-Norwegian, pro-royal intervention on the part of the author. All three of these biases may shed light on the project as a whole. Condensation may be the easiest aspect to interpret. We can guess that the author (or sponsor) found himself confronted by an array of disparate texts with or without overlap. He seems to have wished to combine them into a surveyable overview of manageable proportions, not a pocket narrative like *Ágrip* and not a poly-volume recapitulation such as would have accrued from a combination of Oddr Snorrason's *Saga of Olaf Tryggvason*, the *Oldest Saga of Saint Olaf*, and *Morkinskinna*. If we ask for whom such a digest would have been appropriate, the answer might be a Norwegian rather than an Icelandic audience. Educated Icelanders would have had fairly ready access to all the texts in question (as the author or authors of *Heimskringla* did) and would not have needed what amounts to something like a schoolbook anthology. A Norwegian audience, on the other hand, would not have had such ready access to the length and breadth of Icelandic historiography and is more likely to have had a more incomplete sample. They are the readership most likely to have profited from a handy condensation.

More puzzling is the almost willful silence on the Icelandic origins of the book. There is no prologue as in Oddr Snorrason's book, as there may have been in *Ágrip* if we had the first leaves of the extant manuscript, as there is in *Sverris saga*, and as there will be in *Heimskringla*. Hence there is no comment on sources. Even in the Latin history by Saxo and in Theodoricus's little synopsis there is some acknowledgment of Icelandic expertise, enough to suggest that the Icelandic command of history was widely known.⁴⁸ In *Fagrskinna* therefore the silence seems to go beyond mere omission and has the appearance of deliberate policy. All the sources utilized by the author are full of allusions to Icelandic poets and stories, but such references are never reproduced. This policy suggests not mere negligence but a planned appropriation without acknowledgment, a borrowing of Icelandic material in an attempt to make it appear Norwegian.

If we inquire into the motivation for such an appropriation, we may begin by observing that by far the most extensive source for *Fagrskinna* was *Morkinskinna*. *Morkinskinna* showed the way by combining individual biographies into a compendious overview.⁴⁹ That was clearly the model for *Fagrskinna*. But *Morkinskinna* was not just a narrative model; it was also a self-consciously Icelandic account, the first major compilation of Icelandic stanzas and an unabashed wellspring of Icelandic storytelling. The author of *Fagrskinna* knew it line by line, and it is easy to believe that the author, or the Norwegian sponsor, was alive to the quite unapologetic Icelandic orientation; so alive in fact that one or the other reacted against the proprietary Icelandic overtones in *Morkinskinna* and undertook to write an account of Norwegian history free of such inflections. This possibility suggests much about how the original saga readers could read not only texts but subtexts, and could choose to respond to one or both. It may also tell us something about the delicacy of national consciousness at the time.

We come now to the third major factor in the *Fagrskinna* author's program of revision, the vindication of Norwegian monarchs. We have seen how the author faithfully retains all the positive characteristics attributed to kings and how regularly he tempers or removes negative characteristics. There is a clear patriotic bias, a peculiarity summed up by Indrebø with the words: "The author of *Fagrskinna* consistently adopts a strict national point of view."⁵⁰ It also leads him to the conclusion that the project was undertaken under the royal auspices of King Hákon Hákonarson, but there are some difficulties in this hypothesis. In the first place, King Hákon was born in 1204 and was still a young man in the period 1223–25 when *Fagrskinna* seems most likely to have been planned and initiated. We do not know at what age he developed literary interests, and it is only a surmise that he was personally involved in the translation of *Tristrams saga* in 1226; his name could have been attached to the book by others.⁵¹ In the second place, in the period 1223–27 King Hákon was much preoccupied with a stubborn campaign against the Ribbungar in eastern Norway. In these years he seems to have been rarely in Bergen and never in Trondheim, where *Fagrskinna* is most likely to have been conceived and where Icelandic books are most likely to have been available. On the other hand, Jarl Skúli appears to have resided in Trondheim in 1223–25, and his sympathies could have been no less royalist than

Hákon's since he pressed his territorial claims as late as 1223 and asserted his claim to the throne in 1239.⁵²

Skúli would also have had good access to Icelandic literature because he hosted Snorri Sturluson in 1218–19 and again in 1219–20.⁵³ Literature would surely have been among their topics of conversation. At the same time there would have been tensions because of the trade dispute that had been under way since 1215. A Norwegian had been murdered in northern Iceland, and *Íslendinga saga* states in so many words that “the Norwegians were very hostile to the Icelanders.”⁵⁴ The hostility was in fact such that Jarl Skúli planned to dispatch a large fleet to Iceland in reprisal.⁵⁵ The plan is only averted when Snorri promises his good offices in persuading the Icelanders to submit to the “Norwegian chieftains.” The plural form “chieftains” is significant because it embraces Jarl Skúli as well as King Hákon. Skúli had presumably not yet abandoned his royal aspirations and would have been just as invested in the history of the Norwegian kings as Hákon. The period 1220–23 would thus have been a moment quite conducive to a literary initiative that was Norwegian and royalist in outlook and tacitly anti-Icelandic.

The relationship between *Morkinskinna* and *Fagrskinna* may suggest something about how the Icelanders and Norwegians interacted personally in the 1220s. They presumably had interlocking but divergent points of view about their perspectives on the two countries. *Fagrskinna* gives us some idea of what the Norwegian side of the conversation may have sounded like, but what would the Icelandic response have been? *Morkinskinna* gives us good access to the Icelandic view of Norwegian history, but there is another equally important document. If *Egils saga* was written before *Fagrskinna*, it had established a view of King Haraldr hárfagri quite at odds with the admiring portrait in *Fagrskinna*; if the author of *Fagrskinna* knew it, we can imagine that he reacted against it. If *Egils saga* was written later, it may be viewed as countermanding the positive slant in *Fagrskinna*.

A more direct Icelandic response to what we find in *Fagrskinna* is the fullest of the medieval Icelandic histories from this period, *Heimskringla*. Indrebø argued that the author, whether it is Snorri or not, made use of the latter parts of *Fagrskinna*.⁵⁶ The central section on Saint Óláfr is so much more elaborate in *Heimskringla*

than in the abbreviated account in *Fagrskinna* that there was no need to refer to the latter. The author of *Heimskringla* would have simply set it aside because he had a much greater project in mind. We could, however, imagine a concession to *Fagrskinna* in the emphasis that the author of *Heimskringla* places on Óláfr's secular achievements and his curtailing of the hagiographic elements. On the other hand, the author takes a very different tack with respect to the Icelandic sources that are so demonstrably passed over in silence in *Fagrskinna*. He appears to make a special project of adding and expanding the stories about Icelanders who were held hostage by Óláfr Haraldsson, and he greatly enhances the diplomatic roles allotted to Sigvatr Þórðarson and Hjalti Skeggjason at the Norwegian and Swedish courts.⁵⁷

I have commented elsewhere on the third part of *Heimskringla* as a response to *Morkinskinna* and concluded that the author of *Heimskringla* regularly modifies the implied critique of kings found in his source.⁵⁸ Thus he is somewhat less adulatory about Magnús góði and more indulgent about Haraldr harðráði; he does not use the former to cast shadows on the latter. Similarly he follows the example of *Fagrskinna* in omitting the tale of the chieftain Sveinki Steinarsson's humiliation of Magnús berfœttr's emissaries and thus spares the king's reputation. He also moderates the contrast between Sigurðr jórsalafari and his brother Eysteinn by downplaying the symptoms of madness in the former. These small adjustments can be understood as corrections to *Morkinskinna*, but they might also be understood as further concessions to *Fagrskinna* and an attempt to compromise with the Norwegian orientation in that text. The relationship among the three compendia is therefore not just a matter of borrowing but to some extent also an ideological debate with a consciousness of national identities. An Icelandic author seized the initiative in *Morkinskinna*, but an Icelandic writer in Norwegian employ refocused the portraiture of kings in *Fagrskinna*, while the author of *Heimskringla* tried to find a middle ground acknowledging both the Icelandic literary claims and an elevated level of respect for the Norwegian kings.

CHAPTER 4

An Imperiled World

Heimskringla

“Snorri hefur ætlað sér að skrifa veraldarsögu norrænna manna, fjalla um uppruna norrænna manna (*origo gentis*).” (Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar íslenskra sagnaritara á miðöldum* [1988], 288)

Snorri intended to write a world history of the Norsemen, to treat of the origins of the Norsemen (*origo gentis*).

Neither *Morkinskinna* nor *Fagrskinna* has a proper title; they are referred to with names that are strictly speaking used for the manuscripts in which they are found—“rotten parchment” and “fair parchment.” The title of the third compilation, *Heimskringla*, is, as in the case of *Íslendingabók*, taken from the first sentence of the text: “The circle of the world [‘kringla heimsins’] that is inhabited by people is very indented by bodies of water.”¹ The author describes the great ocean that passes through the Straits of Gibraltar and flows all the way to Jerusalem and thence into the Black Sea, which (in turn) divides the three parts of the world, Asia to the east, Europe (or “Eneá”) to the west and Africa to the south. The River Don (Tanais) runs down from the north, empties into the Black Sea, and separates Asia from Europe. The area north of the Black Sea is known as “Svíþjóð in mikla” (“Greater Sweden”) or “Svíþjóð in kalda” (“Cold Sweden”) and is no smaller than Serkland (Saracen Land) and is sometimes equated with Bláland (Africa). The Tanakvísl (Don branch) was once called Vanakvísl or the land of the Vanir (a family of gods).²

Thus *Heimskringla*, unlike *Morkinskinna* and *Fagrskinna*, which are strictly chronicles of kings, prefaces its account with a geographical

setting. That broadens the spatial coverage but also deepens the well of the past by recognizing that the shape of the land was in place before humans arrived on the scene. Additionally, it provides a divine prehistory by associating the word Asia with the dominant family of pagan gods, the Æsir, and hypothesizing the dealings of Æsir and Vanir as a first stage of early history in the distant East. The pagan ancestry is destined to be replaced by the true Christian religion, which readers of Scripture would have known to have its origin in the East as well. The author adds a third strand with a reference to Europe as “Eneá,” suggesting the Trojan diaspora and another form of the progress of ancient civilization from the East, a form destined to embrace Northern Europe in its Christian manifestation.³

In this way the author places his history of the Norwegian kings in a very large context of cartographic space and world history. This change amounts to a reconceptualization of history, and the new perspective transforms the simple chronicle form into something that readers eight hundred years later can recognize as a history of ideas. It implies changes over time and space and an evolution from primitive forms to more advanced concepts. That Norway’s civilization evolves from the East is not a proposition that would seem foreign to a modern Norwegian historian, although the role of Scythia or “Greater Sweden” would not figure prominently and would yield to a Greco-Roman perspective from the south. The perceived movement of civilization is nonetheless analogous. We will see, however, that the westward trajectory of the narrative is not so much a case of *ex oriente lux* as it is a matter of *ex oriente tenebrae*, shadows that disperse only gradually as the Æsir make their way westward.

1. The Narrative

The chieftain of the Æsir in the East is Odin, who is described as a great *blótmaðr* (performer of sacrifices), a term that takes on a very disparaging tone in the Icelandic Christian era. He is also a great warrior and is victorious far and wide. He seems, however, to be enveloped in a penumbra of superstition and primitive practices; during one of his absences his brothers Vé and Vílir share his property and, mysteriously, both marry his wife Frigg, whom Odin must repossess when he returns home.⁴ The culminating event in the eastern prehistory is a war between the Æsir and the Vanir. It concludes with a

peace treaty and an exchange of high-status personages and wise men, somewhat to the advantage of the Æsir, who are conceived of as being rather more advanced than the Vanir. The Æsir do, however, acquire a knowledge of magic from the Vanir.

Odin is also credited with substantial territory in the Near East, but he has prophetic powers that allow him to foresee his destiny in the North. He therefore installs his brothers Vé and Vílir in Asia Minor and settles first in Garðaríki (Russia), then to the south in Saxony. From here his travels take him to Odense on the Danish island of Fyn. The location in Denmark furnishes the occasion for telling the myth that recounts how the goddess Gefjón plows up the land in the area now filled by the body of water in Sweden known as Mälaren and converts it into the Danish island of Zealand, which is alleged to have the same shape. Odin then fixes his residence in Sweden in preparation for the Swedish Yngling dynasty. There is thus a prelude in Scandinavian Sweden as well as in “Greater Sweden” to the east. After uneventful reigns by Njǫrðr and Freyr the rule of Sweden passes, with no attempt at transition, from the divine plane to the human plane, specifically the Yngling dynasty, beginning with a king named Fjǫlnir, son of Yngvifreyr.

The author stated at the very outset of the prologue that the poem “Ynglingatal” accounts for the death and burial site of each member of the Yngling dynasty.⁵ In the case of Fjǫlnir we learn that in a drunken stupor he falls into a mead vat and drowns. That sets the stage for a long series of strange and unusual demises in the Yngling succession:

Sveigðr disappears into a large rock inhabited by a dwarf and never reemerges. Vanlandi is trodden to death by a “mara” (nighttime monster) in his sleep. Vísburr is burned in his house. Dómalði is blamed for a famine and is sacrificed for fertility. Dómarr, exceptionally, dies a natural death, as does his son Dyggvi. Dagr, seeking vengeance for the death of a magically informative sparrow is killed by a slave wielding a pitchfork. Agni is hanged by the daughter of a Finnish king he has vanquished. Agni’s two sons Alrekr and Eiríkr kill each other with the bit bridles of horses. Alrekr’s two sons Yngvi and Álfr kill each other in a jealous rage. Álfr’s son Hugleikr and his two sons are killed by the “sea king” Haki, who assumes the rule of Sweden. Yngvi’s son Jǫrundr is hanged by the

son of the king of Hálogaland after a sea battle. Jǫrundr's son Aun (or Áni) sacrifices a series of nine sons to prolong his life, but the people prevent him from sacrificing the tenth son, and he finally dies. His son Egill fights a long campaign with the aid of the Danes against a slave rebellion but is ultimately killed by a maddened bull. His son Óttarr in turn falls out with the Danes and is killed while raiding in Jutland. Óttarr's son Aðils raids in Saxony and marries the fair maid Yrsa. She is in turn abducted by Hrólfr kraki in Lejre, where she stays until she learns that she is Hrólfr's daughter and returns to Aðils, who ultimately dies by falling from a horse. His son Eysteinn is killed by the sea king Sǫlvi, who rules the Swedes until he is betrayed by them. His son Yngvarr is killed in an attack on Estonia. Yngvarr's son Qnundr is much beloved for his peaceful ways and devotes himself to clearing the land and building roads, but he dies in an avalanche. His son Ingjaldr, who is defeated in an early boyhood contest, is given a wolf's heart to eat and celebrates his father's funeral by burning six neighboring kings in their halls to facilitate the unification of the realm. The king Granmarr sees trouble in the offing and arranges a marriage alliance with another king named Hjǫrvarðr. Ingjaldr attacks the allies, but they ultimately make terms, although Granmarr has an intimation of death, an intimation that is fulfilled when Ingjaldr once more goes on the attack and burns Granmarr and Hjǫrvarðr in their hall. He incorporates their lands and becomes ruler of most of Sweden, but he is burned in his hall by Ívarr inn víðfaðmi in Skáney (Skåne, Scania). Ívarr now becomes the ruler of all Sweden, all Denmark, a large part of the Baltic region, and a fifth of England. He subsequently becomes the ancestor of the Danish and Swedish kings and puts an end to the Yngling dynasty. In the meantime Ingjaldr's son Óláfr trételgja settles Värmland, but he becomes another victim of the Swedish propensity to blame the king for famine and they therefore sacrifice him for fertility. In place of Óláfr they then appoint a certain Hálfdan hvíttbeinn as king and move into Norwegian territory in Raumaríki, Heiðmǫrk, Þótn, Haðaland, and Vestfold, where he is eventually buried. After the death of his brother Ingjaldr he also reacquires Värmland. The line of descent concludes with a few more links: Eysteinn, Hálfdan, Guðrøðr, Óláfr, and Rǫgnvaldr heiðumhæri, with whose praise the final stanza concludes.

This dynastic rehearsal is no more engaging to read than to recount, although the final phases do seem to focus the theme of aggregating territory. The concatenation is usually taken to be a simple summary, with some elaboration, of the twenty-nine stanzas in Þjóðólfr ór Hvini's "Ynglingatal," normally one stanza for each king. Since the record of events is for the most part restricted to Sweden, we may wonder why so much space is devoted to Swedish prehistory in a book about Norway. The synoptic histories (Theodoricus's *Historia de Antiquitate* and *Ágrip*), as well as Sæmundr Sigfússon's lost history, began with demonstrably Norwegian kings, and *Fagrskinna* followed suit. The ostensible reason for the inclusion of Swedish prehistory in *Heimskringla* is that the Yngling dynasty spills over into Norway in its latter phases, beginning with Hálfðan hvíttbeinn's acquisition of Norwegian provinces. But there may be other contributing factors as well. The author shows a real taste for historical dredging in the Asian prelude, and his genealogical instincts may have been reinforced by the genealogical precedents in Genesis. The violent and sometimes eerie death accounts, especially in the first stages of the Yngling dynasty, may also have served to ratify the magical and heathenish intonations of the Asian prelude. The organization of the narrative seems to argue that Norway arose out of a dark era of superstition into a clearer day of ordered and ultimately Christian understanding.

The Swedish prelude has the additional advantage of fitting into the historical progress from east to west and suggesting a midpoint between the profound paganism of Æsir and Vanir in Asia and eventual enlightenment in Norway. From the Norwegian perspective the Swedes were considered to be a backward people mired in heathen ways because Christianity took root among them more slowly than in coastal Norway.⁶ The trajectory of *Heimskringla* therefore suggests a gradual evolution from the depths of ignorance in distant Asia through the intermediate confusions of early Sweden to the more settled outlook in Norway that will culminate in the conversion imposed by Óláfr Tryggvason at the end of *Heimskringla* I and more emphatically in the mission of Óláfr Haraldsson in *Heimskringla* II.

Supplementing the theme of religious unification is the secondary theme of political unification, which surfaces toward the end of "Ynglinga saga." The king Ingjaldr Qnundarson succeeds in unifying the whole of the Swedish realm, albeit by deceitful means, and his successor Ívarr víðfaðmi is able to extend the unification to the

neighboring regions as well. Unification becomes a dominant theme not only in *Heimskringla* but in much of later Norwegian historiography. Haraldr hárfagri's signal achievement is the unification of Norway, and for the two Óláfrs the unity of the country is hardly less important than the conversion to Christianity. This is an indication that political concerns have begun to overtake the religious concerns found in the earlier histories. As we will see in the next chapter, unification is also a constant theme in *Sverris saga* and a capital theme in late twelfth-century Norwegian history.

The fear of fragmentation now becomes a recurrent note. Óláfr Haraldsson's defeat at Stiklarstaðir plunges the country into Danish overlordship and a dismemberment of the realm. Unity is restored under King Magnús and persists for the rest of the eleventh century, but during the civil-war period after 1135 the kingdom is once more divided. A reassembling of the country becomes a guiding principle of King Sverrir's struggle. One of the low points is the tale of his failure to come to terms with Magnús Erlingsson because both of them are unalterably opposed to a sharing arrangement.⁷ The ultimate reunification of the realm must wait for the advent of King Hákon Hákonarson and his recognition as sole ruler ca. 1230.

After "Ynglinga saga," the first generally acknowledged king of Norway is Hálfðan svartí, the son of the next-to-last king in the Yngling dynasty (Guðrøðr). He makes some additional conquests in southern and eastern Norway and competes for and wins the hand of Ragnhildr, the daughter of Sigurðr hjörtr in Hringaríki. Both Ragnhildr and Hálfðan have premonitory dreams forecasting that their progeny will be distributed over all Norway. Hálfðan succumbs when he falls through the ice in early spring on a lake in Haðaland.

The traditional beginning of Norwegian history dates from the advent of Hálfðan's son, who becomes known as Haraldr hárfagri (Fairhair). The synoptics viewed him as the first important figure, as did Sæmundr, but they passed over him quickly and seem to have been chiefly interested in his infatuation with a Finnish (Lappish) woman named Snæfríðr (or Snjófríðr). Even *Fagrskinna* is quite sparing of detail; it begins with a catalogue of virtues and runs a mere seventeen pages, nine of which are given over to the recording of twenty-five skaldic stanzas, which, like "Ynglinga saga," also produce a catalogue

effect. Haraldr takes possession of Þrándheimr and swears an oath not to cut his hair until he has subdued every remote valley and extended promontory in Norway. This vow entails a long campaign with many battles, the most important of which is in Hafrsfjörðr, while others are not specified. After a ten-year period of conquest he finally allows his hair to be cut. The story concludes with a listing of his sons and an account of his interaction with King Aðalsteinn (Athelstan) of England.

It is only *Heimskringla* that gives Haraldr's reign true saga dimensions. It also casts the narrative as a political plan, not just a summary but an ordering of events. We learn that Haraldr must begin by defending his claim to his patrimony against intrusive rivals. Only then can he secure the eastern provinces of Norway by imposing his rule successively in Hringaríki, Heiðmörk, Guðbrandsdalar, Haðaland, Þótn, Raumaríki, and Vingulmörk. At this point the author inserts an elaborate version of Haraldr's oath to conquer all Norway. It is connected with the story of a woman named Gyða, whom Haraldr covets but who declines to consort with a king who rules only a few paltry provinces rather than being the lord of a whole country like the kings of Denmark and Sweden. Rather than taking offense, Haraldr expresses gratitude to the woman for calling his attention to such an obvious mission, and he initiates the conquest by subjecting all of Þrándheimr and environs and forming an alliance with the jarls of Þrændaløg.

He is now in a position to provide himself with a great ship and a naval force, with which he proceeds down the coast to Mœrafylki, Raumsdalr, and Firðafylki. This sequence is somewhat reminiscent of King Sverrir's plan of conquest, and we may wonder whether the author, who could have had no precise sources for such a sequence, may have borrowed the route from *Sverris saga*, or perhaps from a calculation of what might be logical under the circumstances.⁸ The author then skips over the provinces of Hjørðaland, Rogaland, Jaðarr, and Agðir and dispatches Haraldr directly to Túnsberg. Here he learns that the Swedish king has encroached on Värmland, which he proceeds to subdue together with a certain amount of territory in Västergötland. In the meantime there is an uprising inspired by the leading figures in the southwest, but Haraldr is able to defeat them in the great Battle of Hafrsfjörðr.

The resistance is now broken and there is a general exodus of the defeated factions to the Faroe Islands, Iceland, Shetland, Orkney, and the Hebrides. The resulting unification is twice underscored for emphasis: “King Haraldr had now become sole ruler of all Norway” and “He had taken possession of all the land.”⁹ Gyða had challenged Haraldr to become a “þjóðkonungr,” a national king, and this version of his story tells us in some detail how he did it. It does not merely record a few moments in the king’s life but reconstructs a historical narrative, telling the story of how Norway was assembled from disparate provinces to become the country of later history. The anecdotal materials that are primary in the earlier versions, the story of Snæfríðr and the interaction with King Aðalsteinn, survive only as postscripts.

Another thread in *Heimskringla* is the trajectory from east to west. Thus Sweden becomes an extension of the advance of the Æsir from Asia, and the beginning of state formation in Norway is an extension of the advance of the Yngling dynasty in Sweden. The story of Haraldr hárfagri takes the advance one step further when he is able to reduce the Orkney Islands to tributary status. This acquisition anticipates the conquests of Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson in the North Atlantic. It also anticipates the political orientation of the later kings’ lives, which become increasingly focused on the exercise of influence and the gaining of territory.

Haraldr hárfagri is depicted not only as an expansionist monarch but also as a model of political astuteness. His multiple sons, the product of a long life and many liaisons, become discontent with their lot. They assert their independence, oppose Haraldr’s jarls, and quarrel among themselves. The king resolves the situation by conferring the royal title on each, stipulating that every descendant of a king will have the same title and bestowing land on each of them. This arrangement seems to pacify the sons, but it constitutes a curious retraction of the principle of unity. Since the author was writing toward the end of a hundred years of political division in Norway (ca. 1135–1230), the arrangement must have prompted some discussion of whether Haraldr’s solution was wise only in the short term and risky in the long term. It is also contradicted by Eiríkr blóðøx’s desire to be *primus inter pares* and his father’s approval of that wish. To a Norwegian reader in the 1220s this must have looked like a warrant for dynastic disorder.

The consequences of the splintered realm are not long in materializing. After Haraldr hárfagri's death Norway should have fallen to the lot of Eiríkr blóðøx, as Haraldr intended. But when the youngest son Hákon, fostered in England by King Aðalsteinn, learns of his father's death, he immediately returns to Norway to stake a claim. *Heimskringla* states that he is fifteen years old. He works in collaboration with the great jarl of Þrándheimr, Sigurðr Hákonarson, who may be imagined to have thought that he could hold the young aspirant under his sway. The mechanism for attracting support is Hákon's promise to restore to the farmers the ancestral lands that had been confiscated by Haraldr hárfagri. If this bears any resemblance to historical reality, it could be viewed as a bid by Jarl Sigurðr to gain local popularity, but it could also have been a concession demanded by the farmers as the price of support. In either case it reveals a political way of thinking.

The author's position is clearly that Hákon, in collusion with, or under the guidance of, Jarl Sigurðr, outmaneuvers his older brother Eiríkr, who is unable to muster support and goes into exile. Hákon's success is depicted to some extent as a matter of personal qualities. He is an imposing figure who makes people believe that Haraldr hárfagri has returned in a new embodiment. He is described in the most engaging terms: "King Hákon was the cheeriest, most eloquent, and least assuming of men. He was exceptionally wise and very attentive to the establishment of laws."¹⁰ Eiríkr, on the other hand, is described in almost exclusively negative terms: "Eiríkr was a big, handsome man, strong and very enterprising, a great warrior and victorious in battle, aggressive by nature, fierce, disagreeable, and not much given to words."¹¹ His standing is not improved by the magic arts, deceitfulness, and fierce disposition of his wife Gunnhildr, who becomes synonymous with wickedness in saga literature.¹² It is small wonder that the people rally to Hákon rather than Eiríkr.

There are clearly matters that work to Hákon's advantage, but eventually he too is beset by problems. Having been raised in England, Hákon finds himself somewhat isolated as a Christian in a pagan land. Because of his popularity he is able to convert some followers, but the people of Þrændaløg, including Jarl Sigurðr, prove to be adamant in their old ways and they insist that Hákon conform

to their traditions. Sigurðr tries to mediate as best he can, but both sides are distinctly dissatisfied. The practice that signals Hákon's Christian isolation is that when he must be present at sacrifices, he is in the habit of eating in a small house with a few men rather than occupying a central seat, but even in this matter he must bow to public pressure.¹³ His anger is such that he gathers forces to march on Þrándheimr, but before he can carry out the plan, he gets news that the sons of King Eiríkr are advancing from the south.

Hákon is able to turn back the attack, and he tries to secure Norway by establishing a system of warning pyres along the coast, but after twenty years of rule Eiríkr's sons launch a renewed assault. Hákon once again prevails by stratagem and valor, but six years later the pattern repeats itself and there is a great battle at Storð off the island of Fitjar. Hákon once more has the best of it, but he is fatally wounded and sends word to the surviving sons of Eiríkr that, in the absence of male progeny, he leaves Norway to them. He also indicates to his followers that, even if he should recover from his wounds, he intends to return to his Christian heritage and repent his misdeeds against God. With respect to his burial he is indifferent and accordingly is laid to rest in full armor in a heathen barrow but without all the customary grave goods.

Hákon leaves behind an almost unparalleled reputation: "King Hákon was much lamented; both friends and enemies mourned his death and maintained that there would never again be an equally good king in Norway."¹⁴ He was nonetheless out of keeping with his time because he was Christian before Norway was ready to follow his lead. The Norwegians are not entirely comfortable with him, nor he with them. This mismatch tells us something about the author's appreciation of historical ambiguities; the leader can be right but the moment wrong. Hákon's premature Christianity also introduces the important theme of religious culture, which has come full circle from the Vanir and Æsir in Asia but for which the time was not quite ripe, as it will be more nearly under the two Óláfrs. "Hákonar saga" therefore represents an intermediate stage in the intellectual history of medieval Scandinavia, a moment at which Christianity is an issue but not yet a culture.

After the fall of Hákon góði (ca. 960) the author inserts a section entitled "Haralds saga gráfeldar." Haraldr gráfeldr (Graycloak)

is one of the sons of Eiríkr and Gunnhildr, but he does not control the narrative to which the author attaches his name. The incidents related provide only a transition piece prefacing the story of Óláfr Tryggvason. There are scattered episodes, but for the most part the action is focused on the hostilities conducted by the sons of Eiríkr and Gunnhildr, who ensconce themselves in Norðmœrr, Raumsdalr, and Sunnmœrr on the central west coast, while Hákon jarl Sigurðarson secures Þrændalög after Gunnhildr's sons have contrived to murder his father Sigurðr jarl in an effort to win Þrændalög. The passage covers a period of about ten years but does not amount to a saga.

The narrative in *Heimskringla* I is organized into four blocs: the prelude in Asia and Sweden, the saga of Haraldr hárfagri, the saga of Hákon góði, and the saga of Óláfr Tryggvason. It may seem surprising that no coherent saga was devoted to Hákon jarl Sigurðarson, who had an exceptionally full and active reign for some twenty years, but the information about him is scattered in the insert about Haraldr gráfeldr and the saga about Óláfr Tryggvason rather than being gathered in a separate account. Hákon may have been disqualified on three counts. In the first place he never laid claim to the royal title; in the second place his sphere of influence was largely restricted to Þrændalög; and in the third place he represented a reversion to paganism and did not fit into the Christian trajectory of the book. The author may have wished to focus on the “þjóðkonungar,” national kings, and that focus is clearly in line with the focus on national unity, both political and religious, leading to the emergence of Norway as a single entity.

The sagas of Haraldr hárfagri and Hákon góði are about the creation and articulation of Norway as a political entity. Haraldr's saga is largely a tale of conquest, but Hákon is also devoted to the establishment of legal and religious institutions, that is, to the consolidation of Norway. When he dies, however, the hard-won unification of Norway begins to crack. Hákon jarl is able to maintain himself in Þrændalög, but he must contend with the sons of Eiríkr and Gunnhildr who continue to press their claims, to some extent in league with the Danish king. The whole sequence of the narrative, from the end of “Ynglinga saga” down to the death of Hákon góði, is preoccupied with the project of unity.

2. The Undercurrents

The saga of Óláfr Tryggvason is focused quite differently. Although Óláfr is the first king to impose religious uniformity on the country, his reign is short (five years) and subject to growing external pressures. It is a story not of consolidation but of vulnerability. There are challenges not only from persistent pagan elements within the country but also from increasingly organized incursions from without. Óláfr is able to displace Hákon jarl partly because the latter makes himself unpopular, but his son Eiríkr proves to be a formidable rival when the time is ripe. From another quarter the Jomsvikings in Wendland launch a major attack for political reasons that are not transparent, and they are turned back only with the greatest difficulty. On the Swedish front Óláfr has hostile dealings with Queen Sigríðr, and the Swedes find themselves more naturally aligned with the pagan traditionalists against the Christian innovators. To the south Óláfr alienates the Danish king Sveinn by marrying his sister Þyri without observing the diplomatic niceties. Even the relations with the Icelanders are somewhat soured by Óláfr's dispatching of the heavy-handed missionary Þangbrandr to Iceland and his zealotry in dealing with important Icelandic visitors at his court.¹⁵

The picture that emerges from these interactions is not the historical progress of a nation but a perilous exposure to outside interests. These interests combine in a grand alliance against Óláfr including the Swedish king, the Danish king, and Hákon jarl's son Eiríkr. Despite the truly heroic dimensions attributed to Óláfr and some overt disparaging of his enemies, he is no match for such a coalition and succumbs. At the conclusion of the battle he disappears with no clear indication of what became of him.

The author of this story had a particularly full account available to him in the biography of Óláfr Tryggvason written by Oddr Snorrason in the period 1180–1200. It is, however, evident that he completely transformed the previous account. Oddr's saga falls easily into three parts: the story of his birth and escape to Russia from the clutches of Queen Gunnhildr, a long and repetitive sequence of conversion episodes, and a preface to, and description of, the final battle at Svölðr. The version in *Heimskringla* I bears no resemblance to this outline. In the first place, the author suppresses all but a few

of the conversion incidents so that they can no longer be considered the main body of the text. What remains is interspersed with other material and covers a mere thirty pages. With the de-emphasis on conversion activities goes a certain downgrading of Óláfr's identity as a conversion king.

Instead, the narrative is more generally distributed over a variety of characters. Thus the first seventy-five pages interweave the early years of Óláfr Tryggvason with the last days of Hákon jarl. Some fifteen pages are set aside for the aggression of the Jomsvikings and the great Battle of Hjörungavágr. The last thirty to thirty-five pages are even more diversified. They report the death of the last of Eiríkr's and Gunnhildr's sons, the raiding activities of Eiríkr Hákonarson after his father is killed, the attempt to marry the Danish king's sister Þyri to King Búrizláfr in Wendland and her defection, and finally the gathering of the allies for the attack on Óláfr at Svölðr. The effect of this diversification is to highlight not the religious revolution but the political situation in Norway, which finds itself in the eye of a gathering storm.

The result of the concerted attack on the Norwegian king is the dismemberment of his country. The victors meet in the last chapter to share the spoils. Four districts of Þrándheimr, both North and South Mørr, Raumsdalr, and a stretch of eastern Norway fall to the lot of the Swedish king, but he allocates them to Sveinn, the son of Hákon jarl, who has become his son-in-law. Sveinn's older half-brother Eiríkr Hákonarson gets four districts of Þrándheimr in addition to Hálogaland, Naumudalr, Firðir, Fjalir, Sogn, Hørðaland, Rogaland, and Agðir, that is to say, the greater part of the west coast. King Sveinn of Denmark asserts the traditional Danish claim to Vík but grants Raumaríki and Heiðmörk to Eiríkr. In this division Eiríkr has a dominant position, but Norway has to some extent returned to the fragmented state in which Haraldr hárfagri found it, so that the unifying efforts of a hundred years have come to naught.

It is possible for the modern reader to construe *Heimskringla* I as a tale of Norway's isolation and breakdown for, as it turns out, a period of fifteen years. This perspective is quite novel in comparison to what we find in the earlier versions of Óláfr Tryggvason's life. The earlier versions focus more on the crowning success of Óláfr's conversion efforts, which will have the effect of changing Norway's spiritual

outlook for the foreseeable future. The early texts see Óláfr's reign as a triumphant moment, but in *Heimskringla* I it could be read as a serious setback. We would of course like to know how the author intended us to read the text, but he does not provide us with a clear set of criteria. He certainly allows latitude for an appreciation of Christian progress, but there is equal latitude for an interpretation of political failure.

If Óláfr's reign climaxes in failure, we would like some assessment of the reasons, but this is the kind of analysis of which saga authors are quite sparing. In this case the author does not venture an evaluation of Óláfr's strengths and weaknesses; he merely registers victories and defeats. Are we to believe that Óláfr's imposition of Christianity was too vigorous and forced the Norwegians to break with their time-honored traditions prematurely? Are we to believe that he was not sufficiently diplomatic in dealing with his brother kings in Sweden and Denmark? The author provides no adequate indications that would allow us to address these issues. The same questions will have to be posed when Óláfr Haraldsson succumbs at Stiklarstaðir thirty years later, but in the case of Óláfr Tryggvason they do not seem to be either formulated or answered. Perhaps we are to understand that success and failure are always balanced on a knife's edge, but that too constitutes a view of history. When, at the beginning of the saga of Óláfr Haraldsson, Óláfr has a lucky stroke and captures his opponent Hákon Eiríksson, he tells him that his good luck has run out, but Hákon replies: "What has happened to us is not misfortune. It has long been the case that sometimes one side and sometimes the other emerges victorious."¹⁶ We will see, however, that in the story of the second Óláfr the vagaries of fortune may not be an adequate historical explanation.

The Saga of Saint Óláfr

The transition from one Óláfr to the next is peculiar in several respects. In the first place, there is no account of the fifteen years of Danish rule that separate them, a period that *Ágrip* describes as a time of tyranny and hardship.¹⁷ The author of *Heimskringla*, despite a broad view of history, seems in this instance to have been more interested in royal biography than in the sequence of Norwegian events. In the second place, although the saga of Óláfr Tryggvason tells in rich and quite

dramatic detail about the protagonist's birth and escape from Norway, *Heimskringla* II has nothing to say about the circumstances of Óláfr Haraldsson's birth. We learn only that he is raised by his mother Ásta and stepfather Sigurðr sýr and shows early signs of a dominant personality. He begins his viking career at the age of twelve, with details that are extracted from twenty-four stanzas.

His return to Norway is similarly unelaborated in contrast to the preparatory moves that usher in Óláfr Tryggvason's return and the colorful demise of Hákon jarl. Óláfr Haraldsson simply lands with two large ships and an insignificant contingent of 220 men. He then has the good luck of devising a stratagem to capsize the ship of Hákon jarl Eiríksson, the son of Eiríkr Hákonarson, and then convincing him to desist from any further claim to Norway. He pursues his campaign by presenting himself in his native Vestfold, where he is well received, and by appealing to his stepfather Sigurðr sýr for assistance. Sigurðr is cautious and circumspect, but his mother Ásta scorns caution in the best tradition of the caustic and ambitious mother. Sigurðr accedes but insists on public consultation.

There follows a most illuminating debate led by two petty kings from Heiðmörk, Hrærekr and Hringr; they deal precisely with the issues that were not explored in the case of Óláfr Tryggvason.¹⁸ It is as if the author is compensating for the theoretical omission in the previous saga, though we know too little about the author (or authors) to make any direct connection. Hrærekr is the first to speak and begins by noting the collapse of the kingdom of Haraldr hárfagri and the absence of a central monarch.¹⁹ To this he appends a thumbnail sketch of Norwegian history, the successful reign of Hákon Aðalsteinsfóstri, but the domineering and unjust reign of Gunnhildr's sons, who induced the people to prefer a foreign king less immediately involved in Norwegian affairs and therefore less oppressive. There was support for Hákon jarl, but he too became "harsh and grasping" toward the people, who eventually killed him. The same pattern repeated itself under Óláfr Tryggvason, who had the right lineage and qualities to succeed Haraldr hárfagri, but when he reached the pinnacle of power, everyone lost their freedom. He was aggressive toward the chieftains, and no one was at liberty to choose what god to believe in. Hrærekr concludes by doubting whether having a kinsman as king will improve his lot.

This is precisely the sort of critique that is missing in the saga devoted to Óláfr Tryggvason, but it emerges in retrospect that he too could be viewed as tyrannical and therefore vulnerable to public resentment. Hrærekr's brother Hringr delivers the response, arguing that luck will determine whether Óláfr Haraldsson becomes sole king, but that if he does succeed, and the people are aligned with him, there is a good expectation that they will be rewarded. The reader may sense that Hrærekr has offered the sounder arguments, but the listeners at the assembly are convinced by Hringr, and Óláfr is accepted as king in Upplönd.

He must first contend with the residue of division left by Óláfr Tryggvason's defeat. Since the defeat was at the hands of three opponents, Óláfr Haraldsson must do battle on three fronts, against the opposition within Norway, against the Swedish king Óláfr Eiríksson who has installed his son-in-law Sveinn Hákonarson in Norway and feels proprietary about his share of the realm, and ultimately against Knútr inn ríki Sveinsson, who rules England as well as Denmark. In other words he must confront the burden of recent history in the form of a splintered realm. He is at first successful but in the long run a victim of local traditions because the divisions run too deep. He is able to defeat Sveinn Hákonarson in a naval battle at Nesjar and force him abroad, where he dies not long after. But that turns out to be only half a victory because Sveinn's sponsor, King Óláfr of Sweden, believes that he still has a claim in Norway. Indeed, he believes that he has conquered Norway, as he tells the Icelandic diplomat Hjalti Skeggjason in no uncertain terms.²⁰

The hostility between Óláfr of Norway and Óláfr of Sweden goes on for the best part of a hundred pages. The Norwegian king is willing to make peace, but his Swedish counterpart is angered to the point of not allowing his rival to be referred to by his proper name in his presence; instead he is to be referred to as "the stocky fellow." The Swedish king most certainly refuses to consider for a moment the possibility of a marriage alliance between his daughter and the Norwegian Óláfr. The story of the Swedish king takes on broader and more metaphorical dimensions because the Swedish people want peace. The story becomes therefore not so much the tale of a royal feud as a political parable in which the power of the people is balanced against royal autocracy. This focus recalls the insistence of Óláfr

Haraldsson's stepfather, Sigurðr sýr, that the people be consulted with respect to Óláfr's royal aspirations. In *Heimskringla* II the people have a voice, and that voice speaks loudly at the Swedish court.

In the saga as a whole we may identify what could be termed a Swedish interlude.²¹ Prominent in this interlude are two Swedish "lawmen," Þorgnýr Þorgnýsson and Emundr af Skǫrum, who confront the Swedish king on behalf of the Swedish people, the first with a direct denunciation and the second with a series of metaphorical stories that must be interpreted but are no less admonitory. The upshot is that the will of the people prevails and that the king must share the throne with his more acceptable son Jákob/Ǫnundr. This digression amounts to a peaceful revolution. We may wonder why so much detail is devoted to events in Sweden that are connected only tangentially with what is, after all, a Norwegian history. It is tempting to believe that it is not so much the focus on history that dictates the inclusion of the Swedish digression as it is the political problem of a king's relationship to his people. The Icelandic writer may well have felt that a discussion of royal autocracy and popular dissent was a little too dangerous to locate as close to home as Norway and therefore removed it to the safe distance of the Swedish court; the issues raised in one location may be equally applicable in the other. In short, the Swedish interlude may be viewed as a political digression that provides a general study of the strains between people and monarch.

Such an understanding is reinforced by the stories that surround the Swedish interlude and deal with the relationship between certain individuals and certain entities with the king. The first of these separates the episodes on the Swedish "lawmen" Þorgnýr and Emundr and is devoted to the petty king Hrærekr who opposed Óláfr's claim to kingship at the conference in Haðaland and was subsequently captured and blinded.²² The tale recounts Hrærekr's ingenuity in overcoming his disability and attempting to evade the king's custody; it engages at least as much sympathy for Hrærekr as for King Óláfr.

Following the Swedish interlude the author provides a short history of the jarls in Orkney and, in particular, an account of how King Óláfr imposes his will on the jarls and is able to add Orkney to his territorial possessions. The account shows Óláfr at his devious worst as he manipulates power and his own view of precedent to realize his

political ambitions. This coup is followed by more conversion activity, which might also be viewed as a manipulation of the people and which culminates in the well-told story of how Óláfr converts the pagan chieftain Dala-Guðbrandr by force and rank intimidation.²³ More purely political is the submission of the great Prændalög chieftain Einarr þambarskelfir and the great western chieftain Erlingr Skjálgsson.²⁴

What follows is a sequence of two-edged stories. On the one hand they are designed to exhibit the king's power and ambition, but they also suggest a degree of vulnerability. The first one is centered on a certain Ásbjörn Sigurðarson from Qmð in the north and it is both long and suggestive.²⁵ The king has forbidden the export of grain to the north in a year of famine. Ásbjörn manages to circumvent the prohibition, but one of the king's agents confiscates his cargo of grain and humiliates him into the bargain. Ásbjörn contrives to take revenge by killing the agent in the very presence of the king. He is scheduled to be executed by the king's order, but a visiting Icelander manages to delay the execution with various stratagems until Ásbjörn's uncle Erlingr Skjálgsson arrives with a large enough armed contingent to thwart the king's command. A resolution is finally arrived at whereby Ásbjörn agrees to serve in the place of the slain agent, but once he gets home, his uncle Þórir hundr convinces him not to become the king's "slave" and to remain at home in an independent capacity. The king must therefore forgo his judicial privilege, swallow his pride, and lose any semblance of compensation.

After some renewed conversion activity and the birth of Óláfr's son Magnús, a second story is related in the same style. It records the killing of Ásbjörn Sigurðarson by a certain Ásmundr Grankelsson, who is in the king's service.²⁶ Ásbjörn's mother incites Þórir hundr against the king, and the effect of the hostility, though long deferred, will be realized in due course. This is a case in which the king is not directly responsible, but it illustrates the risks inherent in the always potentially dangerous dealings between kings and chieftains.

On the heels of these ominous tales of revenge and counter-revenge comes a short but famous account of King Óláfr's initiatives in Iceland.²⁷ He sends an Icelandic delegate with the request that the northern Icelanders grant him the small island of Grímsey off Eyjafjörðr. People are at first receptive to the idea, but the wise chieftain Einarr Eyjólfsson at Þverá delivers a decisive speech outlining the perils incurred in giving the Norwegian king a foothold so close

to the Icelandic coast. The people take the warning to heart and decline to part with the island. The underlying message seems to be that King Óláfr's underhanded designs must be subjected to the most exacting scrutiny by the wisest analysts. Óláfr's back-up plan is then to issue an invitation to several of the most important Icelandic chieftains, but by this time caution has prevailed and the chieftains decide not to go themselves but to send others in their stead. What such a royal invitation entails becomes clear in the next episode, in which Óláfr lures several leading Faroe Islanders to his court and forces them to become his liegemen. Only the most intelligent of the Faroese chieftains penetrates the design, feigns a diplomatic illness, and declines to accept the invitation. The North Atlantic islands seem to be constantly in the position of fending off Óláfr's contrivances.

Although Óláfr appears to be registering a series of successes, he also pays a price for his authoritarian ways. King Knútr inn ríki of Denmark and England, together with Hákon jarl, the son of Eiríkr jarl Hákonarson, also has a claim on Norway, but refrains from activating it as long as Óláfr continues to be popular. When, however, Óláfr's chieftains begin to feel that they are becoming "disenfranchised under his rule," they start defecting to King Knútr inn ríki, and they communicate their dissatisfaction openly: "Many of those who came from Norway complained of their disenfranchisement and declared it to Hákon jarl, and some to the king himself; they said that the Norwegians would be prepared to return to the rule of King Knútr inn ríki and the jarl and receive their freedom from them."²⁸ Knútr inn ríki is persuaded and dispatches messengers to Óláfr to lodge his claim. Óláfr roundly rejects the demand and forms an alliance with the Swedish king Qnundr. At this point there is a halt in the narrative to make room for another episodic story.

Two brothers in the king's service, Karli and Gunnsteinn, form a trading partnership with King Óláfr and set out with a small band for Permia (the Kola Peninsula), but before doing so they are joined by Þórir hundr with a rather intimidating, and definitely uninvited, force of eighty men.²⁹ They reluctantly agree to this collaboration, but Karli is eventually killed by Þórir, who then seizes all the merchandise and booty that they have accumulated. King Óláfr mounts a deceptive mission to recover his losses, but Þórir is able to make good his escape to King Knútr inn ríki's court with his ill-gotten gains largely intact. For all his ingenuity, Óláfr once more draws the shorter straw and

must put his trading venture in the debit column both financially and politically. Þórir becomes an example of how Norway slips from his grasp. The tale is interspersed with additional information on Óláfr's Swedish alliance, his dealings with the Faroe Islands, and, as a new facet, his detention of several notable Icelanders at his court, pending an Icelandic decision to submit to his laws and pay taxes.

The Icelandic hostages become the pivot for more internal dissension in Norway.³⁰ One of them, Steinn Skaptason, takes refuge with the wife of one of four brothers of distinguished lineage, the sons of Árni Armóðsson. It is the wife of Þorbergr Árnason who undertakes to protect the refugee Steinn and thus precipitates contention with King Óláfr. Three of the brothers submit to Óláfr, but the fourth, Kálfr, becomes an important figure in the resistance to the king. Steinn is spared the king's full wrath and makes his way to King Knútr inn ríki's court. Another Icelandic hostage, Þóroddr Snorrason, escapes and has a fairy tale adventure with an outlaw who has a heart of gold.³¹ Þóroddr is subsequently able to make peace with Óláfr, but the fact remains that the Icelandic hostages, who are in effect held for tribute, undergo considerable hardships before they can make good their escape. At the same time they become a factor in the growing resistance to King Óláfr. After some additional information on the king's failure to collect taxes in the Faroe Islands the story returns to the alliance between the Norwegian and Swedish kings.

The conflict between King Knútr inn ríki and the alliance of Norwegians and Swedes culminates in an indecisive naval engagement off the coast of Skáney (Skåne, Scania). While the Swedes return home in the face of oncoming winter, Knútr inn ríki and Óláfr remain in place, but Knútr's agents begin to corrupt the Norwegians with outright gifts or promises of money. Óláfr senses that there is defection in his ranks and hesitates to expose himself to Knútr's forces by sailing through the Øresund, as Ólafr Tryggvason once did to his great misfortune. Instead he proposes to leave his ships in Sweden and return to Norway overland. The maneuver succeeds, but King Knútr's campaign of corruption continues and provokes executions in Norway that are unpopular. Meanwhile Knútr assembles a very large army, while Óláfr has little success in raising troops for his cause. Knútr is therefore able to land in Norway unopposed; he is acclaimed as king first in Agðir

and later as far north as Þrándheimr. Knútr turns the realm over to Hákon jarl, and Einarr Þambarskelfir in particular is returned to his former position of authority.

Though virtually abandoned, Óláfr does manage to win a naval engagement against Erlingr Skjálgsson, but that victory is transformed into the ultimate defeat when one of Óláfr's men kills the captured Erlingr with an ax stroke. Óláfr had clearly intended to spare him in the hope of a last-minute alliance. Erlingr's death provokes Óláfr's famous rejoinder ("Now you have struck Norway out of my hands.") and leaves him with no alternative but to retreat across Norway to Sweden. This is effectively the end of his reign and provides the occasion for a total evaluation of his character and an assessment of his rule:³²

We are told that King Óláfr was upright and devout in his prayers to God all the days of his life, but as he realized that his power was coming to an end and his opponents were gaining the upper hand, he devoted himself wholly to the service of God. He was not remiss in his other concerns or the labor he had previously initiated, for as long as he occupied the throne he had labored at what seemed to him of greatest value, first of all to release and save the country from the oppression of foreign leaders, and then to convert the people of the country to the true faith and establish laws and legal administration, and for the sake of justice he punished those who committed wrong. . . . He meted out punishments to both the powerful and powerless, but that seemed presumptuous to the people of the country and they were animated by enmity in opposition when they lost their kinsmen under a just rule, even though the charges were justified. The origin of the resistance that the people of the country offered King Óláfr was that they would not suffer his justice, but he preferred to forgo privilege rather than justice. But the charge that he was stingy with his men was not justified. He was most generous toward his friends. But it happened, when people waged resistance against him, that he seemed hard and harsh to them, whereas King Knútr offered great sums of money, and the greatest chieftains were deceived when he promised each of them honors and authority; furthermore people in Norway were eager to accept Hákon jarl, for he had been most beloved by the people while he ruled the land.

This paragraph appears to tell us everything the author wishes us to know about King Óláfr, his rule, and the reasons for his ultimate failure. He was, especially in his waning years, reliably Christian. He freed Norway from foreign rulers and established the rule of law. He was impartial in his application of justice, favoring no one group over another, but people did not tolerate his justice even though the charges brought against them were correct. He was generous to his friends but was simply outspent and outpromised by King Knútr. In addition, he had to contend with a particularly popular rival. The portrait is altogether positive, and the reverses suffered by the king are explained by unreasonable subjects and financial aggression on the part of King Knútr. But how well does this glowing portrait agree with the story that has been told? Does the story in fact lead the reader to evaluate King Óláfr in similarly favorable terms?³³

In the Swedish prelude Óláfr remains unscathed; disfavor falls rather on the Swedish king, who alienates his subjects. But if we attempt to integrate the rather unusual attention to Swedish politics into the narrative as a whole, it could be understood as a warning about what lies in Óláfr Haraldsson's future. We need not wait long to see what this future holds. It is illumined first of all by the king's dealing with the jarls of Orkney. He astutely, but forcibly, drives wedges between the jarls and obliges them to become his liegemen. The reader must decide whether this is a matter of clever politics or high-level trickery, but it partakes of neither the religion, nor the justice, nor the impartiality proclaimed by the author.

Óláfr's conversion (or reconversion) of his countrymen certainly accords with his Christianity, but here too there could be critical undertones since the mission is conducted by force. We must bear in mind the retrospective critique of Óláfr Tryggvason's forced conversions in the speech that Hrœrekr delivers at the outset of the saga:³⁴

When Óláfr thought that his power was fully established, no one was his own master because of him. He treated us petty kings aggressively in collecting all the taxes imposed by Haraldr hárfagri, and in some matters he was [still] more aggressive; people were even less their own masters because no one could decide [on his own] what god he should believe in.

Once again the reader must determine whether Óláfr's adamant imposition of Christianity is correct in the long term, whatever the short-term cost, or whether it involves an element of autocratic overreach. In light of the phrasing in Hrærekr's speech we cannot believe that all services to Christian belief, however extreme, should be regarded as positive.

Most illustrative of Óláfr's difficulties with the entrenched Norwegian chieftains is his relationship with the great western chieftain Erlingr Skjálgsson. It requires complex negotiations for Erlingr to come to an understanding with Óláfr, who must be persuaded that "there is no more important support for the king than Erlingr."³⁵ Even so they are only "sáttir at kalla" (nominally reconciled). Their reconciliation is severely strained when Erlingr's nephew Ásbjörn Sigurðarson takes revenge by killing a man in the king's presence and is bound over for execution by the king. Erlingr intervenes with a large enough force to face the king down, and their differences once more become acute. The king may have the letter of the law on his side, but most readers will sense greater sympathy for Erlingr. The sympathy is not diminished when Erlingr is struck down by one of the king's followers. This killing is not approved by the king, but there may be some reason for the killer to believe that it is. What is in any event clear is that Óláfr is unable to work out a manageable collaboration with this chieftain or several others. Diplomacy is not one of his skills.

This shortcoming is again on display when he ventures beyond the borders of Norway to Orkney, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands. In all three locations he uses main force and trickery for no just cause; his aim is territorial gain, and his methods are deceitful. In Orkney he sets the local jarls against each other to his own advantage. In Iceland he hides a military plan under a seemingly innocent request, a plan that is penetrated only by the perceptive Einarr Eyjólfsson. In the Faroe Islands he bends several leaders to his will and is resisted only by the equally resourceful Þrándr í Gøtu. The king tries to collect tribute but is repeatedly thwarted, again, one suspects, under the auspices of the impenetrable Þrándr. The designs on Iceland culminate in the detention of notable Icelanders at the Norwegian court until such time as the Icelanders at home will submit to the king's will. This amounts to international blackmail, and the stories of these hostages are cast as heroic escape dramas.

When King Knútr inn ríki of England and Denmark finally steps onto the stage in a serious way, he is given the benefit of quite a different portrait. He levies taxes to an extent not matched by other kings, but he also provides a greater return. In addition he leaves the old traditions unabridged: “In his whole realm there was such undisturbed peace that no one dared to challenge it, and the natives themselves enjoyed peace and their traditional laws. As a result he gained great fame in all lands.”³⁶ Knútr is therefore a great adversary not only by virtue of his military power but also by virtue of his leadership qualities. The Norwegian refugees who come to his court make the contrast quite explicit (*ibid.*): “Many of those who came from Norway complained of their disenfranchisement. . . .” The word rendered by “disenfranchisement” is “ófrelsi” (unfreedom), and “freedom” is a theme in the kings’ sagas that awaits special study. Deprivation of freedom was also a charge lodged against Haraldr hárfagri and was understood to have motivated the emigration to Iceland. “Ófrelsi” would therefore have had an especially negative flavor in the lexicon of an Icelandic writer.

The record compiled in this saga does not conform very well to the emphasis on Christian devotion, the rule of law, the evenhanded application of justice, and the practice of generosity attributed to Óláfr in the author’s summation. This summation takes no account of his forced conversions, his inability to collaborate with the chieftains already in place, his trickery, and his at once forceful and deceitful methods used in bringing the island territories to the west under his control. How should we reconcile the narration with the summation? I have made the case elsewhere that the author of *Heimskringla* III mediates between the Icelandic outlook in *Morkinskinna* and the Norwegian outlook in *Fagrskinna*.³⁷

We could surmise that *Heimskringla* II represents a similar compromise: that the narrative was primarily conceived for an Icelandic readership with reservations about kingship, while the summation, with its more pious regard for Óláfr’s saintly status, was written with a Norwegian readership in mind. The result is a collision between the saintly tradition and a more secular orientation. In the *Oldest Saga* and the *Legendary Saga* the saintly tradition prevailed, but in *Heimskringla* II the secular viewpoint dominated, with a small nod to the saintly profile in the final summation.

The last days of King Óláfr need not detain us. His retreat from Norway to Sweden is marked by a number of miraculous moments that document his saintliness. He eventually makes his way to Russia, where he learns that his successor in Norway, Hákon jarl Eiríksson, has disappeared at sea. He therefore yearns to return to Norway and is able to do so with the aid of the Swedish king. His march to his destiny at Stiklarstaðir near Trondheim is highlighted in particular by his insistence on recruiting only warriors who are firmly committed Christians, but his devotion is to no avail and he succumbs to a numerically superior force of farmers under the leadership of the chieftains who have defected from him.

We will not dwell at length on the narrative in *Heimskringla* III. Down to 1157 it follows closely the model of *Morkinskinna*, and presumably it did so as well for the years between 1157 and 1177 that are missing in *Morkinskinna*. With *Morkinskinna* it adheres to the theme of shared kingship. After the demise of King Óláfr the leaders of Þrændalög regret their actions and recall Óláfr's illegitimate son Magnús from Russia. Magnús proves to be an ideal choice, but very soon his uncle Haraldr harðráði Sigurðarson demands and is able to negotiate a share in the realm. There is some tension between the co-regents but no overt feud. Magnús dies young and is greatly lamented by the people, but his death opens the way for Haraldr to reign for the twenty years from 1046 to 1066, when he falls at Stamford Bridge in a vain attempt to conquer England. He is succeeded by his son Óláfr kyrri, who gives Norway the blessings of a pacific reign of twenty-seven years down to 1093. Óláfr is in turn succeeded by Magnús berfœttr, who reverts to his grandfather's acquisitive ambitions and ultimately falls in a military expedition in Ireland in 1103. Because of the premature death of his nephew Hákon, who is declared king in Upplönd, Magnús is not challenged for the throne.

There is, however, a real division of the realm under his sons, first a three-way division among Sigurðr jórsalafari, Eysteinn, and Óláfr, then after Óláfr's early death, a two-way division between Sigurðr and Eysteinn. Again there is some tension but no overt strife. Sigurðr inherits the military aspirations of Haraldr harðráði and Magnús berfœttr, while Eysteinn inherits the domestic focus of Magnús góði and Óláfr kyrri. The contrast is explicitly detailed in a verbal duel between the two kings (a *senna* or "flyting"), in which Sigurðr lauds

his prowess and Eysteinn celebrates his contributions to the welfare of the country. Despite his military impulses Sigurðr is granted the longer life and dies in 1130. Before he dies, however, a certain Haraldr Gillikristr comes from Ireland claiming that he too is a son of Magnús berfœttr. He is able to verify the claim by ordeal and is accepted by Sigurðr.

When Sigurðr subsequently dies, he is succeeded by his son Magnús, but, disregarding an earlier agreement not to contest Magnús's kingship, Haraldr gilli asserts a claim to the throne. At this point the division of kingship becomes not just a potential hazard but the cause of open hostilities between the two rivals. Haraldr has the upper hand, captures Magnús, and blinds him in 1135 so as to disqualify him from any further claim to the throne. The following year Haraldr is himself killed by another pretender, Sigurðr slembidjárn. This bloody sequence becomes the point of departure for the hundred years of civil strife in Norway down to ca. 1230. The strife is often fueled by very doubtful claims to the throne, to which we will turn in the next chapter.

If we attempt to identify an overall theme in *Heimskringla*, it might be the emergence of Norway as a unified realm and the subsequent challenges to this unity. Unification is achieved by, or attributed to, Haraldr hárfagri and was regarded in retrospect as a relatively and surprisingly easy transition, although the process must have been far more contentious in reality.³⁸ The hard-won nationhood was almost immediately threatened by the conflict between Hákon góði and Haraldr hárfagri's other sons, but Hákon's death averted a permanent split. Hákon jarl Sigurðarson restricted his claim largely to his ancestral lands in Þrændalög but did not exacerbate inner divisions by asserting a national kingship.

This claim was deferred to the time of Óláfr Tryggvason, who may have been motivated by the wish to impose a national religion, but *Heimskringla* suggests that this project was as divisive as it was correct. Óláfr's single-mindedness led in any event to the collapse of national unity and a Danish interregnum until 1015 when Óláfr Haraldsson once more asserted a Norwegian claim. But he too fostered internal divisiveness and gave rise to a Danish restoration. Magnús góði and Haraldr harðráði again wrested Norway from Danish control, but they revived the old problem of rival claims to the throne and shared rule. Haraldr also revived the issue of territorial

ambitions abroad in the spirit of Óláfr Haraldsson and at the cost of his own life. Haraldr's foreign adventurism not only echoes the risky policies of Óláfr Haraldsson abroad but establishes an ongoing theme, the question of the relative importance of domestic policy and foreign policy and the narrower question of whether a focus on expansionism is detrimental to a peaceful and progressive policy at home. This question emerges as a central concern in "Magnúss saga berfœtts" and even more explicitly in the story of the rival priorities under King Sigurðr jórsalafari and King Eysteinn Magnússon.

As *Heimskringla* progresses there is a double emphasis on national coherence and internal stability in the face of internecine rivalries and external distractions, in short on the viability of Norway once it emerges as a nation under Haraldr hárfagri. This complex of problems would have been especially vivid during the period of Norwegian wars from 1135 to ca. 1230, a period characterized by insoluble rivalries and repeated recourse to the Danish king. Inevitably this political atmosphere would have colored the view of Norwegian history in the eyes of observers during the civil war era and would have led them to stress the threat of division even in the earlier period leading up to the civil wars. *Heimskringla* clearly conceives of Norway as a nation in recurring peril, but it is remarkable that the concept of nationhood is so explicit, and we must ask where it originates.

This question takes us back to the prologue at the beginning of *Heimskringla* I. The prologue is four pages long in the ÍF edition, two pages on the mostly poetic sources and two pages on Ari Þorgilsson. The author begins by characterizing Ari's *Íslendingabók*, adding that, "as he himself relates," he told the "lives of the Norwegian kings according to the narration of Oddr Kolsson, Oddr being the son of Hallr af Síðu, and that Oddr learned from Þorgeirr af ráðskollr, a man who was wise and so old that he lived in Niðarnes when Hákon jarl the Mighty was killed [995]."³⁹ The author then goes on in similar terms to discuss Ari's other sources and their reliability. The mention of "the lives of the Norwegian kings" could allude to a fuller version of *Íslendingabók*, as many scholars have thought, or it could allude to a separate book.⁴⁰

The kings' lives referred to have been a long-standing mystery. Some scholars have thought that they must have been very short, but others have thought that they may have been more substantial.

It seems odd that the author would have devoted half his prologue to Ari if the latter had provided only a brief listing, and therefore more likely that he wrote something more nearly approximating history. In the absence of the kings' lives we can only surmise what kind of history it may have been on the basis of what Ari writes in the extant *Íslendingabók*. The author of the *Heimskringla* prologue characterizes *Íslendingabók* in a few words:⁴¹

He mostly wrote at the beginning of his book about the settlement of Iceland and the establishing of laws, then about the lawspeakers and how long each had recited, and pursued the chronology first to the time when Christianity came to Iceland and then down to his own day.

This amounts to an abbreviated restatement of the table of contents with which Ari prefaces *Íslendingabók*:⁴²

In hoc codice continentur capitula. About the settlement of Iceland I. About the settlers. II. And establishing laws. About the establishment of the *alþingi* III. About the calendar IIII. About the division of quarters V. About the settlement of Greenland VI. About the coming of Christianity to Iceland VII. About foreign bishops VIII. About Bishop Ísleifr IX. About Bishop Gizurr [X].

There has been some discussion about when the Icelanders first perceived themselves as Icelanders, that is, as a separate national entity.⁴³ It seems clear that Ari sees the Icelanders as a group apart, with a separate origin, separate institutions, and separate leaders (whether lawspeakers or bishops). Ari sets them apart by referring to “foreign” bishops, and later in the book he will use the term “we countrymen” or “the people of the country.”⁴⁴ He therefore has a quite palpable idea of a national grouping distinct from others. The reference to “lives of the Norwegian kings” in the prologue to *Heimskringla* must therefore also imply a national entity called Norway. The topics dealt with in *Heimskringla* are in fact reminiscent of the chapter headings in *Íslendingabók*: settlement, laws, institutions, regional distinctions, and the advent of Christianity. Even the settlement of Greenland may call to mind Óláfr Haraldsson's forays into the North Atlantic. We might therefore theorize that the author or authors of *Heimskringla* modeled

the outline of Norwegian history on the shape of Ari's history.⁴⁵ Both books are about the founding of a nation. The settling of Norway in "Ynglinga saga" and up through *Haralds saga hárfagra*, which is new in relation to earlier Norwegian histories, could be inspired by Ari's account of the Icelandic settlement. Ari's role as a historical model would then explain why he is given such prominence in the prologue to *Heimskringla*. Both Ari and *Heimskringla* trace the rise of a nation, but only *Heimskringla* dwells on the perils of a nation.⁴⁶ What had intervened between them was the period of civil unrest in Norway, and that was bound to sharpen perceptions of peril.

CHAPTER 5

In Quest of a Leader

Sverris saga

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

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

1. *Sverris saga*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. Baglar and Birkibeinar

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. Echoes of Norwegian Warfare in Northern Iceland

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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:¹

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.² 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 lagabœtir, of which only a fragment survives; he is sometimes credited with other books, though with less certainty.³ *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 1280.⁴

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 þáttir" 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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷

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.⁸ 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 Viðines, 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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.¹²

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.¹³

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 þátttr" 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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*.¹⁷ 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."¹⁸

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.¹⁹ 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 Íslensk fornrit edition of *Hákonar saga* written by Sverrir Jakobsson and Þorleifur Hauksson.²⁰ 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.²¹ He also argues that King Hákon does not bear the responsibility for Snorri's killing.²² 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.²³ 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 1215–20.²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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 friðbetra 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.²⁶

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.²⁷ 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."²⁸ 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.²⁹ 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.³⁰ 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.

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*, *Böglunga 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.

Notes

Chapter 1—Early Contacts between Norway and Iceland

1. The beginning of chapter 1 in Ari Þorgilsson's sketch of Icelandic history reads in part as follows: "Iceland was settled first from Norway in the days of Harald Fairhair . . . and that was 870 years after the birth of Christ." There have been recent archeological attempts to show that Iceland was settled before 870. See Margrét Hermanns-Auðardóttir, *Íslands tidiga bosättning* (1989) and "Arkeologiska undersökningar av handels-platsen vid Gásir" (1999); Páll Theodórsson, "Upphaf landnáms á Íslandi 670 AD" (2009); Gunnar Karlsson, "Upphaf mannaferða á Íslandi" (2011). Verena Höfig provides a full discussion of the archeological debate in her unpublished University of California (Berkeley) dissertation, "Finding a Founding Father: Memory, Identity, and the Icelandic *landnám*" (2014), 8–12.

2. The text has been published and translated a number of times and may be found in ÍF 1.1. The most recent translation with abundant annotation and discussion is in Siân Grønlie's *Íslendingabók; Kristni saga: The Book of the Icelanders; The Story of the Conversion* (2006).

3. For a brief introduction to the sagas about early Icelanders (known as "sagas of Icelanders" or "family sagas") see Margaret Clunies Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old-Norse-Icelandic Saga* (2010). A thumbnail overview of the bishops' sagas is provided by Kurt Schier, *Sagaliteratur* (1970), 67–71. On the translations from the Latin see Stefanie Würth, *Der "Antikenroman" in der isländischen Literatur des Mittelalters* (1998). On the translations from the French see Marianne Kalinke, "Norse Romance (*Riddarasögur*)" in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide* (1985; rpt. 2005), 316–63; see also Jürg Glauser, *Isländische Märchensagas: Studien zur Prosaliteratur im spätmittelalterlichen Island* (1983).

4. *Morkinskinna: The Earliest Chronicle of the Norwegian Kings (1030–1157)*, trans. Theodore M. Andersson and Kari Ellen Gade (2000), and *Fagrskinna: A Catalogue of the Kings of Norway*, trans. Alison Finlay (2004). A new translation of the third compendium, *Heimskringla*, by Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulkes, is now complete: Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, 3 vols. (2011–15). Individual volume titles are vol. 1: *The Beginnings to Óláfr Tryggvason*, vol. 2: *Óláfs saga helga*, and vol. 3: *Magnús Ólafsson to Magnús Erlingsson*.

5. I have surveyed some of the specialized literature in "Kings' Sagas (*Konungasögur*)," in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, ed. Carol J. Clover and John Lindow (1985; rpt. 2005), 197–238. Diana

Whaley has written a short but excellent overview in “The Kings’ Sagas” in *Viking Revaluations: Viking Society Centenary Symposium 14–15 May 1992* (1993), 43–64. Shami Ghosh provides a probing update in *Kings’ Sagas and Norwegian History* (2011), 177–201.

6. *Landnámabók* is published in ÍF 1.1–2 and has been translated by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards in *The Book of Settlements* (1972).

7. See Jakob Benediktsson’s introduction in ÍF 1.1 (p. 1). Peter Andreas Munch retraced a number of settlers to their roots in Norway in *Det norske folks historie*, pt. 1, vol. 1 (1852), 545–53.

8. See Gísli Sigurðsson, *Gaelic Influence in Iceland* (1988), 33; Ian McDougall, “Foreigners and Foreign Languages” (1987–88), 182–89.

9. For an impressively detailed survey of Icelandic contacts with the Celtic-speaking regions see Helgi Guðmundsson, *Um haf innan* (1997). The most famous Celtic speaker in Iceland is the Irish princess Melkorka in *Laxdæla saga*, who is brought to Iceland as a concubine and teaches her son Irish in secret. That serves him well later in the story, but it is clear that Irish is a rare accomplishment in Iceland. On Melkorka see Helgi Guðmundsson, *Um haf innan*, 304–15. The most notorious German-speaker in Iceland was the missionary Þangbrandr, whose story is told a number of places, including at some length in *Kristni saga*, trans. Siân Grønlie (note 2), 38–44, and *Njáls saga* (ÍF 12:256–69). Þangbrandr must have learned Norse or made use of an interpreter because he communicates directly with his Icelandic disciples and opponents.

10. See Bruce Gelsinger, *Icelandic Enterprise* (1981), 71–75; Hallvard Magerøy, *Soga om austmenn: Nordmenn som siglde til Island og Grønland i mellomalderen* (1993), 30; William Ian Miller, *Audun and the Polar Bear* (2008), 22–27. Ann Marie Long provides a detailed review of the relevant laws in the fourth chapter of her unpublished University College Dublin dissertation “The Relationship between Iceland and Norway c. 870–c. 1100: Memory, History and Identity” (2013).

11. ÍF 3:337. See *Morkinskinna*, trans. Andersson and Gade, 419, note 11.

12. ÍF 23:184 and *Morkinskinna*, trans. Andersson and Gade, 192.

13. Bogi Th. Melsteð, “Töldu Íslendingar sig . . . vera Norðmenn” (1914), 16–33; see also Helgi Guðmundsson, *Um haf innan*, 273–74.

14. See the contributions by Sverrir Jakobsson listed in the Bibliography (1999a, 1999b, 2002b, 2005a:304–68). Gunnar Karlsson detects signs of separation as early as the beginning of the twelfth century and possibly as early as the second generation of colonists (1987, 1988, 1994, 1995, 1999, 2004). In the introduction to her translation of Ari’s *Íslendingabók*, Siân Grønlie finds a “consciousness of separate Icelandic identity” in the title of the book and in such phrasings as “our bishops,” “our reckoning,” and “our countrymen” (p. xxiv). Kirsten Hastrup, in “Defining a Society” (1984), suggested that the Icelandic “Free State” was a thirteenth-century literary creation (250–51). On the problem of national consciousness in Norway see Knut Arstad, “Ribbungsopprør” (1995), 76–77; Sverre Bagge, “Nationalism in Norway” (1995); Kåre Lunden, “Was there a national Norwegian identity?” (1995).

15. See in particular Else Mundal, "Fremveksten av den islandske identiteten" (1997).

16. On the prologues in *Heimskringla* see most recently Shami Ghosh, *Kings' Sagas and Norwegian History*, 53–57.

17. See Helgi Þorláksson, "Íslandske havner" (1978), 1–26; T. M. Andersson, "Sea Traffic in the Sagas" (2012), 156–75.

18. See Bogi Th. Melsteð, "Ferðir, siglingar og samgöngur milli Íslands og annara landa á dögum þjóðveldisins" (1907–1915), 836; Hallvard Magerøy, *Soga om austmenn*, 39; "Hungrvaka," Bps. 1:71; "Kristni saga," *ibid.*, 1:30–31 (trans. Grønlie, 54).

19. The passage from *Kristni saga* may be found in ÍF15.2:44 and the passage from *Hungrvaka* in Bps. 1:71 (trans. Grønlie, 54). The number of people conveyed in a ship is hard to calculate and presumably would have depended on such factors as military versus commercial use, distance to be traveled, and type of cargo carried. Finnur Jónsson, "Hinn forni kaupstaður 'at Gásum,'" *Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags* (1908), 4, once estimated one hundred or more men per ship, but that seems high. Sven Axel Anderson, *Viking Enterprise* (1936), 66, put the crew of the Gokstad ship at forty but thought she could carry as many as seventy. Kåre Lunden, *Norge under Sverreætten* (1976), 157, calculated a crew of 65 for the Gokstad ship. The replica of the Gokstad ship that crossed the Atlantic in 1893 operated with a crew of twelve according to the report of the captain Magnus Andersen in *Vikingefærden* (1895), 76–83, but she required 32 rowers to leave the Oslo harbor (p. 94). Perhaps the best indication of what an early thirteenth-century Icelandic writer would have thought is the information that when Kveld-Úlfr Bjálfaðson sailed from Norway to Iceland, he had two large *knerrir*, each carrying thirty men plus women and children (ÍF 2:66). Hallvard Magerøy, *Soga om austmenn*, 60, estimated a normal crew of thirty to fifty men for a *knörr* (plur. *knerrir*). On the peril of famine in medieval Iceland see William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking* (1990), 16.

20. See Bogi Th. Melsteð, "Ferðir, siglingar, og samgöngur" 744; *Jóns saga helga* in Bps. 1: 221–22; *Fornmanna sögur*, vol. 7 (Copenhagen, 1832), 32.

21. *Kongesagastudier* (Copenhagen, 1977), III.

22. *Sturlunga saga*, ed. Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason, and Kristján Eldjárn, 2 vols. (Reykjavík: Sturlungaútgáfan, 1946), 1:122; *Sturlunga saga*, trans. Julia H. McGrew and R. George Thomas, 2 vols. (New York: Twayne Publishers and the American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1970–74), 2:100. See also *Guðmundar saga biskups* in Bps. 1:416.

23. *Sturlunga saga*, 1:269; trans. McGrew/Thomas, 1:162.

24. *Íslandske annaler indtil 1578* ("Annales regii"), 119.

25. Bps. 1:77.

26. *Sturlunga saga*, 1:161; trans. McGrew/Thomas, 2:148.

27. *Sturlunga saga*, 1:205–6; trans. McGrew/Thomas, 2:198.

28. *Sturlunga saga*, 1:236; trans. McGrew/Thomas, 1:125.

29. The fullest recapitulation of this conflict may be found in Bogi Th. Melsteð, "Útanstefnur og erendisrekar útlendra þjóðhöfðingja á fyrri hluta Sturlungaaldar 1200–1239" (1899), 122–30.

30. *Sturlunga saga*, 1:312–13; trans. McGrew/Thomas, 1:210.
31. *Sturlunga saga*, 1:349; trans. McGrew/Thomas, 1:250.
32. *Sturlunga saga*, 2:183; trans. McGrew/Thomas, 2:436.
33. The Norwegian chieftain Grégóriús Dagsson addresses the apparently less hardened Icelander Hallr Auðunarson after the Battle of Konungahella in *Heimskringla* in the following terms (ÍF 28:349): “Many men seem to me more easygoing in battle than you Icelanders, for you are less accustomed to it than we Norwegians, but nobody seems bolder in arms than you.” See Helgi Þorláksson, “Kaupmenn í þjónustu konungs,” *Mímir* 13:5–12 (esp. 8 and 10–11) on the Norwegian military advantages. See also Hallvard Magerøy, *Soga om austmenn*, 177 and 180. Chris Callow, “Narrative, Contact, Conflict, and Coexistence” (2004) concluded that the Icelanders did not take the Norwegians seriously as fighters, but I incline to the opposite view.
34. See *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* by Oddr Snorrason, ÍF 25:265–67; trans. Andersson, Oddr Snorrason, *The Saga of Olaf Tryggvason* (2003), 99–100.
35. On Norwegian warrior status see also *Flóamanna saga* (ÍF 13:322–23) and *Pórðar saga breðu* (ÍF 14:195–97). Both passages recount match-ups between Icelanders and Norwegians, and in both cases the point seems to be that the Icelanders emerge as surprise winners.
36. *Sturlunga saga*, 1:124; trans. McGrew/Thomas, 2:102–3.
37. *Sturlunga saga*, 1:124–25; trans. McGrew/Thomas, 2:103.
38. *Sturlunga saga*, 1:126; trans. McGrew/Thomas, 2:104.
39. Magnus Andersen, *Vikingefærden* (1895), 186.
40. *Sturlunga saga*, 1:137–38; trans. McGrew/Thomas, 2:117–18.
41. *Sturlunga saga*, 1:139; trans. McGrew/Thomas, 2:119.
42. *Sturlunga saga*, 1:197–99; trans. McGrew/Thomas, 2:189–91.
43. *Sturlunga saga*, 1:212; trans. McGrew/Thomas, 2:206. On the Skæringr episode see Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 1–12.
44. *Sturlunga saga*, 1:258; trans. McGrew/Thomas, 1:151.
45. E.g., *Sturlunga saga*, 1:270–71; trans. McGrew/Thomas, 1:163–64.
46. *Sturlunga saga*, 1:327; trans. McGrew/Thomas, 1:226.
47. *Sturlunga saga*, 1:393; trans. McGrew/Thomas, 1:297.
48. *Sturlunga saga*, 1:405; trans. McGrew/Thomas, 1:309.
49. *Sturlunga saga*, 1:445–46; trans. McGrew/Thomas, 1:350–51.
50. *Sturlunga saga*, 2:75; trans. McGrew/Thomas, 2:310.
51. *Sturlunga saga*, 2:93; trans. McGrew/Thomas, 2:331.

Chapter 2—Early Epitomes and Biographies

1. The speculations on these lost texts reach back into the eighteenth century and are complex. The history of the question was clearly and succinctly summarized by Eva Hagnell in her *Are frode och hans författarskap* (1938). She made a case for believing that, based on what Ari says in his *Libellus*, there was an earlier version of that book including kings’ lives (*konunga ævi*) and genealogies but that the kings’ lives were for the most part a brief epitome, not a full-scale history. She did allow for somewhat fuller notes on

important matters (p. 136). A short time later Einar Arnórsson published a treatise, *Ari fróði* (1942), in which he argued that in addition to the “first edition” and “second edition” of the *Libellus* Ari authored a separate book on the kings’ lives (pp. 27–62). Two years after that Björn Sigfússon returned to the subject and reviewed the options again briefly in *Um Íslendingabók* (pp. 10–37). More recently Svend Ellehøj, *Studier over den ældste norrøne historieskrivning* (1965), provided a detailed analysis of the thorny issues, emphasizing Ari’s centrality in the evolution of the kings’ sagas. Gudrun Lange, *Die Anfänge der isländisch-norwegischen Geschichtsschreibung* (1989), updated the question once again and attributed an important role to both Ari and Sæmundr. Gabriel Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature* (1953; rpt. 1967), 70–108, provided an overview in English, and I added a short synopsis in “The Kings’ Sagas (*Konungasögur*)” (1985; rpt. 2005), 197–211, with a discussion of Svend Ellehøj’s views.

2. This is true of Ellehøj (1965) *passim* and more explicitly Lange (1989), esp. 10, 114–20, 171, 178–81.

3. This crucial passage reads as follows (ÍF 1.1:3): “Íslendingabók gørða ek fyrst byskupum órum, Þorláki ok Katli, ok sýndak bæði þeim ok Sæmundi presti. En með því at þeim líkaði svá at hafa eða þar viðr auka, þá skrifaða ek þessa of et sama far, fyr utan áttartölu ok konunga ævi, ok jókk því es mér varð síðan kunnara ok nú es gerr sagt á þessi en á þeiri.” This might be translated as follows: “I made the Book of the Icelanders first for our bishops Þorlákr and Ketill, and I showed it both to them and to Sæmundr the priest. And because they liked it as it was or with some additions, I wrote this [book] in the same way while omitting the genealogies and kings’ lives, and I added what I got to know better and now the telling is fuller in this book than in the other.” “While omitting” is the most common understanding of Ari’s words “fyr utan,” but the words could also mean “separate from” or simply “without.” In this case the “kings’ lives” and “genealogies” could have been separate compositions and not part of an earlier edition of the *Libellus*. Accordingly Else Mundal, “Íslendingabók, ættar tala og konunga ævi” (1984), makes an attractive argument for believing that there was no “first edition” and that the three texts in question were simply assembled in a composite manuscript.

4. The references to Ari elsewhere in Icelandic literature are gathered and discussed by Eva Hagnell, *Are frode*, 113–65.

5. These transcripts are reproduced photographically in *Íslendingabók Ara fróða* (1956).

6. My translation, but see also Siân Grønlie, trans., *Íslendingabók; Kristni saga*, 7.

7. *Ibid.*, 8.

8. On this period see Gabriel Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature*, and Orri Vésteinsson, *The Christianization of Iceland* (2000).

9. One example is the Icelandic chieftain Víga-Glúmr who, in his youth, visits his maternal grandfather in Norway (Voss). He gets a cool reception as long as his identity is uncertain, but once he has proved himself, he is duly celebrated (ÍF 9:17–19). Another example, this time from the kings’ sagas, is the Icelander Steinn Skaptason, who has stood godfather to a child of the

distinguished woman Ragnhildr Erlingsdóttir. She not only receives him warmly, but also protects him against the wrath of King Óláfr Haraldsson. ÍF 27:243–49; trans. Lee M. Hollander in *Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway by Snorri Sturluson* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), 414–19; trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 2:162–66.

10. See the references in chapter 1, note 14, above.

11. Orri Vésteinsson, *The Christianization of Iceland*, 144–60.

12. Gabriel Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature*, 78.

13. Both histories are readily available. The *Historia de Antiquitate* is printed in MHN, 3–68, and was translated by David and Ian McDougall with abundant commentary in the volume Theodoricus monachus, *Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium; An Account of the Ancient History of the Norwegian Kings* (1998). The *Historia Norwegiae* appeared in a bilingual Latin-English version edited by Inger Ekrem and Lars Boje Mortensen and translated by Peter Fisher (2003).

14. See the translation in the previous note, pp. 1 and 5.

15. I survey some of the debate in “The Two Ages in *Ágrip af Nóregs konunga sögum*” (2011). Many scholars view the kings’ sagas as distinctively Icelandic. On the other hand, Halvdan Koht once posited a whole Norwegian literary culture under King Sverrir, including Theodoricus, *Sverris saga*, *Ágrip*, and the “Speech against the Bishops.” See his “Norsk historieskrivning under kong Sverre” (1921; first publ. in 1914), esp. 181.

16. See especially the references to Gudrun Lange in note 2 above.

17. I argue this point in “The Two Ages in *Ágrip*.”

18. The early silence about King Haraldr’s unification has been taken to suggest that there was no such unification. See Sverrir Jakobsson, “Erindringen om en mægtig personlighed” (2002) and Shami Ghosh, *Kings’ Sagas and Norwegian History*, 42–45 and 66–70. Such skepticism is possible, but it seems unlikely that everything that was added into the later compendia was without traditional foundation.

19. On Gunnhildr see the articles by Sigurður Nordal, “Gunnhildur konungamóðir” (1941), trans. into Norwegian as “Gunnhild kongemor” (1965), and Anne Heinrichs, “Gunnhild konungamóðir” (1996).

20. My translation, but see also the edition and translation by Matthew J. Driscoll, *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum* (1995, rpt. 2008), 24–25.

21. *Historia Norwegie* (2003), 50.

22. *Ibid.*, 211–17.

23. On the possible meaning of this word see Bjarni Guðnason, *Fyrsta sagan* (1978), 68–72.

24. *Ibid.*, 12–32.

25. ÍF 24:173–75; trans. Andersson and Gade, 369–70.

26. The text is printed in ÍF 25:125–362; trans. Andersson, Oddr Snorrason, *The Saga of Olaf Trygvason*.

27. I make the case for believing this in my translation, pp. 7–14.

28. The tale of Þangbrandr is told at some length in *Kristni saga* and *Njáls saga*. See Siân Grønlie, trans., *Íslendingabók; Kristni saga*, 38–44, and ÍF 12:256–69.

29. ÍF 25:285–86; trans. Andersson, 106–7.

30. I weigh the alternatives in “The First Icelandic King’s Saga” (2004), revised in *The Partisan Muse in the Early Icelandic Sagas* (2012), 45–82.

31. On the bishops’ sagas see Gabriel Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature*, 196–212; and Ásdís Egilsdóttir, “Biskupa Sögur,” in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia* (1993), 45–46.

32. A new translation of *Heimskringla* is now available. See chapter 1, note 4 and the Bibliography.

33. The most convenient edition is the moderately normalized text with a German translation by Anne Heinrichs et al., *Olafs saga hins Helga: Die “Legendarische Saga” über Olaf den Heiligen* (1982).

34. *Ibid.*, 120.

35. The term “Legendary Saga” goes back to Peter Andreas Munch. See the “Einleitung” to *Olafs saga hins helga*, 14.

36. See note 30 above.

37. *Valla-Ljóts saga* is edited in ÍF 9:233–60 and translated by Theodore M. Andersson and William Ian Miller in *Law and Literature in Medieval Iceland* (1989), 256–85.

38. ÍF 9:260; trans. Andersson and Miller, *Law and Literature*, 285.

39. ÍF 9:255; trans. Andersson and Miller, *Law and Literature*, 278.

40. ÍF 9:256; trans. Andersson and Miller, *Law and Literature*, 280.

41. G. M. Gathorne-Hardy, *A Royal Impostor* (1956), 2.

42. The fragments and Danish translation of *Bøglunga sǫgur* have been edited by Hallvard Magerøy, *Soga om Birkebeinar og Baglar* (1988), 2 vols., and in ÍF 31:3–162.

43. See for example Sverre Bagge, “Borgerkrig og statsutvikling i Norge i middelalderen” (1986) and Birgit Sawyer, “The ‘Civil Wars’ Revisited” (2003).

44. ÍF 24:185; trans. Andersson and Gade, 375.

45. Bjarni Guðnason, *Fyrsta sagan*, 126.

46. ÍF 24:193; trans. Andersson and Gade, 379.

47. ÍF 24:205; trans. Andersson and Gade, 385.

48. ÍF 28:284–85; trans. Hollander, 719–21.

49. ÍF 28:302; trans. Hollander, 734.

50. See ÍF 28:229 and 279; ÍF 24:303; ÍF 28:321.

51. ÍF 28:310; trans. Hollander, 741.

52. ÍF 24:208; trans. Andersson and Gade, 386.

53. ÍF 28:322; trans. Hollander, 750. Knut Liestøl discussed the peculiarities of authorial omniscience in the sagas in *The Origin of the Icelandic Family Saga* (1930), 86–100.

54. ÍF 28:318–19; trans. Hollander, 748.

55. *Sturlunga saga*, 1:116; trans. McGrew/Thomas, 2:93.

56. ÍF 28:350–60; trans. Hollander, 770–80.

57. ÍF 28:368; trans. Hollander, 785.

58. ÍF 28:364; trans. Hollander, 781.

59. For these stanzas see *Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas*, vol. 2, pt. 2, ed. Kari Ellen Gade (2009), 565–67.

60. On Einarr see *Sturlunga saga*, 1:88; trans. McGrew/Thomas, 1:86.

61. I refer to these aspirations in *The Partisan Muse*, 144–47.

Chapter 3—The Character of Kings: *Morkinskinna* and *Fagrskinna*

1. The coverage of *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla* (as well as *Fagrskinna*) is summarized and compared in *Morkinskinna: The Earliest Icelandic Chronicle*, trans. Andersson and Gade, 497–511.

2. Ármann Jakobsson, *Staður í nýjum heimi* (2002), chapter 2 (“Uppruni”), summarized on 53–54. See also 82, 87, 102, 181. On the *þættir* in general see Elizabeth Ashman Rowe and Joseph Harris, “Short Prose Narrative,” in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (2005), 462–78.

3. For “Auðunar þáttir” see ÍF 23:217–32 (trans. Andersson and Gade, 211–15), and for “Brands þáttir orva” see ÍF 23:230–32 (trans. Andersson and Gade, 219–20). See also Ármann Jakobsson, *Staður í nýjum heimi*, 80–81, and *A Sense of Belonging* (2014), 334–5. The best and fullest analysis of the classic “Auðunar þáttir” is given by Miller in *Audun and the Polar Bear*.

4. On Brandr as king of Iceland see Hermann Pálsson, “Brands þáttir orva,” *Gripla* 7 (1990), 117–30. In general see Vésteinn Ólason’s illuminating discussion of the sometimes paradoxical relationship between the free Icelanders and Norwegian royalty in “Den frie mannens selvforståelse i islandske sagaer og dikt” (1989).

5. The episode is found in ÍF 23:235–37; trans. Andersson and Gade, 222–23.

6. ÍF 23:237–39; trans. Andersson and Gade, 223–25. See Ármann Jakobsson, *A Sense of Belonging*, 296–97.

7. A short Latin epitome is translated in *Morkinskinna: The Earliest Icelandic Chronicle*, trans. Andersson and Gade, 512–15. The Icelandic retelling of the tale in *Morkinskinna* is found in ÍF 23:242–69; trans. Andersson and Gade, 225–43. The most recent study is Sverre Bagge, “Hákonar saga Ívarssonar—en kompilasjon fra senmiddelalderen,” *Maal og minne* (2014), 2:1–17.

8. ÍF 23:270–84; trans. Andersson and Gade, 243–52. See Ármann Jakobsson, *Staður í nýjum heimi*, 98, and *A Sense of Belonging*, 291.

9. On the magic interlude see Bo Almqvist, *Norrön niddiktning*, vol. 1, *Nid mot furstar* (1965), 186–205.

10. Examples of this commonplace were assembled by Bogi Th. Melsteð, “Töldu Íslendingar sig . . . vera Norðmenn,” 30.

11. ÍF 23:290–93; trans. Andersson and Gade, 255–57.

12. ÍF 23:293–99; trans. Andersson and Gade, 257–61.

13. ÍF 23:205; trans. Andersson and Gade, 204.

14. Most of the “þættir” are in the saga of Haraldr harðráði.

15. See Adam’s *Gesta*, 159 and 267; trans. Francis J. Tschann, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen* (1959), 124.

16. I discuss these stories in *The Partisan Muse*, 97–109.

17. ÍF 24:29–38; trans. Andersson and Gade, 291–97.

18. ÍF 27:148–56; trans. Hollander, 343–49; trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 2:95–102.

19. See Skúli Björn Gunnarsson, “Hið íslenska hirðfífl” (1996), 55–63, and Björn Gíslason, “Klám og gróteska í Sneglu-Halla þætti” (1999), 33–42. See also Ármann Jakobsson, “Munnur skáldsins” (2005) and *Staður í nýjum heimi*, 241.

20. On this “spine-tingling” moment see Miller, *Audun and the Polar Bear*, 64–65.

21. See Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 72.

22. ÍF 24:116–17; trans. Andersson and Gade, 336.

23. ÍF 12:411–12. In this stunning passage Hallr af Síðu runs counter to all cultural expectations by renouncing vengeance in the interest of a peaceful settlement.

24. ÍF 24:38; trans. Andersson and Gade, 297.

25. ÍF 24:59–60; trans. Andersson and Gade, 307.

26. ÍF 24:99; trans. Andersson and Gade, 325.

27. ÍF 24:131–34; trans. Andersson and Gade, 345–47.

28. Birgit Sawyer has also emphasized the role of advice in *Heimskringla* in *Heimskringla: An Interpretation*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 483 (Tempe, AZ: ACMRS [Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies], 2015).

29. The tale is told in ÍF 23:178–87; trans. Andersson and Gade, 187–94.

30. ÍF 23:162–63; trans. Andersson and Gade, 177–78.

31. The treatise is known as *Konungs skuggsjá* and was edited by Ludvig Holm-Olsen (1945; 1983) and translated by Laurence Marcellus Larson as *The King's Mirror* (1917). A propos of Brandr Vermundarson, Ármann Jakobsson, *Staður í nýjum heimi*, 148, has noted “Skapstilling jafngildir ekki skapleysi” (Self-restraint is not the same as cowardice). William Miller concludes his monograph on Auðunn by contrasting the volubility prompted by Melville's white whale and the laconism occasioned by Auðunn's white bear (p. 146).

32. Gustav Indrebø, *Fagrskinna* (1917).

33. Ibid., 278–82. Ármann Jakobsson opposed this view in *Í leit að konungi* (1997), 35.

34. On the Icelandic character of *Morkinskinna* see Ármann Jakobsson, *Í leit að konungi*, 272–78.

35. ÍF 29:261; trans. Finlay (2004), 208.

36. It should be noted that Else Mundal has very recently rejected the traditional location of *Fagrskinna* in Trondheim and has advanced arguments for its being written in Bergen. See her “Sagaskrivarene og Bergen” (2013).

37. Indrebø, *Fagrskinna*, 127.

38. Ibid., 132–33.

39. Ibid., 137–38.

40. Ibid., 148.

41. Ibid., 158.

42. ÍF 29:145; trans. Finlay (2004), 115.

43. Indrebø, *Fagrskinna*, 172.

44. Ibid., 174.

45. Ibid., 175.

46. Ibid., 187.

47. Ibid., 200.

48. See Saxo Grammaticus, *Saxonis Gesta Danorum* (1931), 5, or Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum; Danmarkshistorien* (2005), 1:74–76. The passage might be translated as follows: “Nor should the diligence of the

Icelanders be passed over in silence. For, lacking the resources of luxurious living because of the poverty of the soil, they cultivate the obligations of steadfast frugality and are in the habit of devoting every moment of life to the study of the works of others, and they counterbalance their lack of resources with mental exertion. Indeed, in place of pleasure they are given to bringing together the deeds of all nations, and they consign them to memory, judging that there is no less glory in examining the deeds of others than in displaying their own. By carefully consulting their treasures imbedded in the sure record of historical matters, I have put together no little part of the present work relying on their accounts, and I have not disdained to consider those persons as guides whom I have found to be so experienced in ancient matters.”

49. It should be noted here that Sigurjón Páll Ísaksson has recently taken a revolutionary view of the relationship of the three compendia to one another. He suggests that all three were written by Snorri Sturluson, one after the other. The sequence would have been that Snorri traveled to Norway in 1219 with an unfinished version of *Morkinskinna*, which he showed to King Hákon and Jarl Skúli. They asked him to provide a version without the stories that tended to cast a shadow on the Norwegian kings. He accommodated their wishes and quickly produced *Fagrskinna*, but he completed *Morkinskinna* for an Icelandic readership when he returned to Iceland the following year. At the same time he felt dissatisfied with *Fagrskinna* and went to work on a third version (*Heimskringla*) between 1220 and 1230. The differences in the three versions would have been partly a matter of these political considerations and partly a matter of Snorri's evolution as a writer. See the paper “Höfundur Morkinskinnu og Fagrskinnu,” *Gripla* 23 (2012): 235–85. Some readers will feel that the books are too different to be by the same author, but that is inevitably a subjective response.

50. Indrebø, *Fagrskinna*, 260.

51. See Sverrir Tómasson, “Hvenær var Tristrams sögu snúið?” (1977), 56–57. On King Hákon's education see Kevin Wanner, *Snorri Sturluson and the Edda* (2008), 81–87.

52. See *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* (ÍF 31:266–67 and ÍF 32:49).

53. *Sturlunga saga*, 1:271 and 277; trans. McGrew/Thomas, 1:165 and 171.

54. *Sturlunga saga*, 1:277; trans. McGrew/Thomas, 1:171.

55. *Hákonar saga* (ÍF 31:229); *Sturlunga saga*, 1:277–78; trans. McGrew/Thomas, 1:171.

56. Indrebø, *Fagrskinna* (1917), 285–97.

57. I emphasize this orientation in *The Partisan Muse*, chapter 4 (pp. 83–117).

58. *Ibid.*, chapter 5 (pp. 119–41).

Chapter 4—An Imperiled World: *Heimskringla*

1. On the title *Heimskringla* see Jon Gunnar Jørgensen, *The Lost Vellum Kringla* (2007), 18. *Heimskringla* has routinely been attached to the name of Snorri Sturluson, but enough questions have been raised that I will refrain from that practice. Jon Gunnar Jørgensen (*The Lost Vellum*, 2) writes that “. . . there is widespread agreement that the author is Snorri Sturluson,

although it cannot be said that this has been proven.” A good review of the reasons that might lead us to believe that he is the author is provided by Diana Whaley, *Heimskringla* (1991), 13–19. Although *Heimskringla* may be no more than one redaction, I will treat parts 1 and 2 as a single book on the assumption that in this redaction part 2 has been adjusted to mesh with part 1 (see note 46 below). I will continue to refer to Lee M. Hollander’s translation from 1964 although the three volumes of the new translation by Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulkes have appeared. The page references to the new translation have been added at the last moment, with special gratitude to the translators for giving me access to their work in advance.

2. Andreas Heusler explored the background of the excursion into Eastern origins in his deeply and broadly researched monograph from 1908 (rpt. In his *Kleine Schriften*, vol. 2, from 1943 and 1969) under the title of *Die gelehrte Urgeschichte im isländischen Schrifttum*. On the most immediate sources and analogues see 1969:89–90. On “Greater Sweden” and “Cold Sweden” see pp. 113–15. For a summary see pp. 145–46. On “Greater Sweden” see also Tatjana Jackson, “‘Scithia er uær köllum miklu Suipíod’: Memory, Fiction, or Something Else?”—in *The 15th International Saga Conference: Sagas and the Use of the Past: Preprints*, ed. A. Mathias Valentin Nordvig and Lisbeth H. Torfing (Aarhus: Aarhus University, 5th–11th August, 2012), 168–69.

3. See Heusler, *Die gelehrte Urgeschichte*, 120. See also Anthony Faulkes, “Descent from the Gods” (1978/79), especially 110–24, Rudolf Simek, “Der lange Weg von Troja nach Grönland” (2002), 315–27, and the literature cited by Shami Ghosh, *Kings’ Sagas and Norwegian History*, 197 (note 63).

4. As Finlay and Faulkes note in *Heimskringla*, 1:7111, the inconstancy of Odin’s wife seems to be taken over from the Eddic poem “Lokasenna,” stanza 26.

5. ÍF 26:4; trans. Hollander, 3; trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 1:7. On the relationship of the poem and the prose text see Ghosh, *Kings’ Sagas and Norwegian History*, 25–32.

6. This attitude is documented as early as Sighvatr Þórðarson’s “Austrfararvísur.” See R. D. Fulk’s edition in *Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas*, vol. 1, pt. 2, ed. Diana Whaley (2009), 578–614 (especially stanzas 4, 5, and 8).

7. On the intransigence of the two claimants in 1180 see Fredrik Paasche, *Kong Sverre* (1948), 72.

8. On the possible influence of *Sverris saga* on *Heimskringla* see Hallvard Lie, *Studier i Heimskringlas stil* (1937), 89, 106–19. Siegfried Beyschlag, “Die Reichseinigungen der beiden Olafe” (1986) argued that the conquest sequence of both Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson could have been influenced in part by the route followed by King Sverrir.

9. ÍF 26:118 and 122; trans. Hollander, 76, 78; trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 1:68, 71.

10. ÍF 26:163; trans. Hollander, 104; trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 1:96.

11. ÍF 26:149; trans. Hollander, 95; trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 1:87.

12. See chapter 2 above, note 19.

13. ÍF 26:171; trans. Hollander, 110; trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 1:101.

On the details of the sacrificial rituals see Klaus Düwel, *Das Opferfest von Lade* (1985).

14. ÍF 26:192–93; trans. Hollander, 124; trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 1:115.

15. See chapter 2 above, note 28.

16. ÍF 27:38; trans. Hollander, 266; trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 2:23.

17. See *Ágrip*, ed. and trans. Driscoll, 45.

18. On the debate see Hallvard Lie, *Studier i Heimskringlas stil* (1937), 95, 102–3; Sverre Bagge, *Society and Politics* (1991), 70–71; Ármann Jakobsson, *Í leit að konungi*, 285; Carl Phelpstead, *Holy Vikings* (2007), 131–32.

19. ÍF 27:47–48; trans. Hollander, 271–73; trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 2:28–29.

20. ÍF 27:98; trans. Hollander, 307; trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 2:62.

21. ÍF 27:111–17, 129–57; trans. Hollander, 316–22, 331–50; trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 2:70–75, 83–102.

22. ÍF 27:105; trans. Hollander, 313; trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 2:67.

23. ÍF 27:183–90; trans. Hollander, 369–74; trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 2:120–24.

24. ÍF 27:191–93; trans. Hollander, 375–77; trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 2:126–27.

25. ÍF 27:194–206; trans. Hollander, 377–87; trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 2:127–37.

26. ÍF 27:211–13; trans. Hollander, 391–95; trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 2:140–42.

27. ÍF 27:214–17; trans. Hollander, 393–95; trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 2:142–44.

28. ÍF 27:222; trans. Hollander, 399; trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 2:148.

29. ÍF 27:228; trans. Hollander, 403; trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 2:151.

30. ÍF 27:243–49; trans. Hollander, 414–19; trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 2:162–66.

31. ÍF 27:255–61; trans. Hollander, 424–28; trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 2:171–75.

32. ÍF 27:328–30; trans. Hollander, 474–76; trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 2:220–22.

33. On this question see Sverre Bagge, *Society and Politics*, 66, 159, 182–91, and “One God and One King” (2012), 42–45. See also Carl Phelpstead, *Holy Vikings* (2007), 140–49.

34. ÍF 27:47–48; trans. Hollander, 272; trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 2:29.

35. ÍF 27:193; trans. Hollander, 377; trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 2:127.

36. ÍF 27:222; trans. Hollander, 399; trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 2:148.

37. “Political Subtexts in *Morkinskinna*, *Heimskringla* III, and *Egils saga*” in *The Partisan Muse*, 119–41.

38. Sverrir Jakobsson, in “Erindringen om en mægtig personlighed,” takes the view that the account of Haraldr hárfagri that we have in *Heimskringla* is largely mythical, not dissimilar from the great mythical kings Arthur, Charlemagne, and Theodoric. See also Ármann Jakobsson, *Í leit að konungi*, 86. When this study was complete, I discovered that Sverre

Bagge had identified the unification of Norway as an underlying theme in *Heimskringla*. See his “One God and One King,” especially his conclusion on pp. 42–45.

39. ÍF 26:6; trans. Hollander, 4; trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 1:4.

40. See Sverrir Tómasson, “Tækileg vitni” (1975); Else Mundal, “Íslendingabók, ættar tala og konunga ævi” (1984); Sverre Bagge, *Society and Politics* (1991), 15.

41. ÍF 26:5–6; trans. Hollander, 4; trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 1:4.

42. ÍF 1.1:4; trans. Siân Grønlie, *Íslendingabók; Kristni saga*, 3.

43. See the note in chapter 1 above (note 14). See also Sverre Bagge, *Society and Politics*, 109, 122.

44. See Siân Grønlie, *Íslendingabók; Kristni saga*, xxiv.

45. See Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar* (1988), 290: “It seems likely that the *konunga ævi* formed the framework that Snorri filled out. He used Ari’s work as a sort of compilation of facts which he picked over for his book, combined with other sources, and interpreted at the same time.”

46. It will be apparent that I have treated *Heimskringla* I and II as a continuous narrative, but there are problems inherent in this view. Ever since the outset of Sigurður Nordal’s career (*Om Olaf den Helliges saga* [1914], 202–3) it has been understood that the *Separate Saga of King Olaf* was written first and then revised as a centerpiece for *Heimskringla*, parts I and III of which were written later. More recently it has been argued especially by Jonna Louis-Jensen (most recently in “Dating the Archetype” [2013], 140), but also by Jo Rune Ugulen, *AM 39 fol., Óláfs saga helga og Heimskringla* (2002), especially 39–45, and Patricia Pires Boulhosa, *Icelanders and the Kings of Norway* (2005), 6–21, that there is no proof that *Heimskringla* II was written by Snorri, though parts I and III probably were. There is therefore no compelling reason to assume a conceptual continuity from part I to part II. It is nonetheless the contention of this chapter that parts I and II are indeed thematically similar. The ambivalent views of Óláfr Tryggvason in part I and of Óláfr Haraldsson in part II are quite analogous. For a brief overview of the problems see Jo Rune Ugulen, “Eit oversyn over den mellomalderlege litteraturen om Olav den heilage” (2003).

Chapter 5—In Quest of a Leader: *Sverris saga*

1. Shami Ghosh, *Kings’ Sagas and Norwegian History*, 189, opposes this view, arguing that the author of *Heimskringla* III recapitulates other written sources and could have recapitulated *Sverris saga* as well. Ghosh suggests that the author’s focus was simply on the past, not the present.

2. *Sverris saga* was edited by Þorleifur Hauksson for the ÍF series in 2007. There is an old translation into English by J. Sephton, *Sverrisaga: The Saga of King Sverri of Norway* (1899). For a more modern translation see Torfi H. Tulinius’s French version, *La saga de Sverrir, roi de Norvège* (2010).

3. For the possible influence of *Sverris saga* on *Heimskringla* see chapter 4, note 8, above and Shami Ghosh, *Kings’ Sagas and Norwegian History*, 143.

4. See G. H. Gathorne-Hardy, *A Royal Impostor*, 121, 125; Andreas Holmsen, *Norges historie* (1961), 231; Sverre Bagge, *From Gang Leader to the Lord's Anointed* (1996), 47.

5. See ÍF 30:101–10; trans. Sephton, 83–89; trans. Torfi H. Tulinius, 148–56.

6. See ÍF 30:125–54; trans. Sephton, 102–26; trans. Torfi H. Tulinius, 173–87.

7. On the question of Sverrir's paternity see Gathorne-Hardy, *A Royal Impostor*, 78–93; Magnús Stefánsson, "Kong Sverre—prest og sønn av Sigurd Munn?" (1984); Claus Krag, *Sverre—Norges største middelalderkonge* (2005), 90–98. On the final comparison to his father see Ármann Jakobsson, "Sinn eigninn smiður" (2005), 131–32.

8. See Þorleifur Hauksson in ÍF 30:lvii.

9. Among those who believed that Karl Jónsson authored the whole saga were Finnur Jónsson, "Sverrissaga" (1920), 128; Egil Nygaard Brekke, *Sverre-sagaens opphav* (1958), 108; Lárus H. Blöndal, *Um uppruna Sverrissögu* (1982), 75. Sverre Bagge, *From Gang Leader to the Lord's Anointed*, found no "conclusive evidence for Karl Jónsson's authorship of the second part of the saga" (p. 17), but he also found no evidence of multiple authorship and preferred to assume "unity of composition" (p. 19).

10. Egil Nygaard Brekke, *Sverre-sagaens opphav* (1958), believed that *Sverris saga* was a pro-Birkibeinn text reflecting the struggle between Birkibeinar and Baglar in the period 1204 to 1208, which would therefore be the logical time for the completion of the book (p. 52). On the other hand Halvdan Koht, in "Norsk historieskrivning under kong Sverre," 181–82, with reference to a lost lecture by Gustav Storm, dated the completion of the work between 1214 and 1230. Elisabeth Bjørsvik, "Ideologi og tendens i Baglarsagaen" (1994), again reviewed the criteria and settled on a date between 1214 and 1217 (pp. 117–18). Sverre Bagge, *From Gang Leader to the Lord's Anointed*, 17, opts for a date "between 1214, or perhaps 1217, and some time before 1223."

11. Finnur Jónsson, "Sverrissaga," 114–15; see also Claus Krag, *Sverre—Norges største middelalderkonge*, 262n17.

12. Ibid., 113.

13. Ludvig Holm-Olsen, *Studier i Sverres Saga* (1952), 57–71. See also his "Til diskusjonen om Sverres sagas tilblivelse" (1977), 55–67.

14. Egil Nygaard Brekke, *Sverre-sagaens opphav* (1958), 2.

15. See note 10 above.

16. Egil Nygaard Brekke, *Sverre-sagaens opphav* (1958), 65, 82.

17. Ibid., 161–78.

18. Ibid., 176–78.

19. (Norsk) *Historisk tidsskrift*, 40(1960), 25–91.

20. Lárus H. Blöndal, *Um uppruna Sverrissögu* (1982), 124–57.

21. ÍF 30:67; trans. Sephton, 54; trans. Torfi H. Tulinius, 111.

22. ÍF 24:179; trans. Andersson and Gade, 372.

23. Edvard Bull, "Borgerkrigene i Norge og Haakon Haakonssons kongstanke" (1917).

24. Halvdan Koht, "Kampen om makten i Noreg i sagatiden" (1921;

originally published in 1918), 111–15. See also Hans Jacob Orning, *Unpredictability and Presence* (2008), 259.

25. Andersson, *The Partisan Muse*, 65–82.

26. See ÍF 23:31; trans. Andersson and Gade, 104. ÍF 29:212; trans. Finlay, 171.

27. ÍF 26:172–73; trans. Hollander, 112; trans. Finlay and Faulkes, 1:102.

28. ÍF 23:325; trans. Andersson and Gade, 275.

29. ÍF 24:16–18; trans. Andersson and Gade, 285–86.

30. ÍF 28:213; trans. Hollander, 670.

31. The term comes from G. M. Gathorne-Hardy, *A Royal Impostor*, 246.

32. The Icelandic lawspeaker Þorgeirr, in his effort to reconcile Christians and pagans at the *alþingi* in Ari's *Íslendingabók*, notes the power of the people to force peace on their kings (trans. Grønlie, p. 9): "He spoke about how the kings of Norway and Denmark had kept up warfare and battles against each other for a long time, until the people of those countries had made peace between them, even though they did not wish it." See also the peace treaty concluded by King Magnús berfættr of Norway, King Eiríkr of Denmark, and King Ingi of Sweden in the year 1100 (*Morkinskinna*, ÍF 24:59–60; trans. Andersson and Gade, 307): "Then messengers went back and forth among the kings to persuade them to make peace among themselves and their countries." The writer reports with an air of delight: "And now the kings proceed to talk alone, and they had not been talking for longer than a mealtime before they were reconciled and their realms at peace."

33. See for example Sverre Bagge, "Borgerkrig og statsutvikling i Norge i middelalderen" (1986) and Birgit Sawyer, "The 'Civil Wars' Revisited."

34. Finnur Jónsson, "Sverrissaga," 113–15; Þorleifur Hauksson, "Grýla Karls ábóta," (2006), 153–66, and "Implicit Ideology and the King's Image in *Sverris saga*" (2012), 127–35.

35. ÍF 30:141–42; trans. Sephton, 114–15; trans. Torfi H. Tulinius, 188–90.

36. See G. M. Gathorne-Hardy, *A Royal Impostor*, 204–6; Claus Krag, *Sverre—Norges største middelalderkonge*, 219.

37. ÍF 30:150–54; trans. Sephton, 120–25; trans. Torfi H. Tulinius, 197–202.

38. ÍF 30:154–55; trans. Sephton, 126; trans. Torfi H. Tulinius, 202–3. On the air of finality see Halvdan Koht, "Norsk historieskrivning under kong Sverre," 183.

39. ÍF 30:157–61; trans. Sephton, 128–31; trans. Torfi H. Tulinius, 205–9.

40. See note 4 above.

41. The texts were edited by Hallvard Magerøy, *Soga om Birkebeinar og Baglar*, and in ÍF 31:3–167.

42. Knut Helle, *Omkring Bøglungasögur* (1958), e.g., 106; Hallvard Magerøy, *Soga om Birkebeinar og Baglar*, 1:51–57.

43. Elisabeth Bjørsvik, "Ideologi og tendens," 113, 119; ÍF 31:xix–xxiii.

44. *Ibid.*, 117, 119–20.

45. Ibid., 12, 32–38.
46. Knut Helle, *Omkring Bøglungasögur*, 6–7; Elisabeth Bjørsvik, “Ideologi og tendens,” 98–100.
47. Elisabeth Bjørsvik, *ibid.*, 117.
48. Elisabeth Bjørsvik estimates ca. 1220 (*ibid.*, 120).
49. On the relationship of the longer version of *Bøglunga sögur* to *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* see Hallvard Magerøy, *Soga om Birkebeinar og Baglar*, 1:53–55.
50. See ÍF 31:176; trans. G. W. Dasent in *The Saga of Hacon and a Fragment of the Saga of Magnus* (1894), 5.
51. ÍF 31:211–12; trans. G. W. Dasent, 37.
52. ÍF 31:249; trans. G. W. Dasent, 71.
53. ÍF 31:296; trans. G. W. Dasent, 113.
54. *Sturlunga saga*, 1:430–39 and 484–94; trans. McGrew/Thomas, 1:335–44 and 393–403.
55. On this development see Sverre Bagge, *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom* (2010), 229–92.
56. See Gísli Sigurðsson, *Túlkun Íslendingasagna* (2002), and Tommy Danielsson, *Hrafnkels saga eller Fallet med den undflyende traditionen* (2002).
57. ÍF 9:1–98; trans. John McKinnell, *Viga-Glums Saga with the Tales of Ogmund Bash and Thorvald Chatterbox* (1987).
58. ÍF 10:lxviii.
59. I argue this in *The Partisan Muse*, 148–66.
60. ÍF 10:3–147; trans. Andersson and Miller, *Law and Literature*, 121–255. It should be noted that the texts in the edition and the translation diverge because the editor of ÍF 10 (Björn Sigfússon) preferred the so-called A redaction whereas the translators preferred the so-called C redaction. On the dating of the saga see pp. 74–84.
61. ÍF 10:109–13; trans. Andersson and Miller, *Law and Literature*, 135–38.
62. ÍF 10:117–21; trans. Andersson and Miller, *Law and Literature*, 139–44.
63. “Vøðu-Brands þáttir” in ÍF 10:125–39; trans. Andersson and Miller, *Law and Literature*, 144–52.
64. ÍF 10:138; trans. Andersson and Miller, *Law and Literature*, 161.
65. ÍF 10:16; trans. Andersson and Miller, *Law and Literature*, 162–63.
66. ÍF 10:112; trans. Andersson and Miller, *Law and Literature*, 138.

Chapter 6—A Historical Mirage: *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*

1. *Sturlunga saga*, 1:115.
2. See Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, “Sturla Þórðarson,” in *Sturlustefna* (1988), 11–12.
3. *Ibid.*, 27–30.
4. See Jón Jóhannesson’s introduction to *Sturlunga saga* (as in note 1), 2:xxxviii and ÍF 32:xxxi.
5. The hostility between King Hákon and Sturla has sometimes been

explained by the view that Sturla was an advocate of Icelandic independence, but Helgi Þorláksson does not believe that this is the case and finds a different explanation. See his paper “Var Sturla Þórðarson þjóðfrelshetja?” in *Sturlustefna*, 127–46.

6. See Finnur Jónsson, *OOH*, II, 735; ÍF 31:xxxiii; ÍF 32:xxxvi.

7. On this subject see Ólafía Einarsdóttir’s important paper “Om samtidssagaens kildeværdi belyst ved *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*,” (1995), 29–80. In her paper “Sverrir—præst og konge” (1981), 68, she refers to *Sverris saga* as a “bestillingsværk.”

8. See his paper “Sannyrði sverða: Vígaferli í Íslendinga sögu og hugmyndafræði sögunnar” (1994), 42–78.

9. Sverre Bagge, *From Gang Leader to the Lord’s Anointed*, 99.

10. *Ibid.*, 115.

11. ÍF 31:242–43, 283, 287; ÍF 32:5, 63, 69, 81, 106, 107–8, 258. On *gríð* in general see Guðrún Nordal, *Ethics and Actions in Thirteenth-Century Iceland* (1998), 183–98.

12. Ármann Jakobsson, “Hákon Hákonarson: friðarkonungur eða fúlmenni” (1995), 176, concludes that Snorri was killed against the king’s wishes. That may well be true, but it does not alter the fact that Hákon ordered that Snorri be returned to Norway on pain of execution.

13. See the editors of ÍF 31:lxvi–lxvii, who are inclined to make the Icelandic chieftains more responsible for the annexation of Iceland than the Norwegian king.

14. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Drög um íslenska menningu á þrettánda öld* (1940), 76–77, or *The Age of the Sturlungs* (1953), 72. Guðrún Nordal, *Ethics and Actions* (1998), 199, calculated the killing rate at seven per year between 1208 and 1260.

15. *Sturlunga saga* (as in note 1): 1:244, 246, 249, 253, 264–65, 271, 274–77, 287–88, 296, 297–98, 301–2, 316, 324, 356–57, 361–62, 364–65, 365–67, 368–70, 380, 381, 383–84, 392–94, 417–18, 421, 436, 437, 438, 440, 442, 443, 449, 454, 455, 457, and 475.

16. Sturla’s poems have been most recently edited by Kari Ellen Gade et al. in *Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas*, vol. 2, pt. 2, 675–757. See also Hermann Pálsson, “Kveðskapur Sturlu Þórðarsonar,” in *Sturlustefna*, 61–85.

17. See Tor Ulset, “Sturla Þórðarson og Sverris saga,” in *Sturlustefna*, 86–93.

18. Gustav Indrebø, *Fagrskinna* (1917), 200.

19. See ÍF 32:261 and Bjarni Einarsson’s comment in ÍF 29:cxix–cxxv.

20. See Ármann Jakobsson’s article (note 12 above), 167–85, and ÍF 31:lviii and lxx.

21. Ármann Jakobsson (as in note 12), 173–74.

22. *Ibid.*, 175–76.

23. Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum* (1917; rpt. 1977), 159 and 267; trans. Francis J. Tschan, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen* (1959), 124.

24. *Íslendinga saga* (*Sturlunga saga*, 1:277) states outright that because of these hostilities “the Norwegians were big enemies of the Icelanders, especially of the people of Oddi.”

25. See Ármann Jakobsson (as in note 12), 176–77, and ÍF 31:lix.

26. One of these concessions is to release Hákon from the sort of oath sworn by Magnús Erlingsson at the time of his coronation (ÍF 32:126). Another is to forgo the Norwegian bishops' wish to have a share of taxes (ÍF 32:134).

27. *Íslendinga saga* (*Sturlunga saga*, 1:524–28) provides more information on Gizurr's dealings, but nothing on the king's progress.

28. Ármann Jakobsson (as in note 12), 174.

29. That the bias can also involve the suppression of information is nicely demonstrated by Sverre Bagge's discussion of the marriage between the future King Magnús and the Danish princess Ingilborg in *Cross & Scepter* (2014), 237–38.

30. See Sverre Bagge, *From Gang Leader to the Lord's Anointed*, 93 and 139.

Conclusion

1. Peter Erasmus Müller, *Sagabibliotek med anmærkninger og indledende afhandlinger*, 3 vols. (1817–1820). Finnur Jónsson, *OOLH*, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (1923), e.g., 335. See Ármann Jakobsson, "Inventing a Saga Form" (2012), 1–2, on the lack of uniformity in what we refer to as kings' sagas.

2. Kurt Schier, *Sagaliteratur*, 9–33.

3. Bogi Th. Melsteð, "Ferðir, siglingar og samgöngur"; Hallvard Magerøy, *Soga om austmenn*.

4. *Ibid.*, 25–26.

5. See Ármann Jakobsson, *Staður i nýjum heimi*, 94 and 243.

6. On the Icelandic perspective in *Heimskringla* see Gudmund Sandvik, *Hovding og konge i Heimskringla* (1955).

7. Sverre Bagge, *From Gangleader to the Lord's Anointed*, 86.

8. Sverre Bagge, *From Gangleader to the Lord's Anointed* and "'Gang Leader' eller 'The Lord's Anointed' i *Sverris saga*? Svar til Fredrik Ljungqvist og Lars Lönnroth" (2007); Þorleifur Hauksson, "Grýla Karls ábóta" and "Implicit Ideology and the King's Image in *Sverris saga*"; Fredrik Charpentier Ljungqvist, "Kristen kungaideologi i *Sverris saga*" (2006) and "Bannlyst kung av Guds nåde" (2008); Lars Lönnroth, "Sverrir's Dreams" (2006)—reprinted in his *The Academy of Odin* (2011), 163–78.

9. Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (1991), 69. Later in *Nationalism* (2001) he allowed for gradations between "premodern communities" and "modern nations" (p. 108), but he maintained the distinction by emphasizing the ideological and theoretical bent of modern nationalism (p. 118). More attractive to me are Adrian Hastings' arguments (*The Construction of Nationhood* [1997]) focusing on the centrality of language and literature and tracing national sentiment back to the Middle Ages, but that is perhaps because I am a medievalist and a student of literature, not of history. See also the papers by Kåre Lunden ("Was There a Norwegian National Identity in the Middle Ages?" [1995]) and Sverre Bagge ("Nationalism in Norway in the Middle Ages"), as well as Bagge, *Cross & Scepter*, 169–70. Lunden assembles strong indications that national consciousness was well developed

in Norway in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, while Bagge is more cautious and prefers the general term “group identification” for the earlier period. He is more inclined to equate national sentiment with the emergence of a strong central monarchy under Hákon Hákonarson. Lunden uses *Fagrskinna* in particular to support his promotion of national consciousness, and my reading of *Ari*, *Morkinskinna*, and *Heimskringla* may be understood to supplement his view.

10. See his *Theories of Nationalism* (1983), 86–108.

11. See Oddr Snorrason, *The Saga of Olaf Tryggvason*, trans. T. M. Andersson, 123–26.

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Index of Authors and Titles

The following index adheres to Icelandic practice and alphabetizes by given names, with patronymics in second position, except in the case of Danish (-derived) names (e.g., Melsteð). It lists names beginning with special Icelandic characters (þ, æ, ö) at the end. Short and long vowels are not alphabetically distinguished.

A

Adam of Bremen 57, 144

Ágrip af Nóregs konunga

sögum 28–30, 66, 69–70,

79, 88, 114, 160

Ari Þorgilsson 1–2, 6, 22,

25–31, 33, 37–38, 66, 101–3,

131, 136, 151, 155, 160–61

Ármann Jakobsson 51, 54–55,

135, 140, 143, 145–46, 151

Ásbjörn Sigurðarson

(story of) 92

“Ásu-Þórðar þátr” 64

“Auðunar þátr” 52, 59–60, 65

B

Bagge, Sverre 158–59

Bandamanna saga 9

bishops’ sagas 38, 155

Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa

9, 16, 38

Bjarni Guðnason 31, 43

Bjørsvik, Elisabeth 120

Blöndal, Lárus 113

Book of Settlement

(*Landnámabók*) 3–4, 21

“Brands þátr orva” 52, 59, 65

Brekke, Egil Nygaard 112–13

Bull, Edvard 114

Böglunga sögur 42, 119–21, 155

D

Droplaugarsona saga 14

E

Egils saga Skallagrímssonar

5, 38, 57, 67, 72, 142

Einarr Skúlason 48

Eiríkr Oddsson 31, 43, 46, 160

Eiríks saga rauða 6, 9

Eyrbyggja saga 8, 38, 126

F

Fagrskinna 2, 26, 51, 65–73,

75, 79–80, 98, 105, 114–15,

131, 141–42, 155–58, 161–62

Finnur Jónsson 111–12,

116–17, 155

Flateyjarbók 66

Fljótsdæla saga 20

Fóstbræðra saga 8, 17–18

Friis, Peder Clausson 120

Færeyinga saga 155

G

Genesis 79

Gesta Hammaburgensis

Ecclesiae Pontificum 57

Gísla saga Súrssonar 8

“Gísls þátrr Illugasonar” 3

Grettis saga 9, 17

Grýla 110–12, 116, 118–19

Guðmundar saga dýra 15,

19

“Gunnars þátrr

Þiðrandabana” 20

Gunnlaugr Leifsson 7

Gunnlaugs saga

ormstungu 8, 38

H

Hákonar saga góða 84–85

Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar

42, 120–21, 123–25, 133–36,

138–43, 146, 150–52,

155–56, 159–60, 162

Hákon Ívarsson (story of) 53, 57

“Halldórs þátrr Snorrasonar”

3, 51–53, 64

Haralds saga gráfeldar 84–85

Haralds saga hárfagra 85, 103

Heiðarvíga saga 9, 17

Heimskringla 26, 34–36,

42–43, 51, 58, 63, 66–68,

70, 72–73, 75, 79–83, 88,

100–3, 105–6, 114–15, 131,

142, 151, 155–58, 160–61

Heimskringla I 79,

85–88, 101, 124

Heimskringla II 50,

79, 89, 91, 98

Heimskringla III 42–44, 46,

48–51, 98–99, 105–6

Helle, Knut 119–20

Historia de Antiquitate

Regum Norwagiensium

28, 30–31, 79, 160

Historia Norwegiae 28–30, 160

**Hlaðajarla saga* 66, 114–15

Holm-Olsen, Ludvig 112

“Hreiðars þátrr” 51–52, 64

“Hrómundar þátrr halta” 11

**Hryggjarstykki* 31, 34, 37,

41, 43, 46, 66, 155–56

“Huldar saga” 134

Hungrvaka 1, 6, 11, 34

Hænsa-Þóris saga 12

I

Indrebø, Gustav 65–69,

71, 114, 142

Íslendingabók 2, 25–27,

30, 37, 75, 101–2

Íslendinga saga 7, 72, 123,

133–36, 138, 140, 151

J

Jómsvíkinga saga 66, 155

Jón Jóhannesson 151

Jón Ólafsson (transcriber of

Heiðarvíga saga) 9, 17

Jónas Kristjánsson 127

Jóns saga helga 34

Julius Caesar 106, 159

K

Karl Jónsson (Abbot)

105, 110–13, 119

Koht, Halvdan 112

Kristni saga 6

Króka-Refs saga 10

L

Landnámabók 3, 134

Laxdæla saga 8–9, 17, 56

Legendary Saga of Saint Olaf

34–38, 69, 98, 155, 160

Libellus Islandorum 1, 26

Lie, Hallvard 113

Ljósvetninga saga 12–13,

128, 130, 136, 157

Ljungqvist, Fredrik

Charpentier 159

Lönnroth, Lars 159

M

Magerøy, Hallvard 119–20,

156

Magnúss saga berfætts

7, 62, 101

Magnúss saga lagabætis 151

Melsteð, Bogi Th. 3, 6–7, 156

Morkinskinna 2, 4, 31,

41–44, 49–67, 69–73, 73,

98–99, 105–6, 113–15,

141–42, 155–58, 160–62

Müller, Peter Erasmus 155

N

Njáls saga 14, 16–18, 21, 61

O

Oddr Snorrason 31, 33–38,

66–67, 70, 86, 142,

155–56, 160–61

“Odds þátrr Ófeigssonar”

56, 64

“Ófeigs þátrr” (in

Ljósvetninga saga) 128

Ólafía Einarsdóttir 140

Óláfs saga helga 55, 58,

88–103, 128, 156–58, 160

Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar (by

Oddr Snorrason) 36–37, 55,

66, 70, 85–86, 136, 142,

155–56, 158, 160–61

Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar

(in *Heimskringla*) 86,

88, 90, 136, 158

Oldest Saga of Saint Olaf 34,

36–38, 66, 68, 70, 98, 155

Orkneyinga saga 155

P

Páls saga biskups 34

Prestssaga Guðmundar

góða 7, 18, 47

R

Reykðæla saga 13,

128, 130, 135

S

Saxo Grammaticus 70

Schier, Kurt 155

Schreiner, Johan 113

Separate Saga of Saint

Olaf 4, 10, 22, 156

Shakespeare, William

106, 133, 137

Sighvatr Þórðarson

(skald) 63, 73

Sigurðr Hranason

(story of) 60–61

Smith, Anthony D. 161

“Sneglu-Halla þátrr”

53–54, 56, 59, 64

Snorri Sturluson 7–8, 34, 49,

72, 133, 138–39, 143–44,

147, 149–50, 161

Steinn Skaptason (story of) 94

Storm, Gustav 112

“Stúfs þátrr blinda” 56, 59, 64

Sturla Þórðarson

121, 123, 133–41, 150–51

Sturlunga saga 5, 15,

18, 82, 133–34

Sturlu saga 49

“Sturlu þátrr” 134–35, 139–41

Styrmir Kárason 68

Suetonius 159

Sveinki Steinarsson (story

of) 58–59, 61, 69, 73

Sverrir Jakobsson 4, 143, 145

Sverrir Tómasson 75

Sverris saga 41–42, 70,

80–81, 105–24, 126, 130,

135–36, 141–42, 151–52,

155–56, 158–59, 161–62

Svínfellinga saga 20

Sæmundr Sigfússon 22,

25–26, 28–31, 38, 66,

79–80, 136, 155, 160

“Sǫrla þátrr” (in

Ljósvetninga saga) 128

T

Theodoricus monachus

28, 30–32, 70, 79

Tristrams saga 71

V

Valla-Ljóts saga 39–40, 42, 60,

124–26, 128, 130, 135, 157

Vápnfirðinga saga 14, 17

Vatnsdæla saga 8, 10, 12

Víga-Glúms saga

125–26, 135, 157

W

William of Sabina (Cardinal)

145–47, 150

Worm, Ole 120

Y

“Ynglinga saga” 79–80, 85,

103

“Ynglingatal” 77, 79

Þ

Þjóðólfr Arnórsson

(skald) 53–55

Þjóðólfr ór Hvini (skald) 79

Þórðar saga kakala 19

Þórðr Sturluson 133

Þorgils saga skarða 16–17

Þórir hundr (story of) 92–94

Þorláks saga 34

Þorleifr jarlsskáld 54

Þorleifur Hauksson 116,

143, 145, 159

Þóroddr Snorrason (story of)

94

“Þorsteins þátrr sǫgufróða”

64

“Þorvarðar þátrr krákunefs” 8

þættir 51