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SOME THOUGHTS ON KINGSHIP IN THE HELGI POEMS ¹

It is not surprising that historians of religion should, earlier this century, talk about sacral kingship, not only in Middle Eastern and many primitive societies, but also in Ancient Scandinavia. Wilhelm Mannhardt in the 1870s thought that he had discovered Middle Eastern motifs of Adonis and Attis in peasant customs connected with the cycle of fertility in North West Europe. Sir James G. Frazer earlier this century discovered universal patterns of divine kingship in many primitive societies and ancient civilisations, where he considered that the king incorporated the spirit of fertility by which the divine powers sustain the fecundity of the natural environment. It became the fashion to interpret kingship in Ancient Scandinavia in the light of a notion of sacrality. Hence Åke Ström could proclaim at the VIIIth Congress of the History of Religions "that kingship in Old Scandinavia was entirely sacral, is nowadays, considered to be a mere matter of fact".²

The counter blow to the untrammelled romantic speculation on sacral kings and sacral kingship in Ancient Scandinavia was struck by Walter Baetke in 1964. Most of the reassessment of the source-material necessitated by Baetke's research and reinterpretation has been, understandably, limited to Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*.³

In this paper I shall discuss some aspects of the nature of kingship in the three Helgi poems in *Codex Regius*, *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* (HHv), *Helgakviða Hundingsbana* I (HH I) and II (HH II).⁴ The need for brevity precludes a detailed examination of theories of the origin of the texts of the poems and their possible relationship to each other, and an analysis of the relationship between Helgi Hjörvarðsson and Helgi Sigmundarson. The important aspects for the purpose of this paper are the contents and the attitudes to kingship in the poems rather than their age and

¹. The author would like to express his thanks to Associate-Professor Margaret Clunies-Ross of the University of Sydney for the loan of some material hard to obtain in Australia.

². Ström 1959 p.702.

³. See McTurk 1975-6.

⁴. In this paper the edition used is that of Jón Helgason (1962).

provenance. I shall first look at the words used in the texts for kings and warriors and then the roles they played in the three poems, and finally examine the light the evidence throws on the debate about kingship and sacrality.

Words used for kings in the Helgi poems

There are 18 words used for leaders in the three poems:

1. *allvaldr* is a word from the scaldic tradition, which occurs once in the poems for Helgi. This is its only use in the *Poetic Edda*. It means "all-powerful" and emphasises the power wielded by the ruler.

2. *baugbroti* or "breaker of rings" is a kenning signifying a "munificent ruler". It is used once for Helgi.

3. *buðlungr* is generally given in the dictionaries as "prince" or "king". Neckel, Sijmons-Gering and de Vries see the word as a derivative from Buðli, meaning a descendant of Buðli, and latter applied, especially in the poetic tradition, to kings in general. The word is used eight times for Helgi and eight for Higrvarðr. In the plural form it is used twice for rulers including Helgi.

4. *daglingr* means a prince (in the sense of *Fürst*) and is seen as being derived from the name of the legendary king Dagr. It is used three times for Helgi and in the plural once for Helgi's followers.

5. *gylfi* is another word with special poetic connections for a ruler and appears in Old Norse tradition as the name of a sea-king. Neckel (1936 p.39) thinks that the word comes from a root meaning "one that roars" (*Brauser*), and de Vries gives an etymology from *gulr* "yellow" (1961 p.196). The word appears once in the poems referring to Helgi.

6. *hringbroti* or "breaker of rings" has the same meaning as *baugbroti*. It occurs only once and then in reference to Helgi.

7. *hǫfðingjar* appears once in the plural for the chieftains under the leadership of the sons of Granmarr. Cleasby, Vigfusson and Craigie define the word as "1) a head, chief, 2) a captain, commander 3) a ruler used for all governors from a king downwards, especially in plural *the gentry*"

8. *iqfurr* is a poetic title for a prince or a chieftain and is seen to come from an ancient word for a "boar". In Anglo-Saxon *eofor* means "boar" and "helmet-ornament", and the word could well be derived from the helmet worn from the leader. (Cleasby, Vigfusson and Craigie 1957 p.327)

9. *konungr* is the word for "king" which was most wide-spread throughout the ancient Germanic world and which is the one used most frequently in the Helgi poems. Neckel (1936 p.95) mentions that the word can also be used for male blood-relations of ruling kings. The frequency is as follows: Álfr 1, Eyhlmi 2, Granmarr 1, Helgi 2, Hlǫrleifr 1, Hlǫrvarǫr 5, Hrǫmarr 1, Hundungr 7, Hǫǫbroddr 1, Hǫgni 2, Sigmundr 3, Starkaðr 1 and Sváfnir 3. It is also used in the plural form once for Hǫgni and his sons, and once for Hǫǫbroddr and his colleagues. The term is particularly used in the prose annotations. As many as 26 of the 40 examples of it are in prose passages, whereas 14 are in poetry.

10. *landreki* occurs once and is used for Helgi. This is the only instance of its use in the *Poetic Edda*, but it is *landesherrscher* or "sovereign".

11. *lofaungr* is a poetic word for a "king" or a "prince" (Cleasby, Vigfusson & Craigie 1957 p.397). It is used four times for Helgi. Dr Vries (1961 p. 363) sees possible etymologies in *lof* or "praise" or *leyfi* "permission".

12. *mildingr* is used once for Helgi and once for Hǫǫbroddr. It appears once in the plural form for Helgi's followers. Sijmons-Gering (1931 p.52) stresses the influence of the etymology of the word on the meaning as "a generous [or munificent] prince" or "a man who distinguishes himself through *mildi*" *Mildi* can be translated by "mildness" or "munificence"

13. *siklingr* is a poetic word for a "king", which is used once for Helgi and in the plural form three times for "kings" in general.

14. *stillir* occurs once for Heðinn and once as a general term for a "leader". in the plural it appears once for Hǫǫbrodd's men. Neckel gives the meaning (1936 p. 162) as *besänftiger, friedensstifter* or "peace-maker, pacifier"

15. *stýrir* is a word which means "leader" or "one who steers the tribe or realm" It is derived from the word *stýra* "to steer; to direct, govern, manage". It is used once for Helgi, and once for Hǫǫbrodd's followers.

16. *visi* is used three times for Helgi and once for Sigmundr; in the plural

form it is used once in a general sense. It is poetic term for "guide, leader, captain" Its etymology is given as *viss* or "wise" as is implied in the definition given in Neckel (1936 p.202).

17. *pengill* has a single occurrence for Helgi. It is common amongst the poets and is defined in Cleasby, Vigfusson and Craigie (1957 p. 734) as "prop. leader of a *ping* (?), a king, prince".

18. *qðlingr* is used four times for Helgi, and in the plural once for Helgi's men and twice in a general connotation. Cleasby, Vigfusson and Craigie (1957 p.762) define the word as a "noble captain, prince" and seek its derivation in "an allodial owner or possessor of of *oðal* [i.e.property held as patrimony]". Neckel (1936 p.209), on the other hand, considers the word to be an equivalent of the Anglo-Saxon *æðeling* and gives meanings for various usages in the Helgi poems as *edeling* "chieftain" (HHv:13), *fürstenspross* "royal scion" (HHI: 2) and *edler gefolgsman* "noble follower" (HHI: 27).

The above words for a "king" or "ruler" indicate a leaders who by his descent and/or such personal qualities such as wisdom, skill at conciliation, munificence and ability to rule and govern stands out from his fellows and is acknowledged and supported by his subjects. At this point we may mention a matter to be discussed later; there is no reference to any sacred character to the holder of the office.

Words used for warrior-chieftains in the Helgi poems

1. *álmr*, meaning an "elm-tree" is used to describe an outstanding warrior. It is used once to denote Helgi. It is a word which normally has an additional element to create a kenning for a man (Sijmons-Gering 1931 p.75).

2. *fólks iaðarr* means a "leader of the army". The element *fólk* denotes "folk, people" or "people mobilised for war", and *iaðarr* means "edge". Whilst the kenning has the connotation of a "leader" in general, it does have a military significance. It occurs once for Helgi and once for Higrvarðr.

3. *fólks oðdviti* is similar to the above in meaning. The second element is from *oðdr* or a "point of a weapon" and from *vitr* or "wise". It signifies a "military leader who leads through wisdom".Sijmons-Gering show that the compound *oðdviti* appears in several scaldic connections.

4. *gramr* In poetry means a "king" or a "warrior". It is connected with *grimmr* which has the connotation of "ferocity, sternness and wrath" (Cleasby, Vigfusson and Craigie 1957 p. 211, 215). It is used six times for Helgi and once each for Hjórvarðr, Hundingr and Starkaðr.

5. *hermogr* or "war-man, warrior" is used once in the plural for Helgi and his men.

6. *hildingr* is a "warrior" from the poetic word *hildr* or "battle". It is used three times for Helgi and once for Helgi's ancestor. In the plural form it is used twice for Helgi and his followers, three times for Helgi's followers and once for Helgi's opponents and once in a general sense for "heroes".

7. *hglǫtr* has a wide range of meanings from a "leading farmer" to a "free follower" and a "warrior". It appears once for a group comprising Helgi, Atli and their followers.

8. *lofði* occurs once in the plural for "men, heroes" in general. It is the name of a legendary king, and de Vries derives it from *lof* or "praise" (de Vries 1962 p.363)

9. *rógapáldr* is a kenning for "apple-tree of battle" and is used once for Helgi.

10. *ræsir* is from the verb *ræsa* or "to put into swift movement". The word is defined by Neckel (1936 p.143) as *anführer des sturmangriffs* or the "leader of the storm-attack". It is used once for Helgi and once for Hjóbroddr.

11. *seggr* means a "follower" or a "young warrior". It occurs once in connection with Sinfiotli.

12. *vikingr* has the meaning of "sea-warrior" and is used three times in the plural for Helgi's followers.

The role and function of the king in the Helgi poems

For reasons of space this investigation will be limited to the figure of Helgi himself, but his figure dominates, and little information about kings and chieftains can be gleaned from the other characters.

(1) **Httv** The image of a warrior king is that of a leader who is *mikill*

"great" and *vænn* "promising, likely to succeed, good-looking, handsome" A folk-tale motif is the giving of his name by a valkyrie and a sword as a naming-gift. Helgi upheld his moral duty of avenging the death of his grandfather. He performed many *þrekvirki* (deeds of heroic strength or courage), including the slaying of Hati. His heroism is summed up in the phrase *allmikill hermáðr* or "an exceedingly great warrior" (in the prose after v.20) and in his being called *bestr und sólo* or "the best under the sun" (v.39). He married Sváva, a valkyrie and died heroically.

(2) HHI Helgi was allotted fame by the norms and was made the *frægstr fylkir* and *bestr buðlungr* vv.2-5). His accelerated development is again a typical folk-lore motif in that he is seen standing in his mail-coat fully-grown and one day old. He is supported loyally by his *drátt* or "warrior-throng, body-guard" (v.7). He was generous in gifts to his followers (v.9). At the age of 15 Helgi slew Hundíngur (v.10) and treated his antagonist's vanquished kinsmen with severity (vv.11-12), finally slaying them all in a mighty battle (v.14). Then he rescued Sigrún from a promised marriage to Hǫðbroddr (vv.17-56). In the flying between Guðmundr and Síngǫtli (vv.32-45) the figure of Helgi emerges as one who scorns flight and maintains class-solidarity in that he does not consort with slave-girls. On the battle-field Helgi is first in the throng (v.53). As the result of the defeat of Hróðmarr at Frekasteinn Helgi won his bride and red rings as well as victory and lands. (v.56).

(3) HIII In the early verses Helgi could not conceal his heroic qualities when he was disguised as a slave-girl at the mill. His hero's eyes shone forth, the mill-stone broke and the mill-pole was shattered. Helgi began his heroic career with the slaying of Hundíngur v.10) and his sons (prose after v.13), and he avenged his kin in a proper manner (v.10). Helgi had the heroic qualities of despising flight from battle, he acquired land and his realm extended over the seas (v.20). His heroic status was perceived by Guðmundr from the red battle-glow emanating from the ships (v.19). His slayer, Dagr, paid him the tribute that he was *bestr buðlungr í helmi* or "the best prince in the world" (v.30) and Sigrún likened him to a stag (v.38). In the prose after v.38 Óðinn shared his rule in Valhalla with Helgi after the hero's death.

The Helgi poems and "sacral kingship"

The three Helgi poems portray daring and mighty deeds of two heroic kings, both called Helgi, the avenging of the death of kinsmen and the battle to win a bride. They do not depict a king living within the confines of his royal domain in non-combatant circumstances. Hence the evidence

of any "sacrality" is strictly limited by the nature of the plot. The only reference to sacrifice in the poems is the request of the bird in the tree to jarl Atli to sacrifice (*blóta*) to him and provide him with a temple (*hof*) for the desired reward of the bride, whose hand has been refused in marriage. (HHv vv.2,4). This reference to a sacrifice and temple has no connection with kingship and agricultural prosperity. In HHv v.7 there is a mention that with Helgi *góð* will come to humankind. The word itself is missing in the MS, but was added in the Arnarnagnæan Edition of 1787-1828, and most commentators agree with this textual emendation. However, there is no indication in the text that the "good" which will come has anything to do with agrarian fertility from sacrifice or any other means of royal "sacral" intervention. It appears rather to be good and harmonious conditions from a good and heroic ruler. In HH1 v.13 the *Fróða friðr* is broken. This is not seen as fruitful agricultural conditions similar to those of the days of the legendary King Fróði, which are shattered by the cessation of sacrifice, but the loss of communal tranquility by the outbreak of hostilities as Helgi attacked the sons of Hundingr at Logafjöll. The reference to Óðinn is made in the prose after v.38 by a later annotator and stresses the heroic character of Helgi. As a supreme hero he receives this great honour from the god. We can sum up by commenting that there is nothing in the poems themselves, from the names given to kings and heroes or from their actions, which refers directly or indirectly to a sacrality of the royal person and functions.

In dealing with the Helgi poems O. Höfler discusses first the name "Helgi" itself and draws evidence from his etymology as "der Heilige" or "der Geweihte" (1959 p.675). He then introduces external material to make sense of the evidence in the text (1952 p.25). He uses as the foundation of his argument Frazer's theory (p.19) and von Friesen's etymology of *kunungr* from *kona* "woman, wife" (1952 p.22). Thus the female partner, who is a valkyrie, is seen as a priestess. As valkyrie she chose her betrothed and as priestess consequently sacrificed him (1952 p.25). This last fact is deduced from Höfler's reading of the sacrifice in the grove of the Semnones in Tacitus' *Germania* ch.39. Höfler sums up his theory:

Ich habe ... zu zeigen versucht, dass in diesen *Helgi*-Königen, deren Partnerinnen als Wiedergeburten der *Sváva* - der Repräsentantin des Schwaben-Stammes - galten, sich eine höchst altertümliche Sakralinstitution manifestierte, die mit dem von Frazer herausgearbeiteten Typus von Sakralkönigtümern und Königsopfern eine überraschende Verwandtschaft zeigt. (O. Höfler 1959 p.675)

But this imaginative interpretation is not supported by the evidence of the texts, and an application of Ockham's razor will indicate a much simpler interpretation of the winning of a bride and the subsequent heroic death in the struggle.⁵

Some thoughts on "sacral" kingship

The problem with the concept of "sacral" kingship is that the term is so imprecise. In the English language it is a clumsy term which has not had time to be acclimatised. Hence it is understandable that some scholars have sought other terms; Gabriel Turville-Petre wrote of "divine kings" and E. O. James of "sacred kingship"⁶. The original German *Sakralkönigtum* which sounds so mysteriously satisfying and even mantric to the English-speaker, seems to embody a metaphysical entity that exists beyond and apart from any real historical situation. R. McTurk wrote that "a sacral king is one who is marked off from his fellow man by an aura of specialness which may or may not have its origin in more or less direct associations with the supernatural" (1975-6 p.156). Thus a "sacral" king could be one or more of the following: a descendant of a god, an incarnation of a god, an instrument of a god's activity, a celebrant of cults and the object of a cult.

The concept of a "sacral" king in the Ancient Scandinavian tradition, (both within the narrow confines of the Helgi poems and beyond), is misleading and even tautological. It is evident that since Baetke's re-interpretation of the evidence much caution has to be observed. Recently Lars Lönnroth has shown that even the death of Dómaldr has another explanation than that traditionally presented (Lönnroth 1986).

But there is sufficient evidence to show that there has been some link between chiefs and kings and sacrifices for agricultural prosperity.⁷ Even if we have to accept that much of Snorri's evidence is re-interpreted from contemporary Christian understandings, the idea of a sacrificing chief or king is not part of the mediæval Christian heritage.

There are two influences which have been neglected in the discussion of sacral kingship in Ancient Scandinavia. Firstly there is the possibility that Snorri and his contemporaries were strongly influenced

⁵. William of Ockham's principle is *Non est ponenda pluralitas sive necessitate*. ("A multitude ought not to be assumed when it is not necessary.")

⁶ Turville-Petre, E.O.G., *Myth and Religion of the North*, London, 1964 pp.196-220.

⁷. See Ström 1959 pp.703-9. Even if one cannot accept Ström's argument concerning the sacrality of Ancient Scandinavian kings, the evidence he produces cannot be totally neglected.

in their attitude to kingship by the current application of the principle of *communicatio idiomatum*, by which the relationship of the two natures of Christ in one person were understood. By the "communication of idioms" the attributes of the human nature of Christ were understood as being interchangeable with the divine properties and *vice versa*. Thus as Christ was seen as being spiritually omnipresent, he could also be physically everywhere. This thinking was vital to the sacramental thinking of the mediæval church and had a significant impact on the understanding of kingship. The view was widely held in mediæval Europe that the king, who was consecrated and anointed by the church, stood in a special relationship to God and mystically incorporated Christ in his royal person, becoming a special representative of God to his people⁸. Consonant with this understanding was the statement by Pierre de Blois when he wrote: "J'avoue, assister le roi, c'est (pour un clerc) accomplir une chose sainte, car le roi est saint; il est le Christ le Seigneur."⁹

Secondly, there is the possibility of the influence of St Augustine of Hippo. In approaching Biblical history Augustine stressed the theory of "dispensations". Whereas the Mosaic Law was seen as the *paidagogos*¹⁰ which prepared the Jewish people for the coming of Christ, pagan culture played a similar role for the Gentiles outside the Law, even if, in itself, this culture were inadequate and under certain diabolical influences. This understanding strongly influenced the outreach of the church in the evangelisation policies of St Augustine of Canterbury and of St Boniface.¹¹

The Augustinian philosophy of history could have provided a framework in which Icelanders at the end of the 12th and beginning of the 13th centuries could perceive the Ancient Scandinavian past. Therefore, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that these two mediæval understandings exercised an influence on the retrospective¹² view of the ancient kings of Snorri and his contemporaries.

⁸. Murray, Margaret Alice, *The Divine King in England*, London, 1954, pp. 166-7.

⁹. Bloch, Marc, *Les Rois Thaumaturges*, Strasbourg, 1924, p.41; cited in Murray, Margaret Alice, op. cit. p. 168. The whole chapter 6 "The Sacring of the King", pp. 164-185 contains information on the Christian attitude to the anointed monarch.

¹⁰. The *paidagogos* was the slave who accompanied the boy to school and supervised his education. It is used by St Paul (*Galatians* 3.24) to describe the function of the Law.

¹¹. This topic is the subject of a paper entitled "St Augustine Beyond the Alps" which I read at a symposium held in Melbourne on 29th August 1987 to celebrate the 1600th anniversary of the baptism of Augustine. It will be published at River Seine Press (Melbourne) as the second volume in the series *The Storehouse of Faith*.

The term "sacral", if it is to be retained, should be applied to Christian kings for which a clear definition is available. But for the confusing evidence from pre-Christian and early Christian Scandinavia the term is misleading. In many societies, both past and present, the office of king or of chief implies a sacred function so that the addition of the adjective "sacral" to this type of kingship is redundant. We do not talk of a "political" kingship, an "economic" kingship or a "social" kingship, let alone a "juridical" kingship. Whereas we in the liberal Western tradition separate the secular from the sacred, the phenomenon is not universal, neither geographically nor historically. In many societies the office of king or chief is or was apprehended in relation to the religious behaviour of that community. This would obviously differ from society to society and from age to age. The only common factor is that there is a sacred aspect of a ruler. Thus it appears that the office of chief or king which included the function of overseeing sacrifices through which the gods bestowed fertility and good seasons lay not in the "sacral" character of the person who held the office but in his functional presidency of the cult.

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A personal experience which I related at Professor Hans Kuhn's Old Norse Workshop in Canberra in 1976 (Martin 1976 p.43) throws light for me on the dynamics of the situation. In January 1968 I happened to be in Delhi at the time when the Russian leader Kosygin was visiting that city. Some friends took me to the memorial at the place where the Mahatma Gandhi had been cremated, and some policemen, seeing a foreigner, led us to a close vantage-point on a mound from which we could observe the arrival of Kosygin twenty minutes later. Meanwhile, we watched crowds of barefoot and awe-stricken Indians approach the holy place and raise their hands as a sign of reverence to the late Mahatma and then touch the holy monument or the ground nearby in an attitude of worshipfulness. A few minutes before the arrival of Kosygin the area was cleared, and we saw the Russian leader, accompanied by his entourage and his official Indian hosts, place an enormous wreath of solidarity on the pedestal. Then some Indians placed smaller wreaths. After his departure we watched the crowds surge back. This time it was obvious that it was not only the Mahatma who was the object of reverence and devotion, but also the Indian politicians and the Russian leader. The latter's red flowers especially were touched by ecstatic devotees who would then place their hands on their foreheads, soon to be pushed aside by the ever-surging throng of humanity, eager to touch the holy relics connected with a chief.

This experience, more than any ancient text gives me a key to an understanding of the emotional atmosphere surrounding the relationship

¹³ This understanding is consonant with the findings of O.Olsen in his research in *Herg, hov og kirke*, Copenhagen, 1966.

between the hero and the mass of humanity, the ruler and the ruled. If these simple Indians had been asked whether they considered Kosygin as a god or as an incarnation of a god, they would have thought the question irrelevant and probably incomprehensible. They surely did not regard him as a direct descendant of Marx or Lenin, of whom they may never have even heard. But they saw here a situation, a person and objects which in an indefinable, yet intuitively apprehensible sense conveyed an awareness of the numinous. It would be wrong to draw any more than this from the analogy.

In conclusion, we have seen that the Helgi poems present a concept of two model warrior-kings, both with the name of "Helgi", who avenge wrong and win a valkyrie as a bride. The sources do not indicate any link with the "sacral" nature of kingship, and the attempt to prove that the three poems indicate an ancient cultic situation has to be rejected as an inadequate and unsubstantial explanation. The research of W. Baetke on the influence of mediæval Christianity on the sources is accepted. The revision of the whole question of the "sacrality" of kingship needs to be further worked on, and the line of investigation suggested in this paper is that "sacrality" is irrelevant and tautological if we regard the king or chief as the president of the cult. In this instance the sacred function of the kingship or chieftainship is merely one of many aspects of the royal office.

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