

IDEOLOGY AND PROPAGANDA IN SVERRIS SAGA.

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1. The Problem.

The "objectivity" of the sagas has for a long time been a matter of dispute between historians and literary scholars. Since the research of Halvdan Koht early in this century, the more or less accepted opinion among historians has been that the sagas are biased under their deceptively objective surface. They are the products of the violent struggles between the monarchy, the Church and the aristocracy in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries and can be grouped according to their attitude to these struggles (Koht, 1921a and 1921b; Schreiner, 1926; Sandvik, 1955: 45 ff., 98 ff.; Brekke, 1958: 49 ff. etc.; Helle, 1958: 72 ff.). This has provoked reactions from literary scholars, who have defended the relative objectivity of the sagas, even expressing anger at these accusations against "the honest old saga writers".¹ Recently, literary scholars seem to have moved in the historians' direction (Lönnroth, 1970 and 1976; Magerøy, 1988). I shall in this paper do the opposite and question the historical orthodoxy derived from Koht.

My objection to Koht's project is that it implies a function of historiography in medieval society strikingly similar to that of the 19th and to some extent 20th century. During this period, history served to give identity to social groups: classes, nations, parties, movements etc., and historical arguments were important in the ideological struggle between the parties and to demonstrate that "the logic of evolution" worked in a specific direction and could not be resisted. There are, however, good reasons to doubt both the existence of parties in this sense and the evolutionary view of history in the middle ages (Bagge, 1986: 147 ff., 168 f. etc.; 1991). The literary scholars, however, easily run into the opposite danger. "Objective science" or "truth for its own sake" may very well be modern ideas. In traditional society the past normally has some kind of function in the present. Consequently, the picture of the "honest old saga writer" may be as anachronistic as that of the party politician in disguise.

Thus, my main hypothesis is not that medieval historiography is not "ideological" but that the contents and purpose of its ideology is of a different kind from ours. In analysing saga ideology, some important distinctions have to be made. First, there is the distinction between explicit purpose and implicit bias or even "mentality". In principle, Koht was quite clear on this point (Koht, 1921a: 76 ff.). In practice, however, he had a tendency to blur this distinction, and this applies even more to his successors. Secondly, there is the distinction between the ideology of individual authors and the common ideology of the the saga literature as a whole. So far, historiographical studies have largely aimed at tracing the attitudes of individual authors to controversial issues of the

¹ Lie, 1960-61: 30. See also Lie, 1960-61: 29 ff. with references and 1937: 85 ff., 119 ff. and Paasche, 1967.

period. But how much do these attitudes actually tell us about the saga literature? As is well known, the sagas mostly consist of narrative of events. The narrative is not neutral information that can be overlooked by modern scholars. It reflects the main interest of the author and his audience. Any theory of saga ideology must explain why this is so. In this way, the sagas can be used to understand more fundamental aspects of culture, mentality and society in the Nordic countries in the Middle Ages than emerge from a traditional analysis of the ideology or bias of individual sagas. To make use of a modern analogy - which may turn out to be fairly close: We all know that newspapers are biased and that their presentation of the news are influenced by the political or other loyalties of editors or journalists. However, we do not understand the function of the modern press by analysing this bias. The fundamental fact is that there is a market for news in modern society and that both the definition of "news" and the contents of newspapers in general are largely determined by some kind of shared ideology in society as a whole.

I have already tried to apply some of these ideas to Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla (Bagge, 1991). However, this work deals with the fairly distant past and is written by an author to whom it is difficult to attach any particular party label. Sverris saga is more of a challenge: It is commonly regarded as one of the most heavily biased works of the whole saga literature. In the following pages, I shall discuss the ideology of this saga.

2. Gr'yla.

The picture of Sverris saga as propaganda is above all based on the first part, called Gr'yla, which according to the prologue was written by the Icelandic abbot Karl Jónsson while the king himself was "sitting by" and telling him what to include. Gr'yla is commonly dated to Karl's stay in Norway between 1185 and 1188.

Both the statement in the prologue and the actual contents of Gr'yla strongly suggest that it was intended to present the king in a favourable light. It also seems likely that the propagandistic aim of the saga was to prove that Sverrir had a just cause. Holm-Olsen, particularly, has emphasized this in showing that Gr'yla must have ended early in Sverrir's career, in 1178, i.e. before his great victories.

Sverrir's origin would seem to be the crucial problem in any apology for him. He claimed to be the son of King Sigurðr munnr. His arguments for this claim, as brought forward in Gr'yla, do not appear particularly convincing, nor have they convinced the majority of modern historians. We cannot exclude the possibility that they seemed more convincing to Sverrir's contemporaries but there is a strong likelihood that they were not. Sverrir had not been formally recognized by his alleged father, in contrast to most pretenders before him. Neither had he undergone an ordeal to prove his case, as did several other pretenders, both before and after Sverrir. He had no other evidence for his origin than what his mother had told him. And above all: when initially refusing the demand of the exiled

Birkibeinar to become their leader, Sverrir himself expresses his doubt on the matter.²

Another feature that seems curious to a modern reader expecting an apology for Sverrir is the description of Erlingr skakki's and his son's government in the beginning of the saga. They are popular rulers, with strong support from the people. This point is repeated in several episodes, both in Gr'yla and in the later part (SS: 3, 52, 63, 103 etc.).

These features are best explained from what may be called the "David and Goliath"-pattern of the saga. The evidence of Sverrir's just cause is neither his good arguments for his royal origin nor his superior political programme. It is his astonishing success, despite all odds. There are plenty of references to God as the cause of this. Sverrir dreams that he fights in St. 'Oláfr's army against Erlingr and Magnús (SS: 4) and that the prophet Samuel gives him royal unction in a church (SS: 9 f.). Some of his successes are sheer miracles, as when his men cross a lake on a raft, which sinks as soon as they leave it (SS: 13, cf. also 22 f. and 35). The whole story may be taken as evidence of God's intervention. The saga underlines Sverrir's obscure origins, the wretched creatures he had under his command, their hardships and difficulties and their immense numerical inferiority in battles against their enemies. The prologue underlines this in its discussion of credibility: no one would believe these stories if they were not attested by trustworthy witnesses (SS: 1).

Despite the strongly religious flavour of Gr'yla, the same applies to this work as to the rest of the saga literature. It mainly deals with wars and battles and dramatic events. But the "secular" story of Sverrir also deals with David and Goliath. Sverrir defeats enemies that are greatly superior in numbers (e.g. SS: 14 f., 15 f., 24, 25 f.). But he also knows his and his men's limits and withdraws when the strength of the enemy is too overwhelming (e.g. SS: 17, 24). He finds a solution in every difficulty. And he inspires his men to do their best and to endure defeats, dangers and hard marches (e.g. SS: 22). Despite the sensational and even miraculous aspect of Sverrir's victories, the author does not generally describe Sverrir's success as a miracle. On the contrary, we understand it better than most military events described in the saga literature. The author describes in detail Sverrir's various plans and stratagems and makes it clear the principal reason for his success is his own ability as a commander. Thus, God seems to have very much the same function in Gr'yla as luck in other sagas, including the later part of Sverris saga (Bagge, 1991): It is in principle unpredictable, but tends to favour the man of superior ability.

To sum up so far: the main point in both the "religious" and "secular" ideology of Gr'yla is to present Sverrir as an extremely successful commander, who, like David, defeats largely superior forces through his own ability and God's help. If the work was written at Sverrir's suggestion, the

² "veit æk oc eigi um æt mina. oc ganga þes allir dulþir nema þat eina er ec segi fra ein saman" (SS: 8). On Sverrir's origin, see most recently Stefánsson, 1984.

king is therefore more likely to have intended it to glorify his deeds than to justify his claim to the throne.

3. The Second Part of the Saga.

The rest of the saga, which was written without Sverrir's direct influence, differs from Gr'yla in its more "objective" style, leaving the protagonists, notably Sverrir, to comment and draw conclusions from the events. Thus, as Koht and others have pointed out, it is Sverrir and not the author who refers to God's providence (Koht, 1921b: 184 f.; Indrebø, 1920: lxxiv; Holm-Olsen, 1953: 61 ff.). Further, while Gr'yla almost always presents the events from Sverrir's point of view, the author of the second part frequently changes the point of view from Sverrir to his adversaries and back, often giving the latter as much attention as the former.³ Admittedly, the difference between the two parts may be explained as the result of the author's greater independence, as Sverrir was not "sitting by" any longer. However, this kind of change is not specific to Sverrir saga but is part of the general trend in the development of the classical saga: the author retreats into the background, while speeches and dialogues serve as comments and interpretation (Holm-Olsen, 1977, 1987).

We can then expect the opinion of the author and his audience to agree with what Sverrir expresses in his speeches. Essentially, they contain largely the same message as Gr'yla.⁴ Sverrir outlines his tactics before battles and urges his men in eloquent words to fight well, thus demonstrating his skill as a commander. He refers to his luck and to God's help and he interprets his victories as the sign of God's favour, in full accordance with the "David and Goliath"-ideology of Gr'yla. Occasionally, he points to his role as the ruler over the realm and its inhabitants but such references are marginal (SS: 110f., 103, 137 f., 195). In his great speeches after the death of Erlingr and Magnús, he shows no illusion of being popular or of fighting on behalf of the people. Like the author of Gr'yla he is vague regarding the evidence of his origin but comes forward very strongly in favour of the alleged ancient law that only the son of a king can succeed to the throne, a law Erlingr skakki violated by making his son king (e.g. SS: 43, 68, 106). By contrast, Erlingr and Magnús appeal to the unction and coronation of Magnús and the consent of the people as the legal foundation of Magnús' rule (e.g. SS: 67, 96). Apart from the fact that Sverrir is allowed to speak more often than his adversaries, the author does not seem to exert himself to make Sverrir's arguments sound more convincing. Sverrir, however, is the winner. There is thus reason to believe that the author of the second part, like the author of Gr'yla, regards Sverrir's success as the proof of God's favour.

³ E.g. in the description of the two great battles of Kalvskinnet and Fimreite (SS: 36-45 and 89-101). Particularly the latter is a masterpiece of composition, with frequent shifts in point of view at dramatic moments.

⁴ On these speeches, see Indrebø, 1920: lxxvii ff. and Knirk, 1981: 99 ff.

The part of the saga covering the years 1179-84 seems fairly "objective" in its description of Sverrir's enemies. In particular Magnús Erlingsson receives considerable sympathy, and during his last years, he is depicted as something like a tragic hero (e.g. SS: 96). The description of his father, Erlingr skakki, is more negative but even he emerges as a great man, dying bravely in battle (SS: 41). The sympathetic portrait of Magnús could possibly be explained by the assumption that this part of the saga was originally commissioned by Magnús and was then integrated into the saga of Sverrir after his victory (Blöndal, 1982). Although we cannot exclude this possibility, it is hardly sufficient as an explanation. This part of the saga is so well arranged that the passages on Magnús must have been thoroughly reworked to fit into the new context. Consequently, it would not have been difficult for the author to change the characterization of him, had he so wished. It must also be noted that Gr'yla does not differ from the second part by presenting Sverrir's adversaries in an unfavourable light but simply by not saying very much about them.

By contrast, the part of the saga covering the war against the Baglar (1196-1202) has sometimes been described as more propagandistic and less "objective" than the one dealing with Magnús (Brekke, 1958: 49 ff.; Blöndal, 1982: 104 ff., 142 ff., cf. 197, 201). Admittedly, none of the chieftains of the Baglar is described in such detail and given such tragic-heroic dimensions as Magnús, and one of them, Bishop Nikolás, even emerges as the villain of the story. However, we cannot draw too general conclusions from this. The description of Magnús may have been determined both by literary reasons, that the author had been able to work more carefully with this part, and by the fact that he was by far the most important of Sverrir's enemies. He was the most difficult to defeat and he had the highest rank: he was the only one of Sverrir's enemies who had been anointed and who had ruled as sole king of the whole country. The latter aspect should not be overlooked in the status conscious "saga society". To judge from Heimskringla persons of the highest status usually - though not universally - receive more detailed and more favourable characterizations than persons of lower rank (Bagge, 1991: 152 f.).

Then why is Nikolás pictured so negatively? The most obvious explanation is that he fails to match up to the saga standard of how a leader should behave in war. He is a coward and runs away under attack. However, the author or the Birkibeinar may well have invented this trait to blacken their enemy. Moreover, both Sverrir himself and the author hints that the great king himself was not particularly brave in face to face combat (e.g. SS: 136) - as a matter of fact, Sverrir's self-irony in this field is truly remarkable, almost shocking in this masculine, warrior society. But it was probably evident to all of Sverrir's men that the king avoided face to face combat in order to lead his men. Did Nikolás do the same? Was he the only one of Sverrir's enemies with the same tactical and strategic skill, so that he had to be ridiculed because he was so dangerous? We do not know, but we can point to other reasons for the Birkibeinar to hate Nikolás. First, he was an apostate. This was by no means unusual in the Norwegian civil wars and both parties seem generally to have taken a relaxed

attitude towards this problem. But Nikolás was an apostate to an unusual degree. He had been Sverrir's enemy, had been pardoned, been appointed bishop with Sverrir's consent, had held a high position at Sverrir's court and had then been one of the instigators of the rebellion against him. Secondly, he might be accused of not playing the game. As a bishop, he had a special protection, and the contemporary churchmen loudly announced that they were too holy to intervene in the horror and bloodshed of war. One can easily understand the indignation of warriors who had to fight an enemy whom they were forbidden to kill but who was nevertheless able to do them considerable damage.

In any case, the negative description of Bishop Nikolás is an exception. The author has little, either negative or positive, to say about the rest of the leading Baglar. Towards the end of the saga, we get a closer view and a fairly sympathetic impression of Hreiðarr sendimaðr, the leader of the small group of Baglar who heroically withstood Sverrir's siege of the castle of Tønsberg for twenty weeks, until they had to surrender shortly before Christmas 1201 (SS: 185-92). When Sverrir fell ill shortly afterwards, "he had many conversations with Hreiðarr, who was a wise man and knew many things" (SS: 193).

As for the Baglar in general, the author often refers to descriptions of them by Birkibeinar as well as by ordinary people as rapacious and disturbers of the peace (e.g. SS: 157 f.). However, the author does not attempt to embellish the behaviour of the Birkibeinar towards the civilian population, often hinting at their bad reputation (e.g. SS: 77, 88, 123, 154, cf. also 87 ff., 183 f.). This is partly to be understood against the same background as the references to the popularity of Erlingr and Magnús in Gr'yla. The saga reflects the attitude of professional warriors, who did not care very much about the reactions of the ordinary people and who were not afraid of being accused of plundering farmers and merchants. However, according to Sverrir's ambition of being a great ruler in peace as well as in war, the author presents the king himself as not responsible for such acts (e.g. SS: 77, 88, 137), except when he punishes the farmers for insubordination or rebellion.

One field in which Sverrir emerges in a more favourable light than his adversaries is in his treatment of captive enemies (SS: 83, 85, 124, 160 f.). In some instances, notably after the surrender of the Baglar at Tønsberg, he points to the Christian doctrine of forgiveness as his motive (SS: 192). By contrast, Erlingr and Magnús usually kill captive Birkibeinar (e.g. SS: 71). Whether true or not, this is clearly an example of the author wanting to give a more favourable picture of Sverrir than of his enemies. However, it is not only a question of Sverrir's personal behaviour or of virtue versus vice. Pardoning one's enemies was first and foremost a political question. In twelfth century Norwegian warfare it was impossible to win a total military victory. The best one could hope for was a victory that was impressive enough to convince the opposite party that they had little to gain by continuing to resist and that it was preferable to join the victors. A means to achieve this was to pardon defeated enemies. Enemies that did receive pardon were then normally supposed to join the

victorious army. Of course, there was then the risk that they might defect. Killing them had the advantage of permanently eliminating dangerous opponents and in addition demonstrating strength and showing the danger of fighting in the opposite camp.

In practice one had to balance between the two extremes. As an upstart, trying to win the kingdom with a small army, Sverrir had every reason to pardon his enemies. He had to broaden his support, and pardoned enemies meant potential supporters. By contrast, Magnús, who was the established king, had little to gain by including some Birkibeinar in his army and good reasons to use harsh means to prevent future rebellions. As an established king, Sverrir also became more restrictive. After his victory over the Baglar at Strindsjøen in 1199, he stated his reasons for this: His lenient attitude had not worked, he had to suppress the Baglar ruthlessly (SS: 167.). He also comments on "the politics of pardoning" in an earlier episode: Jón kuflungr had demonstrated that he was not qualified to be a king by pardoning captive Birkibeinar when besieging Sverrir in Nidaros without letting them swear an oath of fealty (SS: 112). These episodes also make clear that the author is aware of the political aspect of pardoning. He does not camouflage Sverrir's political attitude as idealism and he does not consistently present him as the champion of mercy versus the cruelty of his adversaries.

The last years of Sverrir's reign saw his most dramatic ideological conflict, the one against Archbishop Eiríkr. The author gives a brief treatment of this conflict until the year 1196. In speeches and dialogues the author lets his protagonists use violent language but does not immediately imply that the Archbishop is in the wrong (SS: 119, 122 ff.). The rest of his story strongly indicates this, however. The Archbishop goes into exile in Denmark, where he loses his eye-sight. According to Sverrir's interpretation, God turned his condemnation of the Birkibeinar into his own eyes (SS: 129 f.). In the end, the pope decides in Sverris favour (SS: 133 f.). After that, the author hardly mentions the conflict, thus implying that Sverrir was on good terms with most of the churchmen during the rest of his reign. While the first part of the story to some extent corresponds to what we know from other sources - the ecclesiastical ones - the end of it is manifestly wrong.⁵ The author thus passes over the most bitter phase of this conflict. No doubt, this omission must to some extent have been determined by his wish to protect Sverrir. However, this silence cannot have been very efficient from a propagandistic point of view, as most people must have known that his story was wrong. Thus, this particular way of solving the problem can hardly be understood without taking into account the fact that ideology plays a subordinate role and the wars and battles are the main theme of the saga. Characteristically, the most detailed account of the conflict with the Church comes when there is not very much else to tell.

The most important aspect of the author's evaluation of the persons he is describing concerns their performance as war-

⁵ See Gunnes, 1971: 269 ff. for an account of this conflict.

riors. Here evidently, Sverrir gets the highest score, and the Birkibeinar usually, though not universally, perform better than their opponents. But the author often points to skill and bravery in Sverrir's enemies, giving details of exceptional performances by men who are otherwise unknown (e.g. SS: 61, 169). In a speech during the siege of the castle of Tønsberg, Sverrir points to the endurance of the Baglar as an example for his own men (SS: 189), and the author is clearly full of admiration for their behaviour. He occasionally blames Magnús for bad tactics, but usually treats both him and his men and the Baglar with respect. The latter gave Sverrir as many difficulties as Magnús had done. The author has a condescending attitude to the less successful rebels during the period 1185-96. But the great dividing line goes between the members of the conflicting parties on the one hand and the ordinary farmers on the other. The latter are almost always described with contempt. They are defeated despite overwhelming numerical superiority and they are usually frightened and run away when attacked. Thus, the author reflects the attitude of the professional warriors in general more than a "party ideology" of the Birkibeinar.

4. The Purpose of Sverris saga.

The conclusion to be drawn from these observations is that Sverris saga is neither neutral information, collected by an author who was interested in the past for its own sake, nor what can be reasonably called party propaganda. Sverrir is clearly the hero of the saga but his enemies are not generally depicted as bad men, some of them even showing heroic traits. The saga sides with Sverrir in ideological controversies but such controversies do not play a prominent part in the saga. Even the arguments for Sverrir's right to the throne are vague and unconvincing. Sverrir emerges as the hero because of his success, which is due partly to his own ability and partly to God's favour. Finally, the saga contains a lot of information about persons and events that is clearly impartial, showing good and bad performances on both sides in the conflict. How can these observations be explained?

If we want to explain why the saga as a whole got its present form, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that its main purpose was simply to describe heroic deeds and dramatic events as completely as possible. This does not mean that the saga literature was simply harmless, "non-ideological" entertainment. To the political and military aristocracy which was the most importance audience of the sagas this literature served a double function. It celebrated its greatest virtues and urged its members to practice them. And as "war reports" the sagas guaranteed that great men and their deeds were not forgotten but continued to live in men's memory (Paasche, 1967: 73; Bagge, 1991 ch. V). This applies to Sverris saga as well as to other sagas.

In principle, the sagas are then supposed to give an objective record of events, in which men and their actions are evaluated according to universally accepted standards. Admittedly, the author of Sverris saga may be suspected of exaggerating the virtues of Sverrir and the Birkibeinar, particularly in making their victories more sensational than they actually were. But he does not consistently blacken their

enemies. And why should he, even if he wrote his work in favour of the Birkibeinar? There is no honour in defeating a coward. The better the enemies' military performance, the greater glory to the ones that defeat them. Thus, Sverris saga is essentially Sverrir's res gestae. This applies to Grýla as well as the rest of the saga.

Nevertheless, the description of Sverrir as a charismatic and successful leader may also have had a more direct propagandistic purpose. The parties in the Norwegian civil wars were not formed on the basis of social origin or of having sympathy for any higher principles. They were factions, based on common interests. A leader had to build up his faction through personal charisma, generosity and above all success. Successful leaders increased their following, while unsuccessful ones were deserted (Bagge, 1986: 156 ff., 165 ff. and 1991 ch. II). It was thus far more important for Sverrir to point to his successes than to his legal claims - though the latter were not without importance for achieving the former. The appeal to God fits well in with this kind of reasoning. There seems normally to have been a close connection between ability and luck ("fortem fortuna iuvat") and God's providence may be regarded as a substitute for the latter. If Sverrir is not only exceptionally able but even favoured by God, there is every reason to follow him.

While the great majority who joined a faction did so to serve their own interests and were fairly loosely attached to the leader, there was also a hard core of relatives or close, personal friends. In one sense, Sverrir made a new departure, linking this hard core more closely to himself than had previously been usual and building up a clientele of professional warriors, which eventually became the core of a new aristocracy of royal servants. To this clientele, Sverrir's person became extremely important. This group of men was bound together by their great leader, whose charm, intelligence, humour, imagination and ability to endure all kinds of hardship and turn the most depressing circumstances into victory, impressed his adherents so much, as they continue to impress readers of Sverris saga 7-800 years later. The portrait of Sverrir in the second part of the saga may therefore very well have its background in this milieu, reflecting the strong, emotional ties between the men and their great leader.

However, the system was changing in the age of Sverrir. The factions changed into more permanent parties, whose members became more willing to fight to the bitter end. The support of the population in general became increasingly important (Bagge, 1986: 189 f.). In this situation, the personal factor was not sufficient; an ideology had to be developed. The party of Magnús and his successors took the first step, through their alliance with the Church. Sverrir responded by appealing to God directly, without intervention by the Church. Thus Sverrir's dreams, his use of religion against the Archbishop and in general his appeal to God are not exclusively an extension of his personal appeal. These phenomena are also steps towards a more impersonal party formation and ultimately towards a new kind of monarchical state. This ideology is more prominent in other sources from the milieu around Sverrir, such as his few extant statutes and above all The Speech against the Bishops. Here Sverrir emerges as the rex iustus, trying to suppress

feuds, crime and illegal behaviour and promote public justice, demanding strict obedience from his subjects, as God's representative on earth (Gunnes, 1971: 230 ff., 318 ff.). The reason why this ideology did not influence Sverris saga more, is probably the strength of the narrative genre - oral or written - forming the saga literature, and the fact that the sagas were intended for an "internal" audience of warriors in the king's surroundings, while the other sources marked the king's effort to appeal to the churchmen and the population in general. Eventually, however, the saga literature was more influenced by this royalist ideology. But that is another story.

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