

STRATEGY AND TACTICS IN THE CONTEMPORARY SAGAS:
THE BATTLE OF FIMREITE

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Introduction.

The present paper contains a section of my book From Gang Leader to the Lord's Anointed. Kingship and Individuality in Sverris saga and Hákonar saga, which is now under publication in the Viking Collection at the Odense University Press. In the book I try to trace the change between two different concepts of kingship, corresponding to two different ways of portraying the protagonists of the sagas. Sverrir in Sverris saga is above all the charismatic leader, who attracts men through his personality, political and military skill, and, above all, his successes. By contrast, Hákonar saga contains a portrait of a rex iustus and head of state, while the author deliberately omits to give a closer description of Hákon himself and his relationship to other men. One aspect of this development is the change in the description of tactical and strategic behaviour.

Sverris saga gives a vivid and convincing picture of Sverrir as a military leader, describing in detail his tactics and, above all, showing his ability to persuade his men to fight for him and inspiring them to do their best. However, the saga is vague regarding larger strategical issues. Sverrir fights to become king, and later to protect his throne. The saga mentions no further plans that Sverrir wants to carry out when having established himself on the throne. Apart from his struggles against other pretenders, he only takes part in one major political conflict, the one against the Church, in which he reacts to challenges from the prelates. Nor is it easy to understand the overall strategy of Sverrir's warfare, in contrast to the tactics of individual battles. The saga does not form a continuous story, showing the development of Sverrir's personality, his

different challenges as a politician and a general or the changing phases of the history of the country in the period. It rather consists of a series of vivid and dramatic episodes. There is a correspondence between the episodic structure of the saga and its the lack of explicit discussions of strategy. We do not follow a kind of "game of chess" between two generals, in which each encounter or battle receives its meaning from its consequences for the larger strategic plans which it affects, but rather a series of events of approximately equal importance in which a number of persons act and behave in very much the same way and which give a similar impression of the skill of the protagonist.

The Battle of Fimreite.

I shall develop this point through an analysis of the events leading up to Sverrir's greatest victory, the battle of Fimreite in 1184, which led to the defeat and death of his rival king, Magnús Erlingsson. I intend to show that the author not only fails to give an account of Sverrir's strategy, but narrates the events in a way that directly seems intended to obscure it.

The battle of Fimreite forms the longest single episode of the whole saga, with detailed descriptions of the movements of the two parties and with long and elaborate speeches before and after. From a literary point of view, this is a brilliant story, with the parallell descriptions of the two fleets moving towards one another without knowing it, first Sverrir from Nidaros until his ships are anchored at Fimreite, then Magnús from Denmark along the coast to Bergen and then head on to meet Sverrir in Sogn - and finally the dramatic moment when Sverrir's men discover the enemy ships moving towards them. The decisive encounter is also anticipated in a number of ways. There are signs - the crows are gathering on Magnús' ships. The kings' clothings are described, and both of them make speeches which hint at the result of the battle, Magnús's sad reflections on the

misfortunes he has suffered during his reign and his will to carry the heavy burden that was placed upon him when he was crowned at the age of seven, in contrast to Sverrir's determination to fight a decisive battle and his trust in God and his own skill and luck to bring him victory.

A convenient starting-point for a closer analysis of this battle is Sverrir's victory over Magnús in Bergen late in the summer of 1183 (SS ch. 76-77). Magnús and his men are taken by complete surprise. Magnús survives but leaves Bergen without his ships and later on goes to Denmark to spend the winter there. There are some indications in the comments after this victory that Sverrir may have regarded it as the final one.¹ In addition to the fact that Magnús leaves the country, Sverrir conquers Magnús' royal insignia, which he had worn at his coronation, and the Archbishop makes his peace with Sverrir. However, the indications to the contrary are far stronger. Magnús had not lost more men in Bergen than that he might think of an immediate counterattack. He manages to collect the remainder of his army just outside the town, but his men refuse to follow because they are insufficiently equipped. When pursuing Magnús, Sverrir does not attempt to go further than to Agder (SS ch. 78). Magnús had previously received aid from his kinsmen in Denmark, and this must clearly have been his aim in going there this time as well. Sverrir could not possibly have felt secure as the sole ruler of Norway, he must have expected Magnús to return to fight him the next year.

And that is exactly what Sverrir's actions in the following period indicate (SS ch. 80). When returning to Nidaros after his victory in Bergen, he supervises the launching of *Mariusúðin*, an enormous ship. He makes a speech over it, naming it after the Virgin, to whom he also

¹ Thus Gathorne-Hardy, 1956: 196. In contrast to his scepticism on many other occasions, Gathorne-Hardy fully accepts the saga's description of Sverrir's desperate situation at *Fimreite* (*ibid.*: 197-210).

gives costly gifts, and he equips the ship with relics. In the winter he builds some more warships and repairs others. The next spring, after Easter, he leaves Nidaros with twenty-three ships, most of them large. He is thus far better prepared now than for his attack on Magnús the year before. The alleged aim of this new expedition is to punish the people of Sogndal, who have killed Sverrir's gjalumenn there, which he also does, burning hundred farms in the region. It seems incredible, however, that these great preparations were only intended for some disobedient peasants. Sverrir must clearly have been thinking of Magnús' return from Denmark. Above all, the building of Mariusúðin is evidence of this. Such a ship could only have one purpose: to fight a sea battle. It was cumbersome to manoeuvre and dangerous in heavy sea, because of its enormous size. It also went more slowly than the smaller ships, built according to the traditional model of Viking ships (Malmros, 1985: 95-97). Nor could Mariusúðin have been very easy to move in the narrow Sognefjord. If Sverrir had wanted a fleet for controlling the coast or launching punishing expeditions against rebellious peasants, he would have built smaller and more mobile vessels. But in a battle Mariusúðin was a floating fortress, far higher and with a larger crew than any enemy ship. Sverrir must have planned a similar tactics as at Nordnes, tying up a large part of the enemy fleet in a "siege" of Mariusúðin, while the rest of his fleet could move freely and attack the enemy at his weakest points, in other words, the tactics he actually used at Fimreite.

In the following passages the author explains how Sverrir's great force was gradually diminished. He allows three ships to go to Bergen with men having business there (ch. 81: 87). He sends six ships to attack Kaupanger (ch. 81: 88), while the rest attack Sogndal. Having burnt this area, Sverrir moves to the other side of the fjord, to Fimreite, leaving two ships in Sogndal (ch. 81: 89; ch. 88: 93). Leaving Sverrir there, the author turns to the story

of Magnús' arrival in Eastern Norway, his journey along the coast, his sudden attack on Sverrir's men in Bergen and his swift move to Sogn to fight Sverrir there. Returning to Sverrir and his men, he then describes how they suddenly discover ships in the fjord and then - to their horror - identify them as Magnús' fleet. According to the saga, Magnús had twenty-six ships, most of them large, while Sverrir had fourteen, including the two left at Sogndal, which were immediately sent for and took part in the battle.² In a short speech, Sverrir points to their desperate situation. They must either fight an overwhelmingly superior enemy or leave the ships and flee over land - in enemy territory, among peasants who thirst for revenge for what they have just suffered. And, Sverrir adds, this will probably mean the end of his reign; to obtain the ships has cost him so much that he hardly thinks that he will try to do the same once more (SS ch. 88: 94). Sverrir's men take the hint and decide to follow him and wage a battle. Thanks to Sverrir's brilliant tactics and Magnús' and his men's incompetence, the Birkibeinar win a great victory and Magnús and a number of his most prominent followers are killed.

Was Sverrir actually so unprepared for Magnús' return? In addition to the facts adduced so far, there is one further indication that he was not. The leader of the three ships Sverrir sent to Bergen was called Svína-Pétr (Peter the Pig). According to the saga, around thirty Birkibeinar were killed when Magnús attacked Bergen. The rest fled, so that the mountain "was red with shields" (SS ch. 86: 92). The author says nothing of what happened to Pétr. However, on Saturday, the day after the battle, he tells that a ship arrived in Bergen, before Sverrir himself, with Pétr on board. He goes ashore, lets the horn be blown to gather the

² SS ch. 87; ch. 88: 95. These two ships are indirectly referred to once during the battle: Eiríkr, Sverrir's half-brother, attacks with the remaining thirteen ships, i.e. all except Mariusúðin, which was surrounded by enemy ships (SS ch. 92: 99).

inhabitants, and opens his speech in the following way:

The saying is here fulfilled, 'Oft the same swine in the field', and my name is Svina-Petr. A short time ago, you remember, we were driven out of this town in rather a shameful way, but we have now come back again.³

Pétr then announces Sverrir's victory and Magnús' death. To do so, he must probably have been present at the battle, which again means that he must have gone directly from Bergen to Sogn, where he knew that Sverrir was. According to the saga, Magnús arrived in Bergen on Thursday (14 June) "at miðmunda scelð", that is: between noon and three o'clock or around half past one, and left at night⁴. Pétr, of course, must have left the town immediately. If the saga is to be believed, he left by land. This seems reasonable enough, as it would have been difficult to escape by ship when Magnús' fleet filled the harbour. If, as indicated in the saga, he went up the mountain, he could have reached the next fjord, Eidsvåg, in less than one hour. And there he could have got hold of a boat to go to Sogn. Magnús arrived at Fimreite on Friday, 15 June, some time after nón (three o'clock), when Sverrir and his men had started eating. They had been eating for a while when they discovered the ships, and it took some time from then until the battle began.⁵ Pétr must have started several hours before Magnús and must probably have arrived well before. Thus, Sverrir probably knew some time in advance that Magnús was on his way. It is

³ "her kemr at þui sem mælt er. opt hit sama svin i acri. Ec heiti oc Suina-Petr. En scamt er á at minnaz at ver varum heðan recnir oc keyróir or þesom bø oc helldr haðuliga. oc erum nu eN aptr comnir." (SS ch. 96: 103 - S).

⁴ "um kvældit" = at the end of the day, i.e. after ten p.m. in the middle of June at this latitude (SS ch. 86: 92 f.).

⁵ According to a later statement in the saga, the battle took place "um aptaninn", i.e. between three o'clock and nightfall, and the killing did not end until midnight (SS ch. 93: 100).

even a likely assumption that he sent Petr and his men to Bergen with the explicit purpose of keeping watch for Magnús' arrival. A further indication that Sverrir was warned some time in advance is the description in the saga of his preparations before the battle. His men gather stones and bring them to the ships, they put war-bulwarks on the ships and they send for the two ships in Sogndal, which arrive in time to take part in the battle (SS ch. 88: 95).

Sverrir probably did not have enough time to get out of the Sognefjord before Magnús entered, as Fimreite is near the middle of this very long fjord. And the whole fjord is too narrow to have allowed him to escape if Magnús had already entered it. But he would have been able to get forward a message to the other ships in his fleet or to move on to some place where he could hide and possibly surprise Magnús. When he nevertheless chose to remain at Fimreite, the reason must have been that he felt sufficiently strong to fight a battle there. This is not surprising; according to the author's own account, Sverrir did fight and win at Nordnes against an even greater numerical superiority than at Fimreite, fourteen ships against twenty-six at Fimreite, sixteen against thirty-two at Nordnes. On both occasions he may have been less numerically inferior than the author indicates or - more likely - the size of his ships was to some extent able to compensate for the smaller number. We know less of the size of the ships at Nordnes, but it is reasonable to conclude from the saga's description of the battle of Fimreite that the average size of Sverrir's ship must have exceeded that of Magnús'⁶. As the author himself

⁶ The saga gives some indirect clues to a comparison between the size of ships in the two fleets. Mariusúóin was clearly an enormous ship, with thirty-three rúm (compartments), and by far the largest in the battle, having 320 men on board, i.e. five men in each half-rúm, instead of normally three (SS ch. 73, 80-81). Of the two other ships mentioned by name in the saga, which Sverrir built in Nidaros, one had twenty-six rúm, i.e. probably fifty-two rowers, and the other almost as many. Neither of these took part in the battle, however (SS ch. 80: 87; 81: 88). Magnús had one very large ship, called "Skeggan" (=the Man) with twenty-six rúm

admits in his comment on Sverrir's victory at Florvåg against an enemy with fewer but larger ships (SS ch. 120), the size of the ships could outweigh a considerable numerical superiority.

As Sverris saga is our only source for the battle of Fimreite, we shall probably never know the exact truth about what happened there. But it is well known that the author of the saga tends to describe Sverrir's victories as more sensational than they actually were, according to his "David and Goliath"-pattern. Medieval authors are notoriously inaccurate regarding numbers, and though the author of Sverris saga seems to be better in this respect than many of his contemporaries, some of his numbers are highly unlikely, not to say impossible (Bagge, 1986: 187 f. with ref.). Sverrir's actions in the winter and spring of 1183-84 clearly indicate that he prepared for a decisive battle against Magnús. To what extent he kept his watch all the

(SS ch. 51: 57). Another of his ships, mentioned by name, was a tvítugessa, i.e. with twenty seats or the size of a normal leiðangr ship of the older type, before the change to twenty-five seats in the second half of the twelfth century. This indicates that the rest of his ships were hardly very large. During the battle "Skeggan" is repeatedly referred to as "the big ship" (SS ch. 91: 98; 92: 99) and it is clearly implied that it was much larger than the rest of Magnús' fleet. In the battle fourteen of Magnús's ships attacked Mariusuðin, their bows into its side, which made it difficult to enter. Admittedly, Magnús and his men were not tactical geniuses but their reason for attacking in this way was clearly that Mariasuðin was so much higher than their ships - including Skeggan - that it would be very difficult to attack alongside. Having tied up the greater part of Magnús' fleet in this way, Sverrir then sent the rest of his fleet, thirteen ships, against the remainder of that of Magnús, twelve in all. The saga explicitly states that this part of the Birkibeinar force had larger ships and more men (SS ch. 92: 99). Thus, though we cannot give exact numbers, there are indications that Magnús' numerical superiority was considerably less than the saga states. Koht (1952: 58), probably reasoning in a similar way as I have done here, calculates Sverrir's force to about 1500 men and that of Magnús to 2000. Gathorne-Hardy arrives at the proportion of three to two in Magnús' favour, but adds that the confidence expressed in the speeches by Magnús and his men before the battle - composed by the author himself! - indicate an even larger numerical superiority on their part (Gathorne-Hardy, 1956: 199).

time during his punishing expedition in Sogn, is open to discussion. He might have preferred to fight under other conditions than at Fimreite, but he was hardly in such a desperate situation as described in the saga.

This means that Sverrir was actually a better strategist than his own biographer is willing to admit. If the description of the battle in the saga were correct, Sverrir would, from a modern point of view, have committed a serious blunder in not preparing adequately for Magnus' possible return. To the author, however, there was nothing discreditable about Sverrir being caught by surprise. In his view good military leadership consisted first and foremost in defeating numerically superior adversaries and in brilliant improvisation in difficult situations. This understanding of leadership also corresponds to his "David and Goliath"-perspective and his emphasis on Sverrir's luck, which he mentions explicitly in his explanation of the outcome of the battle⁷. The author accordingly suppresses evidence of Sverrir's foresight and strategic planning.

Modern political and military biographies tend to exaggerate in the opposite direction, as may be illustrated by the historiography of Gustavus Adolphus' great victory over Tilly and the imperial army at Breitenfeld (1631). According to the picture of this battle originating in the mid-nineteenth century and developed further in the official Swedish history of Gustavus Adolphus' wars, edited by the General Staff (1937), the king planned to surround and annihilate the enemy's army. This plan had to be postponed when the enemy attacked but directed the king's thinking during the whole battle and was finally carried out in its last phase. In this way, Gustavus Adolphus proved a both determined and foresighted and flexible general, who could adapt to circumstances without losing sight of his final

⁷ See the comment on Sverrir's victory at Fimreite: "En þó skal nú þat inna hvat mest þar til með aðnunni er sva sneriz sigriN sem olicligra þotti." ("yet we shall now tell what most availed, with good fortune, to turn the victory in a direction that seemed unlikely", SS ch. 92).

aim. This analysis is based on the "model battle" of Cannae, where Hannibal defeated the Romans in 216 BC, a battle that received a very influential treatment in 1909-13 by A. von Schlieffen, head of the German General Staff, and which was then "recognized" in the great German victories at Tannenberg and the Masurian Lakes in 1914. According to a more recent study of the battle and its historiography, Tilly had the initiative during most of the battle, and Gustavus Adolphus won by responding in the right way to his attack, which means that we know very little of the king's plans before the battle (Lundkvist, 1963).

Warfare in Twelfth Century Norway.

This comparison between Sverris saga and modern military historiography is relevant to the discussion as to whether tactics and strategy actually played a significant part in medieval warfare, or it was mainly determined, either by the warriors' - i.e. the knights' - aggressive impulses or by the norms of chivalry.⁴¹ In my opinion, there seems to be fairly good evidence for assuming that tactics and strategy did play an important role in Middle Ages, although the chivalrous norms regarding the way noble knights should fight one another and treat one another as prisoners, might to some extent modify tactical and strategical considerations. Such rules only affected a very small minority, however, as it was perfectly legitimate to treat both ordinary soldiers and the civilian population quite ruthlessly, according to one's strategical and tactical interests. Sverris saga and the saga literature in general

⁴¹ Traditionally, military historians have held a fairly low opinion of medieval tactics and strategy. See for instance Delbrück, 1982 [orig. 1923]: 93-426, and more recently Howard, 1977: 27, 36 and Keegan, 1978: 175 f., 336. To DUBY, 1984, twelfth and early thirteenth century warfare is mainly a noble and chivalrous game for the lords and their knights. More recent studies have, however, presented considerable evidence for tactical and strategic thinking in medieval warfare. See Smail, 1956: 120-203; Beeler, 1971; Gillingham, 1973: 32 f., 94-163 and 1988; Contamine, 1980: 350-89.

gives a strong impression that success was the primary aim in military confrontations, and that norms of chivalry were vague and relatively unimportant. Admittedly, the saga often depicts Sverrir showing mercy towards captured and defeated enemies, while referring to the Christian norm that one should forgive one's enemies, but the author clearly implies that such leniency was also determined by political considerations. He also shows Sverrir behaving more ruthlessly towards the end of his career, out of the conviction that leniency no longer served its political purpose (Bagge, 1991: 161-73; 1993). In any case, it is clear from the account in the sagas that there were no general norms demanding men of high rank to be treated with greater leniency than ordinary warriors, and no strictly defined "chivalrous" elite whose members had to fight one another in a particular way. We thus find a different attitude in the narrative of the sagas than in feudal Europe, which at least to some extent must correspond to actual differences.

Consequently, there is no reason to believe that norms of chivalry modified the importance of tactics and strategy in Norwegian warfare of the twelfth century. The difference between the emphasis on the former in contrast to the latter in Sverris saga might seem to support Norbert Elias' theory of a more spontaneous personality among medieval aristocrats than among their counterparts in the following period, in military as well as other contexts (Elias, 1977, I:65 ff., II: 351 ff.; cf. Bagge, 1989b, 1991: 161 f. 168-72). Before we draw such a conclusion, however, we have look for a possible rationality in the behaviour described in the saga.

In Sverris saga the armies are almost constantly on the move, without the author caring much to explain why. Most probably the reason for these movements was fairly obvious to the readers of the saga: they were necessary simply to get provisions. The strategy did not consist in capturing fortified towns and strongholds and holding them, as in contemporary Europe, but in meeting and defeating the enemy

in the field (Bagge, 1986: 184-86). It would not have been "rational" to plan the conquest of Norway by subduing its towns one by one. As is evident from the sagas, it was impossible to hold a town for a very long time after conquering it, or, in any case, to hold more than one or two towns at the time. As the towns were not properly fortified, a fairly large army would be necessary to hold them, and it was impossible to mobilize and provision an army strong enough to garrison several towns for very long, while at the same time attacking the enemy. These conditions began to change towards the end of Sverrir's reign, when the first castles were erected. A small garrison in a castle could not defend a town but could prevent the enemy from getting a permanent hold on it. Still, however, the way to victory was by defeating the enemy in the open field, or preferably at sea. As Norway has an extremely long coast, along which the majority of the population lived, then as now, the only way of controlling the country was to have a large fleet. When pretenders fought a battle on approximately equal terms, they normally fought at sea. If the defeated party lost most of his fleet, he would be in a very difficult position - as is well illustrated in Sverris saga. Decisive battles were therefore more often sea battles than land battles, the latter being decisive mainly if one of the leaders happened to be killed. At least in the earlier phase of the civil wars, one major victory was likely to make the majority of the defeated party defect and join the victorious one. - A "Vernichtungsslacht" according to the model of Cannae was hardly a realistic possibility in this kind of warfare. - Later, during Sverrir's age, the parties were more closely knit together, and, as Sverrir himself bitterly experienced, tended to survive a number of defeats. Actually, Sverrir's appearance on the stage led to a long war of attrition which only ended with a compromise under his successors in the early thirteenth century.

Moving and provisioning large and complex armies,

securing communication lines and conquering towns and fortifications clearly demand more foresight and rational planning than the small-scale warfare of Sverrir's age. Strategy and long-term planning therefore play a more important role in the military historiography of the Modern Epoch. However, the difference between the warfare of Sverrir's age and that of later centuries is not directly one of rationality, in the sense that Sverrir and his men were more spontaneous and less interested in furthering their own long-term interests. To some extent, the general simply had to move around, hoping for some encounter with the enemy, and improvise when such encounters took place. Clever tactics and brilliant improvisation in individual battles were therefore probably the most necessary and most praiseworthy military virtues. Sverrir was unusually clever in this way, and clearly an innovator in contemporary tactics. The battle of Fimreite is evidence that he was also - despite some blunders - ahead of his contemporaries in long-term strategic planning, even so much so that they failed to recognize his skill in this field.

A New Perspective on Warfare? - Hákonar saga.

Compared to Sverris saga, the descriptions of warfare in Hákonar saga are fairly dry, and Hákon is not shown as a brilliant military leader. Most probably, he was also less brilliant in this respect than Sverrir. What is interesting in Hákonar saga, however, is that the author's perspective is different, in accordance with his different concept of the royal office. Hákon is described more as a general of later ages than Sverrir. He rarely discusses with his men, he issues orders, which are usually, although not always, obeyed. He takes less direct part in the action itself, confining himself to outlining the tactics before the battle. Dramatic episodes, showing the exploits of individual warriors, also occur more rarely than in Sverris saga. And above all, strategy plays a more prominent part in Hákonar saga than in Sverris saga. In short, Hákonar

saga's perspective on warfare is that of the "general staff". Sturla Þórðarson, the author of the saga, refers to discussions over the general strategy of a war or an expedition, such as the one between Skúli and his men at the beginning of his rebellion in 1239 (HH ch. 201) or among Hákon and his counsellors during the expedition to Scotland in 1263 (HH ch. 319, 326). Such deliberations are very rare in Sverris saga - as opposed to deliberations about the tactics of individual battles. Mostly, however, Sturla confines himself to telling what was done, without explicitly commenting on means and aims. We therefore have the same difficulty as in Sverris saga of deciding whether the author expected his readers to draw their own conclusions on such matters or they simply did not think of them. An argument for the former interpretation is that Sturla's narrative is mostly clear and detailed, so that it is not difficult to draw conclusions regarding strategy. As a military writer, Sturla is at least as able as the author of Sverris saga in this respect, while he would seem inferior in describing individual encounters and the relationship between the leader and his men. This inferiority may, however, equally well be the result of changes in the political and military organization during the first half of the thirteenth century as of any defect in Sturla's ability as a writer. Thus, we may venture the conclusion that he shows good understanding of military matters, and, compared to the author of Sverris saga, has moved a considerable step in the direction of "the general staff perspective" in his narrative of warfare. This change is determined both by the new concept of the royal office in Sturla's milieu and by changes in warfare and the royal administration during the strong monarchy in the age of Hákon Hákonarson.

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