

THE UNITY OF MORKINSKINNA

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How can we hope to show that an anonymous saga is the work of one author when we cannot even demonstrate to everyone's satisfaction that Shakespeare wrote his plays? And how infinitely more difficult it is to establish authorial identity in the imperfectly transmitted literary works of the Middle Ages! It was not, after all, until 1933 that Einar Ólafur Sveinsson convinced us that Njáls saga was one saga, not two, and as late as 1964 Lars Lönnroth released a trial balloon in large letters to the effect that Heimskringla might be a collaborative work (1964:87-88). To my knowledge no one has tried to puncture that balloon because the extent of our information does not allow us to argue that Snorri is personally responsible for every word. Quite apart from the possibility that he had hired writers in his employ, the sources from which he worked were so full that the title "editor in chief" might be more appropriate to his function than "author."

The unity of Morkinskinna has been considerably more dogged by doubt than the unity of either Njáls saga or Heimskringla. There have been persistent suspicions that the MS from ca. 1280 may differ substantially from the original work from ca. 1220. The latest summary statement by Sverrir Tómasson indicates that the book as we have it should be considered a work of the later thirteenth century (1992:383). But even the original work of 1220 has been denied the respectability of single authorship. Finnur Jónsson (1928-1932:X-XXXVIII) notoriously believed that it was compiled from lost individual kings' sagas. Particularly suspect are the numerous separable þættir, which, consensus seems to hold, could have been inserted at various stages between the original and the extant manuscript.

Having spent substantial parts of the last five years translating the prose of Morkinskinna, I have become a sympathetic and reasonably close reader of the text. I emerge from my reading with the impression, and it can only be an impression, that a guiding spirit runs through the composition as a whole. I am not the first to incline in this direction. In 1939 Gustav Indrebø enunciated the same view in an extended review of Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson's Om de norske kongers sagaer. In one four-page passage Indrebø professed

little faith in the existence of lost kings' sagas underlying Morkinskinna. On the other hand, singling out the contradictions and signs of reworking in the account of King Magnús's return to Norway, Indrebø posited considerable differences between the original redaction and the presumably much longer preserved redaction (1939:72). His arguments for unity of authorship therefore applied only to the hypothetical original purged of later additions. The arguments are nonetheless of considerable interest (1939:75-76).

Indrebø notes the consensus that Morkinskinna was designed to fill the gap between an óláfs saga helga and Sverris saga, and he asks how such a design could be contemplated if no such gap existed because it was already filled by Finnur Jónsson's individual kings' sagas. In the second place, he reminds us that the Morkinskinna author cites *Hryggjarstykki, another text referred to as *Jarla sǫgur, and finally a *Saga Knúts konungs. It therefore seems anomalous that he does not refer to a single one of the individual Norwegian kings' sagas that he is alleged to have used. Lastly, in dealing with the Norwegian kings the author tends to rely on skaldic sources rather than saga sources. Indrebø does not claim that these arguments are probative, but they are certainly worth considering.

A process of gradual immersion in the text has made me even more skeptical than Indrebø about the degree of interpolation and expansion that accrued between the first redaction and what we now have. I am also skeptical about the extent of the written sources used in the original version. We can agree without difficulty that *Hryggjarstykki was among these sources, but everything else is more doubtful. The þættir have traditionally been the prime suspects in the assumption of both written sources and ongoing interpolation. Some of the þættir may indeed have existed in prior written form, but the arguments need to be made in more compelling form.

As for interpolation, why should this particular redaction of kings' sagas have been singled out for interpolation while Fagrskinna and Heimskringla remained free of þættir? Or should we assume that some þættir were in the original redaction and served as an invitation for further inclusions? If so, how do we distinguish between the original and the supervenient þættir? Is it not easier to assume that these þættir, which give the text such an unmistakable Icelandic cast, were part of the author's plan from the outset rather than stray imitations of his plan added in over the decades?

In 1976 Heinrich Gimmler's Frankfurt dissertation assumed that most of the þættir were interpolated, but the following year Jonna Louis-Jensen (1977:77-78) pointed out that the þættir missing in Flateyjarbók, and for that reason suspect as interpolations in the Morkinskinna manuscript, were quite possibly in the original Morkinskinna after all. She argued that the placement in Morkinskinna is essentially the same as in Hulda-Hrokkinskinna and that it is unlikely that identical placement came about by a process of interpolation rather than common positioning in the archetype. Louis-Jensen did not draw any general conclusions about þættir interpolation on the basis of this observation, and presumably none can be drawn. Indeed, she continues to believe that "Þinga saga" had a separate existence and was absorbed into Morkinskinna (1977:95), whether by the author or an interpolator is hard to know.

Louis-Jensen (1977:79-82) also follows Indrebø in believing that the introductory story ("Karl's þáttir vesæla") was not included in the original redaction of Morkinskinna because it shows signs of being awkwardly combined with a different account. She assumes that a separate "Karl's þáttir vesæla" was added into the original Morkinskinna and was poorly reconciled with it. Subsequently an interpolation from Ágrip further disrupted the narrative.

This solution is problematical because "Karl's þáttir vesæla" does not have the characteristics of a þáttir at all. An alternative speculation might be that the opening account of King Magnús's return to Norway came from a narrative devoted not to Karl but to King Magnús, perhaps a part of, or a sequel to, *Hlaðajarla saga (see Indrebø 1917:80-84, Bernitsen 1923:182-217, Schreiner 1927:20-60, Bjarni Aðalbarnarson 1937:185-87, 206-24). The narrative confusion would then have arisen when the Morkinskinna author tried to combine this tradition with the general tradition underlying Ágrip. There is no compelling reason to believe that the confusion was caused by interpolation rather than the author's struggle with conflicting sources.

Invoking a continuation of *Hlaðajarla saga down to the time of King Magnús and Einarr þambarskelfir may seem rash, but Þrendalög partisanship at the beginning of Morkinskinna seems palpable and is easily explicable in terms of a source with a Þrendalög focus. Such a source might even explain the mysterious reference to *Jarla sǫgur (FJ 1928-32:31). This is to be sure not the usual explanation. Since the reference to *Jarla sǫgur

occurs in the context of strife between Røgnvaldr jarl Brúason of Orkney and his uncle Þorfinnr jarl, the common assumption is that the lost text referred to here is about Orkney and is some version of Orkneyinga saga.

It is, however, notoriously difficult to show any connection between the texts of Morkinskinna and Orkneyinga saga. On the other hand, there is no reason to exclude the conflict between Røgnvaldr and Þorfinnr from a continuation of *Hlaðajarla saga focusing on King Magnús since Morkinskinna notes specifically that Røgnvaldr was appointed Earl of Orkney by Magnús. The gist of the underlying source would have been that the Þrændir led by Einarr þambarskelfir were instrumental in the return of Magnús to Norway. It could therefore well have included mention of some of the new king's political acts, such as the appointment of Røgnvaldr jarl.

There is thus no reason to underestimate the author's use of written sources. He had at his disposal *Hryggjarstykki, something called *Jarla sögur, an equally mysterious *Saga Knúts konungs, and perhaps a separate "Þinga saga." A distinct question is whether these written sources were absorbed into Morkinskinna from the outset or serially. No one doubts that *Hryggjarstykki was there from the outset, and there seems to be no obvious reason to believe that the other texts were later afterthoughts.

That does not mean of course that there were absolutely no interpolations. A case on which all critics seem agreed is Ǫgrip, from which a long series of brief supplements were inserted into Morkinskinna sometime after the original composition. In some instances the insertion is so awkward that interpolation is the only explanation. But even in this case it can be argued (though not here) that three of the passages from Ǫgrip were already present in the original redaction of Morkinskinna, or were added in almost immediately, because it appears that the author of Fagrskinna used a Morkinskinna text that was already interpolated (see the passages in fF 29.215, 226, 302-3).

In general the time may have come to suspend the search for interpolations and focus rather on the arguments for believing that Morkinskinna is hardly less authorially consistent than Fagrskinna or Heimskringla. There is only space to suggest a few very general criteria, but they may serve as a first step in circumscribing the author's personality.

One such criterion is negative, the author's consistent lack of interest in chronology. There is not an absolute date to be found in the book and only

a score of references to relative chronology, the age of an individual, or particular days in the Church calendar. Some of these are simply taken over from skaldic verse, others are interpolations from *Ágrip*, still others seem to be lifted from English sources, and one appears to be from *Hryggjarstykki. Subtracting these passages, we are left with a residue of the death days of four kings (Magnús góði, Magnús berfœttr, Haraldr gilli, and Sigurðr Haraldsson) and the days on which six battles were fought, the Battle of Hlýrskógshelðr, the Battle of the River Niz, the Battle of the River Ouse, Magnús berfœttr's last battle, the Battle of Holmengrã, and Sigurðr Haraldsson's last battle. There is clearly no attempt to devise a chronological structure, and that is true of the compilation as a whole.

It is also true of the book as a whole that the stance is Icelandic. Eivind Kválen (1925) argued that the author was Icelandic on the basis of his knowledge of Iceland and relative unfamiliarity with parts of Norway. But a more palpable index is the omnipresence of the *bættir*, which consistently focus the stories of Norwegian kings through an Icelandic lens. It is no exaggeration to say that in the longest of the biographies, that of Haraldr harðráði, the king's personality is chiefly revealed in terms of how he deals with the Icelanders in his service and those who visit him. *Heimskringla* is of course no less Icelandic than *Morkinskinna*, but Snorri appears to be at pains to downplay Icelandic biases while the author of *Morkinskinna* is overtly and unashamedly Icelandic. Indeed, one of the underlying themes of the book as a whole seems to be the advocacy of a noninterventionist Norwegian foreign policy, that is, a stout defense of Icelandic independence.

Icelandic prerogatives emerge particularly in "Hallðors þátr Snorrasonar," which centers on the difficult relationship between King Haraldr and his Icelandic retainer Hallðorr. At one point Haraldr forces Hallðorr to drink off a penalty libation, but Hallðorr retorts angrily (FJ 1928-1932:149.22-25): "It may be, sire, . . . that you can get me to drink, but I can tell you that Sigurðr sýr could not have forced Snorri góði." King Haraldr is infuriated by this blunt assertion of genealogical equality, but a few pages later, when it suits his purpose, the king picks up the theme and uses it against a Norwegian chieftain who disputes the command of a ship with Hallðorr. Haraldr takes Hallðorr's part and deflates the chieftain's pride by saying (FJ 152.24-26), "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 Norwegians themselves." The author therefore has a somewhat contradictory view of the Icelanders' position vis-à-vis the Norwegian king. They are both fiercely independent, to the point of willful arrogance, and at the same time conscious of a historical bond with Norway that entitles them to equal access to the king, an access that is insisted on time and time again in the *þættir*.

As a result, and almost paradoxically, the author is preoccupied both with Icelandic assertiveness and with a court service ethic. Halldórr Snorrason embodies the first, his countryman Ólfr stallari the second. Ólfr renders King Haraldr faithful service with none of the bristling defiance that characterizes Halldórr. As a result he is honored with a handsome royal eulogy over his grave (FJ 265.27-28): "Here lies a man most loyal and devoted to his lord."

The little chapter entitled "A Dear Friend of Tryggvi Óláfsson" (FJ 250-51) seems to have been included for the sole purpose of celebrating a nameless man who can never recover from his grief over the loss of his lord. Magnús blindi probably has the least flattering portrait of any king in the book, but even he becomes the occasion for celebrating the liege loyalty of a certain Hreiðarr Grjótgarðsson (FJ 433.6-9): "Hreiðarr fell backward onto the deck with Magnús on top of him. Everyone agreed that he had followed his lord well and valiantly, and any man who earns such a reputation should be praised." The comment is probably taken over from *Hryggjarstykki, but it accords well with the view of service in the rest of *Morkinskinna*.

Faithful service is also the theme of several short chapters (74,75, 77; FJ 390-94) relating how various retainers overcame their fear of King Sigurðr jórsalafari during his years of declining sanity in order to show their devotion to their lord's spiritual welfare. At the end of the extant text the unfinished story of Grégórius Dagsson provides one final parable of such devotion. If it were permissible to extract authorial biography from such emphases, we might speculate that the author was an Icelander with a strong national and individual identity who had himself spent time in royal service and had absorbed the ethic appropriate to that station. He seems as well to have experienced the strain between self and service that must have been a central feature of court life.

A career in armed service would certainly be in harmony with the author's manifest interest in military matters. That interest takes the form of

a disproportionate attention to military tactics and battle descriptions, and it is indirectly supported by the observation that, when there is no warfare to relate, as in the case of Óláfr kyrr, the author falls silent.

Another indication that our author lived in a world with large and active horizons is his special interest in commerce and investment, ranging from his attention to how Haraldr harðráði accumulated and safeguarded his treasure to a variety of *þættir* illustrating how Icelanders made their fortunes in the big world. The fullest accounts of ambitious investment can be found in "Karls þáttur vesæla" and "Asu-Þórðar þáttur," but many others illustrate Icelandic enterprise on a lesser scale—"Odds þáttur ófeigssonar," "Hreiðars þáttur," or "Auðunar þáttur." Such stories might justify a speculation that our author moved not only in court circles but also had some familiarity with the northern markets from Finnmark to the Baltic.

Our chief interest does not, however, attach to the question of whether the author was a man with social and commercial connections, but rather to his literary status. He was manifestly a distinguished man of letters. Not only is he skilled in skaldic verse and the first large-scale collector of stanzas, but he also exhibits a rare talent as a prose narrator. He has an irrepressible fondness for stories. Although his narrative has not been much admired in the past, it is both lively and dramatic, with a masterful handling of dialogue in more than a few passages. But even beyond his narrative art and poetic expertise he shows a curiosity about literary transmissions that appears nowhere else in Icelandic literature.

A typical instance occurs in chapter 17, in which King Magnús appoints Ormr (Skoptason) to a jarldom even though Ormr once spared the life of his enemy King Sveinn. So slipshod is the author that he does not bother to provide Ormr's patronymic (as *Fagrskinna* does), but he is eager to explain the moral of the story (FJ 103:2-3): "This is told to show how unlike other men the king was in making such a fine demonstration and judging that the quality of the man was more important than the enmity that separated them."

In chapter 42 we are told the story of how King Haraldr, lacking water for his troops, parches a snake to make it thirsty, then ties a thread to its tail so that it will lead his men to water. At this point the author steps back and ponders how such an incident could have been remembered (FJ 205.8-9): "The device was preserved in memory because it seemed wise and

ingenious." Further along in the same chapter King Haraldr captures Finnr Arnason, who treats him to a memorable tongue-lashing. Just before the final repartee the author reflects once again on the survival of the anecdote (FJ 214:1-3): "Then Finnr made a vicious comment that was later remembered because it indicates that he was so angry that he could not control his words."

In an incident in chapter 68, rather similar to the one involving Finnr Arnason, the chieftain Ingimarr takes leave of King Eysteinn with a biting insult, but the king does not react (FJ 364.18-22): "King Eysteinn did nothing to impede his journey and took no notice of his foolish words. He let his goodness and intelligence prevail as was always the case." Of all the saga authors this one is most apt to reflect on his own narrative matter and the words he sets down. In so doing he reveals a new ruminative consciousness about the act of writing, and it is perhaps not surprising that it is this author who included the little account of how an Icelander told the story of Haraldr harðráði's foreign adventures (sometimes referred to as "Þorsteins þáttur sögufróða"). This account has always been prized as the chief source of our information about the practice of Icelandic oral narrative.

How then do we imagine our author? He was an Icelander, most probably a northern Icelander. His idea of literature was story and anecdote, skaldic or otherwise. He was not primarily a historian but a teller of tales, and the tales delighted him. He had access to some books, chief among them *Hryggjarstykki, but he also relied on a large variety of oral sources communicated to him by Icelanders and presumably Norwegians as well. A century or so after Ari Þorgilsson he was no longer much preoccupied with the accuracy of these sources, but he did ponder how and why they were transmitted. He was not academically analytical, but his imagination was fired by past history.

He was also cosmopolitan. His flights of fancy took him not only to Norway, Denmark, southern Sweden, and the eastern and western coasts of England and Scotland, along with Ireland, but they also recreated court life in Constantinople, Russia, and the periphery of the Iberian Peninsula. He was sufficiently absorbed by the conduct of warfare and the protocol of relations between liegeman and lord that we may ask ourselves whether he was not himself in foreign military service. He seems also to have been a practical man, who combined a sense of adventure with an interest in trade.

commerce, and investment strategies, as had been the custom of ambitious Scandinavians ever since the Viking Age.

But wherever his foreign military and commercial activities may have taken him, he remained a passionate Icelander, who was fond of chronicling the success of his countrymen at foreign courts. He did not confine himself to accounts of individual daring and parables of superior character. He seems in addition to have had a large perspective on foreign relations, the sanctity of agreements, and the importance of moderating royal ambition. In particular he seems to have been concerned with the relationship of the Icelanders to the Norwegian crown, which is the gist of many þættir.

But perhaps his most signal contribution to the history of saga writing was to broaden the narrative repertory and widen the horizons of saga art. Whatever came before Morkinskinna looks parochial by comparison, and whatever came afterward was obliged to take the wider parameters into account. The first reaction (in Fagrskinna and Helmskringla) was to shrink back from such narrative dimensions, but the author of Morkinskinna showed the way for the greater and more inclusive compilations of the late thirteenth and fourteenth century. With Morkinskinna the individual biography and the ideal of defensible history yielded to the ideal of comprehensive and panoramic narrative.

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