SAGA PSYCHOLOGY: THE DOUBLE PORTRAIT OF ST. ÓLÁFR AND HARALDR HARÐRÁÐI IN HEIMSKRINGLA

Sverre Bagge

The sagas have often been praised for their sense of psychology, often to the extent that they appear almost modern, in contrast to the rest of medieval historiography which allegedly presents stereotypes rather the real human beings. In my opinion, this reputation is somewhat exaggerated. The sagas do contain a number of memorable psychological descriptions, but these descriptions are usually of situations rather than characters. We can easily admire Snorri's psychological skill when he shows St. Óláfr and Þórarinn Nefjólfsson discussing Þórarinn's ugly feet (OH ch. 85), or how Þórir hundr is about to walk straight into the sea, having received the spear that pierced his nephew Ásbjǫrn (OH ch. 123), but the reactions in these cases are not specific to the persons portrayed; they might have been replaced by almost anybody else in a similar situation. Nevertheless, the sagas often give detailed descriptions of individuals in the usual medieval style; they contain long "biographies" of kings and other prominent people, and their authors clearly enjoy comparing different characters. In the following, I shall examine one such comparison, the one between St. Óláfr and his half-brother Haraldr harðráði in Snorri's Heimskringla. I shall discuss the relationship between Snorri's statement that the two kings were essentially similar and his actual description of their lives and reigns, and, more generally, the relationship between character and circumstances.

St Óláfr

The saga of St. Óláfr in Heimskringla is one of the longest and most vivid biographical accounts in the saga literature. According to most earlier scholars, this saga is one of the greatest achievements in the saga literature, a story of character development, showing how the Viking changes into a Christian king who then, towards the end of his life, changes into the saint and martyr. In my opinion, this interpretation is wrong.[1] Heimskringla does portray Óláfr successively as Viking, king, and saint, but these portraits actually show three different characters, without any transition between them. Thus, there is change but not development. Moreover, it is open to discussion how far these portraits should be regarded as personal portraits. The portrait of the Viking in the beginning could be almost any Viking. It is, however, fairly consistent with the way Óláfr is depicted in the narrative. The king, however, is essentially the Christian rex iustus, with little direct connection to the actual Óláfr as described in the narrative. By contrast, the portrait of the saint is largely integrated in the narrative; actually, it emerges from the narrative rather than from an explicit characterization. In both cases, however, the "model" element is very strong. Snorri does not consistently distinguish between being a king and being a saint. According to our modern understanding, the first is an office or role, the second a kind of personality. To Snorri - and apparently to many medieval men - the two belong to the same category; i.e. there is no consistent difference between office and personality.

---

[1] Sverre Bagge, Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla (Berkeley etc. 1991) pp. 181-86. References to earlier literature here.

However, neither the royal nor the saintly role plays a very prominent part in Heimskringla as a whole. They are of limited importance even in the description of St. Óláfr. Óláfr also has a "real" character, which is fairly constant, with the exception of some changes during his last phase, as a saint. Like other kings and great men in the sagas, Óláfr is essentially a leader of men. By portraying Óláfr as a leader, however, Snorri has to deal with another change, which is probably more important to him than the earlier ones: the change from success to failure. How can this change be explained, by character or by circumstances?

Already in the beginning of Óláfr's career, his stepfather Sigurðr sýr characterizes him as a harsh and stubborn man who is not willing to give in to others and who may consequently have great difficulties (OH ch. 52, see below, n. 4). The prophecy ultimately comes true, but during the first ten years of his reign, Óláfr's character brings him one success after the other and makes him the most powerful king of Norway after Haraldr Finehair. At his arrival in Norway with only two ships, most of the greatest chieftains are against him. In short time, however, Óláfr conquers the whole country and establishes himself firmly as king. In addition to luck, Óláfr's forceful and stubborn character seems crucial to his success. Thus, in Eastern Norway, where the petty kings rebel because of his harsh rule, he is strikingly successful, "capturing five kings in one day". In the rest of the country, however, he is neither able to crush the magnates nor to win their friendship.

In the beginning of his account of Óláfr's reign, Snorri describes the enormous power and wealth of these men.[2] Most of them had been promoted by Óláfr Tryggvason and had continued in their position under Óláfr's immediate predecessors, the earls Eiríkr and Sveinn. Without developing this point further, Snorri seems to regard these men as a kind of structural problem. In the earlier Norwegian scholarly tradition Snorri's structural problem was understood as the opposition between monarchy and aristocracy. A more likely interpretation is that Snorri regarded it in somewhat more personal terms. Having been promoted by Óláfr's predecessor, Óláfr Tryggvason, and received land, wealth and ruling power from him, these men had formed strong ties of loyalty to him. Óláfr Tryggvason could trust them; his successors could not. Even if these successors confirmed all their predecessors' donations and privileges, the magnates had far less reason to be grateful to them than to the original donor. Consequently, when the earls left these men in their positions, they abstained from really ruling the country. Óláfr follows a different policy, building up new men as his clientela. Snorri gives so many examples of this that he clearly intends it as a consistent description of Óláfr's policy. In this way, Óláfr is able to balance the power of the old magnates without directly challenging them. This policy seems to work for a long time, although Óláfr is never able really to take over Erlingr Skjálgsson's control of Western Norway.

The turning-point comes when Cnut the Great challenges Óláfr's rule of Norway. Óláfr can hardly be blamed for Cnut's attack. Cnut had a hereditary claim on Norway, and it was Óláfr's luck that Cnut was so busy in England that he was unable to prevent Óláfr's conquest in 1015-16. Towards the end of the 1020s, however, Cnut is in firm control of England, and is free to regain control of Norway. As for the other factor, the rebellion of the magnates, Óláfr is clearly to blame.

Snorri has carefully arranged his chronology so as to state this point as clearly as possible (Bagge, 1991, pp. 34 ff.). In turn Óláfr alienates Erlingr Skjálgsson, Þórir hundr,

---

[2] For this and the following, see Bagge, 1991, pp. 64 ff.

Hárekr or Þjóttu, and even his own creature Kálfr Árnason, and is on the verge of also making Kálfr's brother Þorbergr his enemy. Whatever may be said in favour of a tough policy towards the magnates during Óláfr's period of strength, with Cnut threatening to attack, Óláfr needs all the friends he can get. Instead he increases the number of his enemies by his stubbornness and insistence on his rights, expressed in the numerous episodes towards the end of his reign when he runs into conflict with men whom he ought to have maintained as allies. Óláfr insists on the royal prerogative, down to the smallest detail. Snorri seems to have regarded this feature as characteristic of Óláfr as a politician, and may even, to himself or reluctantly, have shook his head at such foolish behaviour. Explicitly, however, he explains it by Óláfr's strict justice, which is a royal and Christian virtue (Bagge, 1991, pp. 158 ff.).

In Snorri's story, Óláfr's is no doubt the victim of adverse circumstances towards the end of his reign. However, as Snorri claims in several other contexts, the Danes are unable to conquer Norway without help from the Norwegians themselves. The crucial factor in Cnut's victory is that the Norwegian magnates support him, largely because of Óláfr's own attitude. Óláfr is a great man, and the same qualities that ultimately lead to his fall, contribute to his success and greatness in the beginning of his career. He does not adapt his behaviour to changed circumstances and pays a high price for this failure. On this point, Snorri's understanding of Óláfr's may be compared to Machiavelli's of Pope Julius II.[3] As a politician, Julius is aggressive, courageous, and plays at high stakes. He is stubborn in adversity, he never gives up, and he is never content. He proves eminently successful. However, Machiavelli adds, had he lived longer, he would no doubt have met with failure: He would have found himself in a situation demanding prudence and care, which, with his temperament, he would have been unable to handle.

This parallel implies that Snorri regards Óláfr's character as constant throughout his life and seeks the main explanation of his failure in changed circumstances. However, Óláfr is not consistently stubborn and aggressive; he does show moderation in some cases during the early phase of his career. The most important example of such behaviour is the way Óláfr deals with the conflict with the King of Sweden. During Óláfr's early years, there is constant war in the border regions, to the detriment of the people living there, who try to bring the king to negotiate for peace. Eventually, Óláfr listens to this advice and declares his will to end the conflict, on the basis of status quo, without claiming compensation for all the Norwegians killed by the Swedes. He does not break off the negotiations, despite delays and insults from the Swedes, and peace is finally concluded, Óláfr marrying an illegitimate daughter of the King of Sweden. In this story, Óláfr shows considerable moderation. Actually, he behaves so moderately that it is difficult to avoid the impression that Óláfr actually suffers a diplomatic setback. To what extent Snorri intends to convey this impression and to what extent he tries to cover up Óláfr's defeat, is difficult to tell. Clearly, however, Snorri implies that Óláfr must have had greater interests in a peace settlement than the King of Sweden. The latter had received a part of Norway as a reward for his victory over Óláfr Tryggvason at Svǫlð (1000) and had lost it by Óláfr's return. Óláfr had recently conquered Norway, needed time to consolidate his gain, and would hardly be interested in conquering Sweden. Thus, Óláfr has good reasons to behave moderately, and Snorri may actually have wanted to portray him as a man who is

[3] Niccolò Machiavelli, The Prince, ed. and transl. by Quentin Skinner & Russel Price (Cambridge 1988), pp. 86 f.

able to adapt to circumstances, in contrast to his behaviour towards the Norwegian magnates. There is, however, a significant difference, the question of justice. In the negotiations with Sweden, only Óláfr's interests are involved, while the conflicts with the magnates have to do with justice. Thus, Snorri may well have wanted to underline the contrast between a stubborn character and concern for justice.

The second example is Óláfr's treatment of the young Earl Hákon when taking him captive in the first phase of his conquest of Norway. A contrast immediately comes to mind, the scene between Óláfr and Erlingr Skjálgsson immediately before Óláfr's exile. Óláfr captures Erlingr in an ambush, kills all his men, and finally makes Erlingr surrender. In the first case, Óláfr pardons his enemy and wins. In the second case, Óláfr's enemy is killed, and Óláfr loses. This contrast might suggest a moral deterioration, showing that Óláfr actually deserved to be exiled. However, such an interpretation is very unlikely. First, in Snorri's account - possibly as opposed to the actual event, as suggested by the scaldic stanzas - Óláfr is not responsible for Erlingr's death. He really wants to pardon him. Second, the moral situation is not the same. Earl Hákon has no obligations towards Óláfr, and there is consequently no moral argument for killing him. Erlingr may be accused of breaking his obligations, at least in Óláfr's opinion; to Snorri himself, the matter seems to have been more doubtful. This point is expressed by Óláfr marking Erlingr's cheek. Third, and most important, in neither situation is morality the primary consideration. Óláfr hardly pardons Hákon out of mercy but for good political reasons. Óláfr arrives in Norway as a foreigner with few men, while Hákon's kinsmen have been the rulers of the country for fifteen years and clearly are in the centre of an important network. Killing Hákon would mean that this whole network would turn against Óláfr and probably make it very difficult for him to conquer the throne. Pardoning Hákon would certainly be risky; he might break his oath. An oath, however, was a very solemn obligation, taken only in very special circumstances, and not easily broken. In Snorri's narrative, Hákon's oath is actually the single most important step in bringing Óláfr on the throne. In addition to his own claim, Óláfr could now add that of an heir descending from the ruling dynasty.

The story of Erlingr shows exactly the same reasoning. Óláfr now found himself in basically the same situation, alone, with a few ships and men, with his adversaries dominating the country. Killing Erlingr would only increase his number of enemies, which was what actually happened. Pardoning Erlingr would at least mean a possibility of turning the tides. This is clearly what Óláfr means by complaining to Aslakr, who killed Erlingr, that he has actually just struck Norway out of his hands.

Thus, Óláfr reasons in exactly the same way in the two crucial situations, showing that he was capable of prudent and diplomatic behaviour in the beginning as well as in the end of his career. From a moral point of view, the case of Earl Hákon is in principle similar to the negotiations with Sweden, in that no principles of impersonal justice are at stake. Erlingr, however, apparently falls in the same category as for instance Þórir hundr or the stepsons of Kálfr Árnason. He had protected the king's internal enemies and he had joined the Danish king against Óláfr. However, unlike Þórir hundr, he had not himself killed any of Óláfr's men, and, as a great and fairly independent lord, he was not subject to the same obedience towards Óláfr as men in his direct service. The episode of Erlingr may be an example of Óláfr acting according to the situation and showing more diplomacy than usual at the end of his career, but it is not strictly speaking inconsistent with his normal behaviour at this stage.

We may thus draw two conclusions from the present examination. First, the

change in Óláfr's career from success to failure does not correspond to a change in character. Óláfr is essentially the same throughout. Second, there is some correspondence between Snorri's general statement about Óláfr's strict justice and his narrative. Admittedly, Snorri's narrative does not portray Óláfr as primarily concerned with internal peace and justice and the equality between high and low. In all examples of Óláfr's strict justice, his own interests are involved. But it is not simply a question of interests; moral and legal principles of some kind are also involved. Óláfr in Snorri' account clearly has some ideas about the king's rights which he is not willing to give up, even when it would have been prudent to do so.

Snorri's portrait of Óláfr is a combination of three different roles: war leader, king, saint. Underlying these is a fairly constant character: the great, ambitious leader, who always has to be the first, who is able to win the friendship of loyalty of other men, but who also drives men away from him through his ambition, demands of absolute loyalty, and his failure to reach compromises with the great men. Admittedly, the circumstances do not favour Óláfr; his predecessors had created a number of magnates who caused him great difficulties. Some conflict was most probably inevitable. However, there was apparently no total conflict of interests; some compromise would have been possible. Óláfr acts foolishly, making most of the great men his enemies for what Snorri apparently regards as trivial reasons in a situation where he needed friends. Snorri "saves" him by his Christian explanation. Thus, a combination of character and circumstances cause Óláfr's fall; i.e. Óláfr proves unable to handle the challenges facing him.

Haraldr harðráði - a Success where Óláfr is Failure?

The comparison between Óláfr and his half-brother Haraldr is to be found in Haraldr's saga and is clearly intended to "redeem" the latter by showing his essential similarity with Óláfr (HHarð. ch. 99-100). Many people point to the difference between the two kings but an old follower of both of them states that he has never seen two men as similar: Both were strong, harsh, warlike, and clever men who carried out great deeds and won fame. However, their aims in life were totally different: Óláfr fought for justice and Christianity, Haraldr for his own glory.

This comparison may possibly have its background in the negative picture of Haraldr in the clerical tradition. In contrast to his brother, Haraldr is certainly not a saint, and Snorri no doubt finds it nobler to fight for justice and Christianity than to fight for one's own glory. Medieval clerics, as well as modern readers, would probably regard this comparative characterization as a statement about the difference, rather than the similarity between the two. However, Snorri's explicit aim is to emphasize the similarity. Consequently, his criteria must different from ours. Apparently, he distinguishes between between the "essential character" and aims, ideas, and decisions in life, and regards the former as more important than the latter.

The contrast between Óláfr who is killed in his own realm, and Haraldr who is killed in that of another king, may be one element in this picture. From a religious point of view, this contrast shows Óláfr's moral superiority. From a more secular point of view, it may have the exact opposite effect. To die in the realm of another king may be intended as a blame of Haraldr for seeking what does not belong to him. However, there is little to indicate that Snorri generally blames kings for seeking foreign conquest and military glory. From such a point of view it is far worse to be killed in one's own country by one's own people. Thus, the sentence may equally well be a contrast between Haraldr's success and Óláfr's failure: Haraldr is so firmly in control of his own country

that he can attempt to conquer that of another king, while Óláfr dies in a vain attempt to reconquer his own country. Here as elswhere, Snorri tries to "redeem" Óláfr's failure by pointing to his strict, impartial justice.

The similarities with Óláfr in the comparative characterization are further emphasized in the individual characterization of Haraldr and in the narrative. Snorri explicitly uses two episodes from their childhood to demonstrate the essential similarity between the two brothers. When asked to saddle the horse for his stepfather, the child Óláfr saddles a goat instead, partly in order to show that he is proud and unwilling to serve, partly to mock his stepfather's peaceful and somewhat rustic disposition (OH ch. 2). When visiting his mother and stepfather in the beginning of his reign, Óláfr watches their three children play. The two elder play with barns and farmhouses, cattle and sheep, while Haraldr, who is three years old, plays with chips of wood in a pond, telling Óláfr that they are warships. When asked by Óláfr what they would most like to have, the two elder boys want fields of grain and cows, while Haraldr wants housecarls, and "so many that would eat up all my brother Hálfdan's cows in one meal" (OH ch. 76). The significance of these parallel stories lies in the fact that the sagas very rarely deal with people's childhood and normally only in order to point to features anticipating their disposition and behaviour as adults.

When grown up, Haraldr, like his brother, is a great warrior; he is an extremely intelligent man, more so than everyone else; and he is able to find a solution to every difficulty - the main criterion of intelligence in the sagas. He is ambitious and proud and does not easily suffer rivals and opposition. Despite every praise for Óláfr's noble intentions and devotion to the Christian religion, Snorri in a certain sense regards this difference as less relevant to his "secular" story of the Norwegian kings. Essentially, the two men are similar, because they are both great chieftains. A king is first and foremost a leader of other men, and the characterizations of kings in the sagas are determined by this understanding.

Thus, Haraldr's character makes him the same advantages and difficulties as Óláfr's: He is not likely to rule without opposition, but he has the necessary skill to fight his opponents. In the beginning of his reign, Haraldr is also faced with the same problems as his half-brother. Thanks to his Byzantine wealth and his military and political skill, Haraldr manages to force his nephew, Magnús - Óláfr's son - to share the kingdom with him. When Magnús dies shortly afterwards, Haraldr becomes sole ruler. Magnús had ruled with the support of a combination of his father's adherents and adversaries among the magnates, the most prominent among the latter being Einarr þambarskelfir. Haraldr cannot take over this network; he has to build up his position, partly by establishing ties with them, partly by forming his own clientela. He has connections with the Árnasons, Finnr being married to his brother's daughter. Haraldr strengthens this connection by marrying the daughter of Þórbergr, an unusual step of a king and a clear indication of his weak links to the leading magnates. - Already in this early period, Norwegian kings mostly married foreign princesses.

Haraldr's main enemy during the early part of his reign is Einarr þambarskelfir, the mightiest of the magnates and almost a kind of "prime minister" during Magnús's reign. Snorri seems to indicate rivalry between the two already from the beginning of Haraldr's reign. When Magnús dies in Denmark during his and Haraldr's expedition against King Sveinn, Einarr refuses to continue the expedition, returning to Norway to bury King Magnús. His speech on this occasion, as referred by Snorri, can hardly be interpreted as anything but a direct challenge to Haraldr (HHarð. ch. 29). The decisive conflict between

Haraldr and Einarr is introduced by a description of the two men. Snorri tells that Einarr had a bad relationship to Haraldr and then gives an impressive sketch of his resources and network: his wealth and influence among the people of Trøndelag and his link to the earls of Lade and other mighty men (HHarð. ch. 40-41). In connection with Haraldr, he comments that he "was of an imperious nature, and grew the more so as he consolidated his rule in Norway",[4] so that most men found it impossible to oppose him. Einarr, however, does so openly, knowing the laws well and speaking against the king on behalf of the peasants. The conflict between them breaks out because Haraldr wants to hang a thief who has earlier been in Einarr's service, while Einarr lets his armed retainers break up the assembly and saves the man. After this open break between the two, friends of both of them go between and arrange a meeting to reconcile them. During this meeting, held in Haraldr's house, Haraldr has Einarr and his son Eindriði killed.

The episode precipitating this conflict resembles some of the examples of Óláfr's strict justice and might be intended to show that Haraldr held similar high standards in this field as his half-brother. Given Haraldr's character, one might of course suspect that the charge of theft was faked in order to provoke the conflict, but Snorri does not hint at this possibility. Nevertheless, his sympathy seems mainly to be on Einarr's side. Technically, Einarr obstructs justice. Morally, however, he does what to Snorri is probably more meritorious than respecting justice: he shows loyalty to a man who has served him well. Generally, he performs the duty of a good local leader, defending his clients against the king.

The conflict between Haraldr and Einarr is hardly a conflict that could have been solved by some diplomacy on Harald's part - in contrast to a number of Óláfr's conflicts. In Snorri's account, Einarr has openly and systematically challenged Haraldr's posisition as ruler - more so than any of the magnates Óláfr finds it necessary to fight. Tolerating Einarr's behaviour, Haraldr would not only have acted contrary to his riklundaðr character, he would have appeared as a weak king. On the other hand, Haraldr does not move against Einarr at once - although he would have had sufficient reason already with Einarr's speech after Magnús's death. He waits until he has been firmly settled in the country and has made friends with some of the other magnates and until Einarr has committed an act that might serve as a justification for killing him. In doing so, he resorts to treason and is roundly blamed for it by Finnr Árnason, possibly also by Snorri himself (HHarð. ch. 45) - although Snorri often seems to take a fairly relaxed attitude to such acts. But he succeeds. Einarr and his son are eliminated.

However, Haraldr has taken a dangerous step. The people of Trøndelag are enraged against him, and Einarr has important friends and relatives. Haraldr immediately sees what he has to do: he must placate Hákon Ívarson, grandson of Earl Hákon and nephew of Einarr's wife Bergljót. He sends his friend Finnr Árnason to Hákon with the mandate of offering him anything except the kingdom if he abstains from taking revenge.

---

[4] "Haraldr konungr var ríklundaðr ok óx þat, sem hann festisk í landinu" (HHarð. ch. 42). The term is not used directly of Óláfr, but Snorri says in the first characterization of him as very young that he was ambitious and wanted to be the first in everything ("kappsamr í leikum ok vildi fyrir vera ǫllum ǫðrum", OH ch. 3). See also Sigurðr sýr's characterizations of Óláfr: "vartu þegar fullr af kappi ok ójafnaði" (OH ch. 36) and: "þat er mitt hugboð (...) við skaplyndi þitt ok ráðgirni, at seint tryggvir þú þá stórbukkana" (OH ch. 52).

Hákon Ívarson accepts on the condition that he receive Ragnhiidr, King Magnús's daughter, in marriage - a prize not much less than the kingdom! The trouble calms down, and Haraldr later finds a convenient excuse for not fulfilling his promise to Hákon Ívarson (HHarð. ch. 44-48). In the following, the relationship between Haraldr and Hákon changes between friendship and open war, but Haraldr is ultimately victorious. Haraldr's conflict with Hákon Ívarson is not directly presented as a power-struggle. Hákon appears like a romantic hero, and the final break between him and Haraldr is due to Haraldr's vindictiveness. There are hints, however, that Haraldr may also have considered Hákon a dangerous man. He is related to the earls of Lade, he may still be suspected of resentment towards Haraldr for killing his cousin Eindriði, and, when reconciled with Haraldr, he is not married to a daughter or close relative of Haraldr, but to the daughter of the last king and Haraldr's rival - whom Haraldr might have preferred to let remain unmarried or marry abroad? Hákon Ívarson might easily become a new Einarr þambarskelfir; he might even challenge Haraldr's and his sons' right to the kingdom by means of his marriage to Ragnhildr. Unlike Einarr, Hákon Ívarson does not openly oppose Haraldr, but Haraldr may nevertheless have considered him a threat to his own position.

Finally, Haraldr runs into conflict with his former friend, Finnr Árnason who - probabaly correctly - suspects the king of having caused the death of his brother Kálfr. Finnr leaves Norway and enters the service of King Sveinn of Denmark (HHarð. ch. 51-53). However, the loss of Finnr's friendship apparently does not harm Haraldr. Finnr is eventually taken captive by Haraldr and released. Apparently, however, Haraldr does not become the enemy of the rest of the Árnassons. Eysteinn orri, Þorbergr's son and Haraldr brother-in-law, remains his greatest friend among the lendir menn and is promised Haraldr's daughter Maria in marriage (HHarð. ch. 87). He fights bravely in the battle of Stanford Bridge and is apparently killed. Another of Haraldr's closest friends and servants, Halldórr Brynjólfsson - the one who gives the comparative characterization of the two brothers - is the son of one of the men promoted by Óláfr. Snorri mentions that Haraldr had plenty of people who wanted to serve him - after all, he had brought great wealth with him from Byzantium - but gives the names of relatively few. The fact that he was a great friend of Icelanders and even made an Icelander his stallari, is, however, a characteristic expression of the way he promoted "new men". In contrast to his brother, Haraldr was thus, according to Snorri's description, able either to eliminate or secure the full loyalty of all members of the aristocracy in the country.

Admittedly, Haraldr as described by Snorri is not a particularly sympathetic character. He is completely ruthless in his means, often resorting to treachery. But he is successful and efficient, and he also has the qualities needed to attract men to him. The final characterization justly emphasizes his great intelligence. Another quality, however, is not mentioned in the characterization but is very prominent in the narrative: his self-control. He keeps his head cool even in the most desperate situations, and he is singularly able to deceive people. He is as domineering as Óláfr, perhaps more so, but he is more flexible. He gives in to his nephew and co-ruler Magnús in the confrontations between them. When the old Finnr Árnason is taken captive and brought before him, throwing the most degrading insults at him, Haraldr takes revenge in the most refined manner of all: He pardons him and sends him back to his Danish allies, thus demonstrating that he is a pathetic old man whose insults are not worth noticing (HHarð. ch. 66).

Haraldr's saga contains two of the most detailed characterizations of men who are not kings in the whole of Heimskringla. Both of them are Icelanders, and both have been Haraldr's friends and followers during his years in Byzantium. The two men are

completely different: Halldórr Snorrason is an introvert with an extreme self-control, while Úlfr Óspaksson is intelligent, eloquent, and extrovert (HHarð. ch. 36-37). A possible reason for Snorri to include these characterizations is that one of them, Halldórr Snorrason, was a relative of Snorri himself and the other, Úlfr Óspaksson, an ancestor of the later Archbishop Eysteinn. However, the two characterizations, which follow immediately after the one of Haraldr himself, may also be intended as a background to the portrait of him. Like Haldórr, Haraldr has an extreme self-control, and like Úlfr he is charming and sociable and easily makes friends.

My conclusion from the preceding remarks is not that Snorri turns the traditional comparison between the two brothers upside down and regards Haraldr as a better king than Óláfr. Snorri accepts the official picture of Óláfr as a saint, and in his description of Óláfr's exile and last days, he gives an impressive picture of how the king's thoughts turn from mundane matters to the heavenly kingdom. By contrast, his description of Haraldr's last expedition is full of bad omens, to which the king - heroically or stupidly? - pays no attention. The two kings have different aims in life, but both are very successful in their chosen field. Naturally enough, Haraldr is the more successful in the purely secular field. This is a significant fact, as this field forms the main theme of Snorri's work. If it were Snorri's task to compare the two kings only in this field, he would probably have concluded that Haraldr was the better ruler. He shows quite clearly that Óláfr committed mistakes that Haraldr avoided, and he has to use a somewhat far-fetched religious explanation to acquit Óláfr of the accusation that he was defeated because of his political incompetence.

Snorri's insistence on the essential similarity between Óláfr and Haraldr is surprising, not only because it plays down the difference between the saint and the king who fights for his own glory but also because it fails to explain the two brothers' different fate in this world. Óláfr's strict justice offers a partial explanation. A modern historian would add that Óláfr was faced with a stronger external enemy, Cnut the Great, while the North-Sea Empire was dissolved and Danmark was weak during Haraldr's reign. Because of his focus on internal matters and his belief in the military superiority of the Norwegians over the Danes, Snorri hardly attached very great importance to this explanation. The crucial difference between the two rulers, as expressed in Snorri's narrative, is Óláfr's stubbornness and Haraldr's flexibility. This difference is not emphasized in the characterizations, a fact illustrating a general feature of the sagas, i.e. that the narrative offers better psychological observations than the explicit characterizations. The saga authors take their point of departure in situations rather than in persons. Their analysis of situations is based on a way of thinking resembling modern rational choice theory: How is this situation to be dealt with? How would a rational individual act in such a situation? In this way, Snorri presents the choices facing Óláfr when Þórir hundr had killed his hirðmaðr or when he had taken captive Earl Hákon and Erlingr Skjálgsson, and Haraldr harðráði when dealing with Einarr þambarskelfir and Hákon Ívarsson. In most of the situations described in this article, there is a certain consistency in the two protagonists' behaviour. In some other cases, however, Snorri's characters may act in very surprising ways, as for instance Óláfr does on his way to his martyrium at Stiklestad, without Snorri worrying too much about the problem of change in character.

The key to understanding this kind of psychology lies in the close connection

between the saga literature and actual political behaviour.[5] The psychological insight of a saga author was of the same kind as that of a practical politician: the ability to guess what other people would do from their looks, their behaviour, and the analysis of the situation. Consequently, the main psychological focus would be on the concrete situation. On the other hand, both practical politicians and saga authors were fully aware of the fact that different people acted differently in similar situations. Consequently, they had to form some impression of what the person in question was like, based on previous experience. In this way, an overall picture of character is formed on the basis of a number of actions and decisions in concrete situations, as in the case of Óláfr and Haraldr. In addition, the saga authors, in accordance with practice in medieval historiography in the rest of Europe, give explicit characterizations.[6] To some extent, these characterizations form a summary of the actions of the persons portrayed, although they are often fairly conventional. They are intended, not as analyses of the essence of an individual but rather as a combination of panegyrics of a ruler or a great man - usually, only kings and very great chieftains are characterized in the kings' sagas - and an evaluation of the person in question as a leader, based on his skill in dealing with a number of different situations. The vividness and psychological refinement of the sagas are thus based on the analysis of a variety of situations rather than the uniqueness of individual human beings.

Abbreviations

HHarð. = The saga of Harald harðráði, in Heimskringla, ed. Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen 1893-1901), vol. III, pp. 74-224.

OH = The saga of St. Óláfr, in Heimskringla, ed. Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen 1893-1901), vol. II.

---

[5] For the following, see also Sverre Bagge, "Decline and Fall. Deterioration of Character as Described by Adam of Bremen and Sturla Þórðarson", Miscellanea Mediaevalia, vol. 24: Individuum und Individualität im Mittelalter, ed. Jan A. Aertsen & Andreas Speer (Berlin etc. 1996), pp. 530-48.

[6] Paul Kirn, Das Bild des Menschen in der Geschichtsschreibung von Polybios bis Ranke (Göttingen 1955), pp. 41 ff.; Lars Lönnroth, "Det litterära porträttet i latinsk historiografi och isländsk sagaskrivning - en komparativ studie", Acta philologica Scandinavica 27 (1965), pp. 68-117.