

ÓLÁFR TRYGGVASON, ÓLÁFR HARALDSSON ACCORDING  
TO SNORRI STURLUSON : SAME STRUGGLE, SAME  
DEFEAT

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With your permission, I shall venture here into a very modest essay of politicology about a theme which has always attracted my attention. A great number of errors, at least in my good country, have been committed and are still done about certain notions, applied to medieval North, such as the so called democracy or aristocracy or kingship. For instance, it is nearly a commonplace idea among our French intelligentsia, to tell of independent Iceland as "the paradise of democracy" or to see the North as a whole, in the Middle Ages, I mean, as the home of liberty (la liberté vient du Nord!).

On the other hand, I have always wondered why two Norwegian kings, Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson the saint, have fascinated the *sagnamenn* or "historians" of Iceland to such a degree. The first reigned five years (995-1000), the second, sixteen years (1014-1030) : one cannot say that these are long reigns! And nevertheless, they enjoy an astonishing amount of biographies, sagas, scaldic poems or strophes, *thættir*, allusions in all sorts of texts and so on. To take an instance : Óláfr Tryggvason has been the hero of at least sixty *vísur*, he is present in the *Ágrip*, the *Fagrskinna*, the *Morkinskinna*, *Jónsvíkinga saga*, the now lost *\*Hladajarlasaga*, Snorri Sturluson has written a special saga about him, included into his *Heimskringla*, Oddr Snorrason has composed a saga on him, Gunnlaugr Leifsson, a *vita* and *Flateyjarbók* contains the famous *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar hin mesta*. The list concerning Óláfr Haraldsson would be still longer, including texts in Latin and, since we are speaking of Snorri, we know that his *Óláfs saga hins helga* included into *Heimskringla* has existed first independently, while it is not excluded that Styrmir Kárason, Snorri's "secretary" wrote the text that inspired his master. There exists no other kings, Norwegian or Danish who could boast of such a passion. Yet, a well-known figure, as Haraldr harðráði could be supposed having known

a large popularity among the Icelandic writers : the comparison proves that he comes far behind the two Óláfr!

I shall not expatiate on the fact that most of the Icelandic *sagnamenn* were churchmen or even monks (such as Oddr Snorrason or Gunnlaugr Leifsson) or had, at least, received a clerical education : this seems obvious to me for very simple reasons, Iceland being not, on this point, different from the rest of the Western world at that time. Neither shall I stress the point that many other kings or important persons have been saints too in medieval Scandinavia. The immediate constatation is that both Óláfr were judged far more interesting than other princes or chiefs, or saints (genuine like Óláfr Haraldsson or susceptible to be seen so, like Óláfr Tryggvason) in Icelanders' views. And since Snorri Sturluson is the main object of my little study, I simply note that Óláfr Haraldsson occupies one third of *Heimskringla*, Óláfr Tryggvason benefitting of the longest saga after the saint's one. Such a predilection cannot be the effect of pure chance, there must exist an explanation behind those preferences!

Of course, one could answer that both corresponded, possibly, to the Scandinavian human ideals of that time. They may also have embodied the qualities that were judged paradigmatic of a model king. For instance, ÓT was certainly a true viking according to the fashion of the time, read chapter 85 of ÓST, he had all the qualities which were thought befitting a great king. Our texts insist also on his beauty, his loves (he got at least four different spouses including one Slavonic (Geira), one Swedish (Sigríðr) and one Danish (Thýri). He was awfully fond of pomp and ostentation, a real Indo-European king, he did not spare money and riches and the attention with which his Great Serpent is described has a lot to tell us about his nobleness and liberality. Snorri does not hesitate to show him in relation with Óðinn himself (ÓST chap. 64), doubtless to indicate on which rank he sees him. We can say similar things about ÓH, although on another level : what is admirable by Óláfr Haraldsson according to Snorri is the king's energy, his sense of action and also, nay chiefly, the way he becomes first a king, he becomes then a saint. We know that, in this mental universe, a man is the sum of his acts and the two Óláfr's grandeur comes from their will of doing *söguligir* things.

But I am not sure that these reasons are sufficient to explain the extraordinary popularity both sovereigns enjoyed in Iceland. After all, there are a lot of other kings in Norway or Denmark who could deserve the same compliments or could claim the same qualities. I already mentioned Harald hardradi but what about Knutr inn mikli, for instance? I think, accordingly, that there must exist another ground explaining the kind of partiality both Óláfr have enjoyed in Iceland. And, more as a question than as a

certitude, I should like to propose you a little investigation of the matter...

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Snorri is writing in the first decades of the XIIIth century, he is living in a very troubled period in Iceland, where the law of equilibrium or balance which has known such a success for centuries is seriously threatened, every intelligent and cultivated man in his country feels or knows that a change, a great change will certainly occur in the situation of Northern countries and these philosophers of History that are the great Icelandic *sagnamenn* know, I should say cannot ignore this evolution. I think that, for various reasons, they do not really revolt against those things to come. Pragmatic or realist as they were, they probably knew that you cannot alter the course of events, that times to come are more or less ineluctable - and, to tell things clearly, that this Hakon Hakonarson who has such clear aims on Iceland will succeed in the long run. Sturla Þórðarson, in his Íslendinga saga, is perhaps more visibly conscious of this fact, but it would be hard to imagine that his colleagues were totally blind on this situation. It was also the Church politics, as you know : having a king over every country in accordance with the Christian notion of kingdom and cardinal Vilhjálmr de Sabina had expressed his astonishment over the fact that Iceland had not a king like all other countries. The Icelandic situation was in the same time paradoxical and somewhat scandalous, everybody was quite aware of the impossibility of maintaining such an anomaly. I dare even say that the famous talk by Einarr Thveræingr (in OSH chap. 125) about the independence of Iceland may have been sensible, I cannot prevent myself from suspecting by Snorri, in the same time a kind of nostalgia and a feeling of something radically obsolete in Einarr's words. Too late, out of fashion nowadays must he have thought, I guess!

Because, and this is a point one should never forget when one is reading an Icelandic saga, these texts are never innocent - this is, at least, my firm conviction -, their authors are writing with a precise mind of the meaning of their work. Nothing is gratuitous in this art, I am convinced of the fact. According to a strictly clerical point of view, we could as well say that a good saga is, must be an *exemplum* : we are not obliged to see it clearly and immediately but I do not know one of these texts which would be bereft of any intentions. After all, it was the rule in the Middle Ages, one wrote to *attirare à moralité*, as they told in Old French, to have you draw a moral conclusion. Lay or neutral texts will come,

of course, but later. In the XIIIth century, it is not yet the case. And this is, I think, the reason why both Óláfr have known such a popularity, why too Snorri devotes so much energy and place to these kings. I imagine he saw them as exemplary in one sense or another and that he wanted to have his readers understanding them in a special way, which I am going to try to explain a little more. We never forget that Snorri and the other *sagnamenn* are writing two centuries after the epoch when the historical events they are recounting happened. There must be a hidden lesson in the facts or behind the characters they are depicting. And this is what I shall try to show now.

Ólafr Tryggvason, Ólafr Haraldsson; they have, I think, a common feature. They wanted to operate, each of them in his way, each of them according to circumstances, what they call into Italian an *aggiornamento*, a bringing up to date. In the end of Xth or beginning of XIth century, the face of the European world was changing. The Church and the so-called southern countries depending on it adopted gradually a new conception of power, of state, of king, of society which became more and more unreconcilable with the ancient situation. The question was to break with venerable traditions, a notion which has always been very sensitive in the Germanic countries, North included. And Óláfr Tryggvason is particularly interesting for us because he tried, quite consciously I consider, to cope with traditions and, eventually, to eradicate them. He endeavoured greatly to reach this goal, as well in Norway as in Iceland, I should say he was decidedly modern and wanted to bring his country out of the past because he judged it retrograde.

And - let us tell it once for all - I do not doubt that Snorri Sturluson agreed with him (with both, in fact). He too was a man of modern times, he too believed in the future : I take his work on the whole, I mean Prose Edda, Heimskringla and even such an *islendingasaga* like Egils saga Skallagrímssonar (if, as I believe, it is due to Snorri's quill) partly for an effort to reconstitute the past like one who knows that it is over but that it would be sad to forget it, partly because he thought, rightly I mean, that something had to be saved of this history, partly, at last, because his look is not full of regret but interested as can be an antiquarian in front of a beautiful piece. But he, Snorri, was definitely inscribed into the problematics of modernity. There was evidently a spirit which could not be forgotten - hence his efforts to rescue the best of his national past, as he saw it. But he, Snorri, belonged to the present or even to the future. It is quite licit to read his Heimskringla like a handbook of politics applied to demonstrate - I shall come back on this point later - the irresistible progression of the idea of royalty in the North in spite of its successive defeats, at least in its initial

phase. There runs a red thread through Heimskringla, for this man who knows the conclusion of History. After the ancient kings faithful - at least, we are allowed to think so - to the venerable concept of *konungr*, we shall have Sverrir, and later on, Hákon Hákonarson who are the kings of modern times. And since such is the present state of facts, do remember that we have known, in Norway, at least two harbingers, Óláfr Tryggvason and Olaf Haraldsson. He probably felt that these two kings had foreboded times to come. The first, ÓT, through christianism and a new conception of the king, the second, ÓH, through christianism as well, and a new type of social structure. After them, nothing could be like before, this is certainly the reason why Snorri devoted such attention to them. At the extreme beginning of the XIth century, the situation is such, in the whole Europe, that a political revolution is necessary, a radical change of structures, or else, it will be death. I am almost convinced that our two Norwegian kings have felt so : else, they would not have acted as they did. The first two modern kings of Norway are called ÓT and ÓH because they had known how to draw lessons of History. But they have not been followed and this is the lesson we have to learn out of their own history... out of Snorri's sagas as well.

The first evidence of what has already been told concerns Christianity. The part of both kings in this regard is well known and I do not feel the need of insisting. Snorri is convinced, too, of the importance of the matter. Let us read what he is saying in ÓST chap. 80 : he is speaking of the difficulties ÓT had with one Raudr and notices that the king had great difficulties with evil spirits and tröll. It would have been very easy to develop and tell horrible or entertaining stories on tröll and such creatures. But Snorri, here, is not interested with these stories, he says : "We prefer writing on the events that regard the way king Óláfr christianized Norway or the other countries he brought to christianism (let us understand : Iceland and Groenland)." In a similar way, we find regularly entire chapters, in ÓSH (for instance 73, 111, 114, 121, 129 etc) dealing exclusively with the same topic. This may reach some extremes : one could be allowed to call the series OST - ÓSH a \*Kristni saga Nóregs because of the importance this theme takes in both texts. If you wanted to agree with the leading countries in Europe, if these merchants that were first of all the Scandinavian wanted to trade with other people (and we remember that the Vikings, active precisely under both Óláfr's reigns, were first of all good merchants, that they had to receive *prima signatio* if they desired to practise their activity), you were obliged to be a Christian. This step was compulsory. I am not edicting a judgement about ÓT's or ÓH's faith, neither am I able nor will I evaluate their Christianity : I simply think that, for them,

Christianism was an instrument to carry out their politics. When I was studying, some thirty years ago, the so called conversion of Iceland and the part ÓT played into it, I hesitated already between two conclusions : have we here to deal with religious politics or with political religion? The same ambiguity may define both Óláfr's attitude but I am convinced that, to Snorri Sturluson, they have appeared as what I should call indispensable catalysts.

Similar reflections would apply to the new conception of royalty such as embodied by ÓT and ÓH. True to say, ÓT was a kind of upstart and this may explain his career : we are allowed to see it as a way to settle accounts with the ancient dynasty of Hladajarlar represented by Eiríkr Hákonarson who will have the better in the long run. We are not yet well informed about what may have been a jarl. But we can infer from our documents what may have been a *konungr*. As you know, if the meaning of jarl is unprecise to us, *konungr* applied to a member of certain families, probably apt to give *konungar* because of their antiquity; he was not supposed to be a great political chief, nor a famous warrior, nor a good administrator : he had to protect fertility-fecundity among his subjects, he was *konungr til árs ok friðar* . Such was not the meaning of this function in Southern Europe and by the Church. It seems clear that, around year 1000, the word (and the function, of course) *konungr* acquires progressively the present signification in the North. The notion is evolving according to the "continental" sense. Heimskringla could be read as a good handbook (so strong is the pedagogical bias by Snorri Sturluson!) applied to demonstrate the irresistible progression of the new Christian idea of royalty. With a mental reservation, I think, which could be expressed so : the times were ripe, around 1000, for this new idea of royalty, such as they are ripe nowadays (around 1230) for a new kind of government. I cannot prevent myself from seeing in Snorri a sort of cynical philosopher, intelligent and lucid, who is exalting both Óláfr because they are, for him, something like a model, an instance : see, they expressed the spirit of their time, it is why they are great... The same feeling could justify his admiration for ÓH, the first to try to become *rex perpetuus Norvegiae* .

We understand, accordingly, why ÓT was attached to destitute the old jarlar : they too expressed a state of things which could not be accepted any longer, they were obsolete! We shall see that ÓH reacted exactly in the same manner and for similar reasons towards *bændr* . They were fighting against the past, taken as a whole.

Although I think that ÓH was probably more aware of the situation than ÓT and that he tried, more or less consciously, to conciliate both ideals of royalty, the old and the modern ones. He was in the same time faithful to the old ideal (*til*

*árs ok fríðar*) especially in the abstract acceptance of the formula, and sensitive to the new watch-words. In other words : he was together a king and a saint : Jacques Le Goff has recently studied the same case with Saint Louis. The central question he asks in his book is : where is the truth? When we look at Saint Louis as a saint? or as a king? or as a normal - if one can express so - man? I find absolutely remarkable that Snorri seems to cope with the same problems : this Olaf Haraldsson, has he to be seen as a saint? or as a modern king versus old traditional *konungr* ? or as a simple man? The answer is not openly given, naturally! But I see an evidence of what I am trying to show in the fact that Snorri - who writes, let us tell it once more, two centuries after Saint Óláfr's death - clearly follows the pattern and ways of writing of a *vita* such as the Western world has composed so many and such as Icelanders have translated such a lot. This is the reason why I took interest in ÓST and ÓSH : both sagas are so visibly written according to the patterns of medieval hagiography that they must have had the same goal. ÓT and ÓH are exemplary, it is hard to think that it was because of what their heroes had actually done, their reigns were so short! As a consequence, it must have been because of what they have meant... They have been responsible of the new state of things.

We could have there another explanation of the interest the monks-writers attached to both kings : they were the first clear expressions of the Christian notion of the king by divine right (*le roi de droit divin* ). Or, on another point of view, we understand why ÓH seems to have clearly conceived a new politics which would have consisted in promoting young menn coming from *smaboendr* against *storboendr* (or *hersar* as well) : this last idea is not new and has already been demonstrated by many a specialist who sees Óláfr Haraldsson as trying to promote *en bondesamfunn* against *en hersearistokrati* , to speak like modern Scandinavian scholars.

Let us sum up : the political, social, religious and moral ideal towards the end of the first millenarium of our era has been expressed by a simple formula : *un roi, une loi, une foi* , be : one king, one law, one faith. With ÓT and ÓH, the tendency towards the realization of this ideal has taken shape, at least in Snorri's works!

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But it goes without saying that this could not be done without resistances : the North came rather late to the Western global Weltanschauung, although known - and, I dare say, well known - the Church needed finally a long time to enter the

North, at least officially. Was the Germanic society so different? Was the German paganism so strong? I am not sure. But I think the situation was - already - akin to the present state of things. There has always existed a myth of the North in our "southern" countries. These countries and people have always embodied what we call "elsewhere" and "otherwise". Very often, I think, the responsible of this Germanic strangeness came from the south. We have brought in Scandinavia what we wanted to bring. And we tend to see ÓT and ÓH such as we would like to envisage them. We had rather read Snorri Sturluson!

It remains that both kings had to face old structures, old habits, old customs which could not be eradicated so easily. We spoke already of the jarlar and *konungar*. One cannot expect of ÓT that he would have been able of rooting up so swiftly so old institutions. Same thing for ÓH and the *boendr*. A change of society, as we say nowadays, craves time. It was not reasonable to imagine that such a result could have been obtained in a few years. This sort of enterprise was condemned to failure. But - and this is precisely the point I want to settle - ÓT and ÓH were right, they had seen correctly, they were simply in advance. And Snorri Sturluson, who could judge with the necessary distance, was quite convinced they had been right. More : that they had chosen the right direction of evolution. And, once more, it is one of the reasons why he chose to enhance so much their figures.

Or let us say they were men of transition : they had one foot in a field and the other in another : this is a quite uncomfortable position, as everybody knows. No surprise if a man with a strong sense of opportunity, like Knutr inn mikli, took advantage of this ambivalence. It is not strange either if both, as well ÓT as ÓH, were defeated. They had tried, because they were intelligent men, men of the future, to hasten the course of time. But they came too early. There existed certainly a deep opposition between the pyramidal structure of power according to the Church and this - let us call it democratic - ideal of concertation, of félag which reigned among the Scandinavians. Snorri himself knew it : chapters like 37-38 or 94 in ÓSH are sufficiently eloquent on this point. But the evolution progressed in one sense and it would have been of no use trying to refuse it. Especially two centuries after.

Snorri showed, in the same time, that his two Norwegian kings were in advance and that the times were not ripe to accept their reforms. I spoke several times of *exempla*, of exemplarity : I am sure that Snorri wanted to give his audience a perfect instance of men able of dominating time and place. Otherwise, why would he have written so much on their account?