

APPEARANCES MATTER. CONCEPTIONS OF LEADERSHIP IN THE KINGS' SAGAS

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On the basis of my study of visual expressions of power described in the kings' sagas, I will argue in this paper that conceptions of leadership in Norway were considerably changed during a short span of time from approximately 1230 to 1265.¹ During this period the old conception of a heroic-charismatic leader, a *primus inter pares*, really seems to have been replaced by the Christian notion of a king of God's grace, the *rex iustus dei Gratia*.

This conclusion rests on the assumption that there is a specific connection between the importance of *appearance* and certain conceptions of leadership. It has furthermore been drawn from the significant differences between the various saga writers' descriptions of appearance, and in particular from the difference between Snorri Sturluson's and Sturla Þórðarson's depictions of the king.²

I will first elaborate the assumed connection between appearance and leadership. Secondly, I will present the marked change in the king's portrayals from Snorri's *Heimskringla* to Sturla's *Hákonar saga*. Then I will discuss, and dismiss, four possible source-critical explanations of this change, before reaching my conclusion.

Appearance and conceptions of leadership

Most scholars working with theories of state formation will agree that there are some coalescing tendencies in societies with certain coalescing features where leadership is concerned. In small societies, with simple technology and a transparent structure, the appearance and generosity of a leader play a more important, and to some extent different, role than in more complex or developed societies. However, it is important to emphasize that few scholars today presuppose a determined, evolutionary, linear development from one stage to another regarding leadership and state formation. Most of them, following Max Weber, present their various forms of leadership as ideal types, and emphasize that these types are not to be seen as mutually exclusive, only that one or the other tend to dominate in societies with certain features.³

One of the distinctive features of the notion from the Middle Ages of the Christian *rex iustus dei Gratia* is the conception that the king, through his position as God's chosen on earth, distinguished himself qualitatively from other men. Through his royal birth he possessed abilities and qualities unattainable by anyone else. This differs from the conception of a heroic-charismatic king, a *primus inter pares*, who distinguished himself quantitatively rather than qualitatively; that is, his abilities and qualities were in the first place no different from anyone else's, he was just stronger, braver, cleverer and in most ways better.

As indicated, I presuppose a connection between the importance of appearance and the specific types of leadership. The conception of heroic-charismatic leadership will signify itself through a *pronounced importance attached to appearance* in the first place, and subsequently through a pronounced importance attached to the *competition between leaders* when it comes to appearance. The conception of a more stable, hierarchical and institutionalized type of leadership will signify itself through a corresponding absence of importance attached to the *competition* where appearance is concerned, as the division between the strata in the social hierarchy is held to be due to qualitative causes, which make transgressions harder. The leader's other characteristics or duties will then be more important.⁴

In other words, the cue is appearance, and I hold certain rituals and symbols signaling status and power to be the most important aspects of appearance in the politics of the Middle Ages.⁵

Rituals and Symbols in the Kings' Sagas

I have analysed descriptions of everyday symbols and rituals associated with the king in the kings' sagas, as far as it is possible. "Then five winters passed" is one sentence we all know from the sagas, summing up the fact that according to the writer nothing worth mentioning happened during this period, which usually means that the murder rates were boringly low.

For methodological reasons that will be further developed below, I have not focused on descriptions of grand rituals like coronation or anointment, baptism or burial. Instead, I have followed the king visually through the saga day, from the first sight of his *merki* on the hilltop in the morning till he empties his last pint of beer at night.⁶ I have studied every description of the *merki*, of the clothing and the battle equipment, of the ships and the table linen, in connection with every arrival or departure, *þing* meeting or party.⁷

These descriptions have been systematically compared to descriptions of the other magnates, and few of the rituals or symbols in question appear to have been reserved exclusively for the king. With regards to frequency, however, there is a pronounced tendency of development. Most palpable, and therefore significant, is the difference between Snorri Sturluson's and Sturla Þorðarson's portrayals of the king, in *Heimskringla* and *Hákonar saga* respectively. To a marked extent Snorri gives more frequent and richer descriptions of the king's ships and their decoration, the king's clothing and his battle equipment, the king's hair and the fabrics and colours that surrounded him than Sturla does. Snorri calls attention to the leader by focusing on his distinction when it comes to such visual expressions of power. A corresponding focus is completely absent in Sturla's writing. Instead he focuses markedly on frequent and rich descriptions of typical Christian procedures reserved for king and bishop, such as processions, the leading by hand or the ringing of bells at *adventus regis*.⁹ I will elaborate this point by giving some examples.

In my chapter on the physical appearance of the king, I started out by simply counting the descriptions given by each saga writer. My criteria for description were presentation of clothing, armament, fabrics, colours, haircuts and weapons, the factors presented individually or several together. I chose the factors with regards to comparison. Statements about beauty, for instance, vary both in strength and phrasing, and are difficult to categorize. They were therefore left out. Such a choice of criteria splits the asyndetic enumeration of the alliterating and assonating adjectives in pairs that have been pointed out as characteristic of the saga portraits.⁹ The problem of rhetorical elements in the portrayals is reduced, and a different picture appears.

By these criteria, Snorri presents eighteen kings and two queens on fifty occasions in *Heimskringla*. Sturla presents two kings and one queen on five occasions in *Hákonar saga*. Of course these sagas vary in length, and the attention Snorri pays to each king varies a lot. I have anyway found the numbers significant, particularly because men like Sigurd Syr or Sigurd Slembe, with their modest place in the sagas and probably in reality as well, are more frequently described by Snorri than Hákon Hákonsson is by Sturla.¹⁰

In detail, Snorri describes the king wearing *pell*, *silki*, *guðvev*, *kleði* or *skarlagan*; Sturla does not describe the king's clothing at all. Snorri describes the king's fair, brown or black hair; Sturla has no description of the king's hair at all. Snorri describes the king's sword, shield or

helmet; Sturla does not have any descriptions of the king's armour at all.¹¹ This is the common pattern of all the descriptions analysed.

On the other hand, Snorri tells us that when Olav Haraldsson went to High Mass on Ascension Day, the bishop led the king by hand in a procession around the church before guiding him towards his seat to the north of the chancel.¹² Snorri also describes the reception he claims was given to Sigurd Jorsalfare by the Byzantine emperor Kirjalaks when Sigurd arrived at Miklagard. Kirjalaks opened his golden gate, *Gullvarta*, to greet Sigurd, and Snorri explains how the emperor used to arrive on horse through this gate after returning successfully from a war on some neighbouring people. Kirjalaks let *pell* be spread out on the streets from *Gullvarta* to his most elegant hall, and in this splendid way received the Norwegian king.

Snorri shows his knowledge of the royal reception, but in all of *Heimskringla* he only mentions it on these two occasions. By contrast, Sturla describes fourteen receptions like this in *Hákonar saga*, and shows the importance he attached to such rituals through his detailed account of the conflict between Hákon and Skule's supporters in 1217.¹³ On his way to Bergen, the day after Hákon had received the name of king on the *Eyrabing*, he received a message from Dagfinn Bonde that the bishop and the chancel brothers in Bergen had been instructed by the Archbishop of Nidaros not to honour Hákon. The archbishop supported Skule. The Bergen men were then caught between king and archbishop, but eventually the matter was solved and the priests walked in procession towards Hákon in the most honourable way, while bells chimed all over town.¹⁴

The archbishop, however, stood his ground. When both Hákon and Skule were in Nidaros for Easter 1218, he still declined to ring his bells or walk in procession towards the king. He stated the reasons for his behaviour by indirectly referring to those who were entitled to *adventus regis*. As soon as Inga from Varteig, through her ordeal, had proved to him that Hákon was a king's son and the true heir to the throne, he would do him every honour possible.¹⁵ Sturla probably uses similar reasoning in his account of how Skule gave himself the name of king on *Eyrabing* in 1239. He emphasizes that afterwards no one went in procession towards Skule, and no bells were rung. However, two of the chancel brothers went out and led Skule by the hand, and Sturla comments that "people thought the chancel brothers expressed less reluctance than one could have expected."¹⁶

Differences like the ones above are representative of all my findings. Snorri focuses on the king's precedence where visual expressions of power are concerned, while Sturla calls attention to other aspects of the king's role. My task has been to explain these differences.

Explaining the Sources

The kings' sagas, besides being works of history, belong to the Western world's literary canon, as do the Icelandic family and contemporary sagas and the bishops' sagas. As we all know, the main inevitable and recurrent problems in using them as historical sources are:

A. Judging their representativeness. For whom were they written, and by whom, i.e., how are they biased? And of course, when were they written and about what period of time, i.e., is it possible to use *Heimskringla*, written about 1230, as a source of knowledge about the eleventh century?

B. Sorting out fact from fiction. As the sagas are definitely literature, how do we recognize possible genre-specific narrative conventions or strategies? And if we do recognize such strategies, what do they mean, and how do they differ within the saga literature between the kings' sagas and the family sagas for instance?

Before I discuss these problems in relation to my particular subject, I should probably state my main position concerning the sagas' information value regarding time. I consider them mainly as sources for the time when they were written down. And if the Old Norse philologists have not come up lately with data that I am unfamiliar with, that means that I treat *Heimskringla* mainly as a source for the time around 1230, and *Hákonar saga* as a source for the mid-1260s.

The development of source criticism in connection with the use of sagas in historical research is of course common knowledge to participants of a saga conference, so I will not dwell upon the points above. I just want to argue that by focusing on everyday symbols and rituals, that is, on phenomena that the saga writers most likely mention *en passant*, I was able to a certain point able to avoid both the problem of bias and the problem of literary conventions. I will be more specific.

Some scholars, like Birgit Sawyer, have argued that differences such as the one between Snorri and Sturla's portrayal of the king are best explained by Snorri's conscious, personal attitude towards the Christian *rex iustus* ideology. He neither liked it nor wanted it.¹⁷ And in line

with Gudmund Sandvik's point of view, the fact that Snorri wrote the way he did because of his Icelandic background has been stressed.¹⁸

To the first of these arguments, I object that it is precisely with regards to representativeness that the methodical benefit of my everyday approach pays off. We know that Snorri was biased in his account of a major event like the fall of Olav the Saint, but there is no reason to believe that he had strong feelings about descriptions of common sleeping arrangements. Likewise, there is no reason to believe that he made up literary patterns to describe the giving or receiving of gifts, the positioning of ships in harbour, or the use of the *merki* in battle. Due to this, I will argue that my findings are representative beyond the saga writer. The sagas were not meant to be fiction, they were meant to be realistic works of history. Their audience expected the truth, and would probably not accept incorrect descriptions of everyday life.¹⁹

I also have objections to the argument that Snorri's geographical and political background is the main explanation of why he wrote the way he did. Snorri was one of the major magnates on Iceland during the Free State period. Sturla was from Iceland as well; he was Snorri's nephew and, just like him, one of the major magnates of Free State Iceland. In other words, if Snorri wrote the way he did because of his background, there must be other reasons why Sturla wrote in a distinctly different way, as his background was largely the same.

Furthermore, I would like to comment upon the possibility of narrative conventions or literary strategies as the most likely explanation of Snorri and Sturla's diversified texts. The family sagas and the non-contemporary kings' sagas have been claimed to be less realistic than the contemporary sagas, and therefore more likely to depict beautiful hair, clothes, weapons and the like.²⁰ As my point of departure, I will refer to some Old Norse scholars' explanations of the saga writers' descriptions of blue clothes, and compare these with what I have found in the kings' sagas.

Several have claimed blue clothes to be a typical example of a literary topos, possibly of oral origin, that has wandered from one saga to another. Hermann Pálsson has written that: "The image of Hrafnkel on both occasions riding in blue clothing is all we need to know about his mood and intentions, for in the sagas blue clothing is conventionally worn by killers." George Johnston has stated that: "in other sagas it is said that men wore blue clothes when they were bent

on killing." Fredrik Heinemann has claimed that: "topos II [the blue clothes] signals that Þorðr is in a "killing mood".²¹

If we compare these statements to the situations in which blue clothes are described in the kings' sagas, they do not quite fit. According to Snorri, Sigurd Syr wore a blue kirtle and blue trousers when he got the message that Olav Haraldsson was on his way to visit him and Ása, something Snorri says he felt joyous about.²² Asbjørn Selsbane is said to have worn a blue kirtle when Ásmund killed him, Harald Hardráde to have worn a blue kirtle in the battle of Stamford Bridge and Sigurd Slembe to have worn blue trousers and a blue shirt when the *gestir* of Harald Gille tried to kill him.²³ Sturla does not mention the colour blue in *Hákonar saga* at all.

The blue-clad person is not depicted as "in a killing mood" in any of these situations; I would rather say the opposite. If a literary topos should be derived from the wearing of blue in the kings' sagas it must be that blue-clad persons were in danger of *being* killed. I would therefore rather say, along with Paul Acker, that: "The contrast in the sagas is really one between dyed and undyed clothes, between everyday clothes in natural-wool colours [...] and fancy, imported dyes."²⁴

However, this does not imply that I do not think that the mentioning of colours, or rich descriptions of other kinds, may in some cases also work as a literary retardation technique to add some thrill to the story. It simply means that I do not think that literary strategies alone can explain the difference between Snorri's and Sturla's writing.

Implicit in the discussion on narrative conventions lies the focus on genre as an important explanatory element. As mentioned above, could it not be that Snorri just wrote more in the genre of the family sagas when he wrote *Heimskringla*? To this, it may be objected, along with M.I. Steblin-Kamenskij, E.P. Durrenberger, K. Lunden or J.V. Sigurðsson, that to apply a genre perspective to the saga literature is anachronistic in the first place, because it presupposes a modern way of thinking.²⁵ Lars Lönnroth argues, even if he wants to hold on to a revised concept of the genre, that our present classification system does not at all correspond to the distinctions used by the Free State Icelanders.²⁶ It may also be argued that what several of the Old Norse philologists have studied are just phenomena like the conscious, partly standardized saga-portraits that are given on first introduction or in the obituaries, and not the everyday, and I still argue less consciously biased, descriptions I have investigated. Furthermore, the reference to genre has been used every bit as often to explain similarities as differences between non-

contemporary and contemporary sagas.²⁷ And finally, if we accept the importance of the problem of genre, we would still have to explain the Icelanders' need for them.

Therefore, in my opinion, the most likely explanation of the differences between Snorri's and Sturla's portrayal of the king is that the conceptions of leadership in Norway were considerably changed during the short span of time from approximately 1230 to 1265. During this period the old conception of a heroic-charismatic leader, a *primus inter pares*, really seems to have been replaced by the Christian notion of a king of God's grace, the *rex iustus dei Gratia*. If we take into consideration that Snorri's direct knowledge of Norway stemmed from his sojourn here from 1218 to 1220, when Hákon Hákonsson had just assumed a tottering throne and had to share the kingdom with a powerful earl, it is likely that the differences between Snorri's and Sturla's descriptions convey some realities as well.

1. Monclair, Hanne, *Forestillinger om kongen i norsk middelalder gjennom ritualene og symbolene rundt ham*, KULT's skriftserie nr. 44, Oslo, 1995. The sagas analysed are: *Heimskringla*, *Sverris saga*, *Boglunga sogur* and *Hákonar saga*.
2. I consciously avoid the word "author" because of its connotations, cf. the bookprose/freeprose discussion.
3. See Weber, Max, Det legale herredømmes tre rene typer, *Makt og byråkrati*, Oslo, 1971; Fried, Morton, *The Evolution of Political Society*, New York, 1967: 3-27; same, Tribe to State and State to Tribe in Ancient China, Keightley, ed., *Origins of Chinese Civilization*, University of California Press, 1983; Sahlins, Marshall, Poor Man, Rich Man, Big-Man, Chief, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1963; Southall, Aidan, The Segmentary State in Africa and Asia, *ibid.*, 1988.
4. For elaborations of the general argumentation, see Bagge, Sverre, *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla*, University of California Press, 1991: 129, 148; Sahlins, Marshall, Poor Man, Rich Man, Big-Man, Chief: Political Types in Melanesia and Polynesia, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, bd. 5, Haag, 1963; Weber, Max, *Makt og byråkrati*, Oslo, 1971.
5. For literature on the study of rituals and symbols, see for example: Le Goff, Jacques, Is Politics Still the Backbone of History?, Gilbert & Graubard, eds., *Historical Studies Today*, N.Y., 1972; Schramm, P.E., Herrschaftszeichen und Staatssymbolik, *Schriften der Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, XIII, 3. vols., Stuttgart, 1956-1959; Blom, Grethe Authén, Kongekroninger og kroningsutstyr i norsk middelalder frem til 1300-årene, Blindheim, Gjærder, Sæverud, red., *Kongens makt og ære*, Oslo, 1985; Bagge, Sverre, Herrens salvede. Kroning og salving i norsk kongeideologi 1163-1247, *ibid.*; Skaare, Kølbjørn, Herskertegn og maktsymboler på norsk og annen middelaldermynt, *ibid.*; Steinsland, Gro, *Det hellige bryllup og norrøn kongeideologi*, Oslo, 1991; Gurevitch, A., *Categories of Medieval Culture*, London, 1985; Miller, W.L., *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, Chicago, 1990; Lunden, Kåre, *Økonomi og samfunn*, Oslo, 1972;

- Bloch, Marc, *The Royal Touch*, London, 1973.
6. The approach is modelled on Troels Lund's *Daglig liv i Norden*, Kristiania/Oslo, 1903-1939.
 7. For definitions and discussions of my concepts *symbol* and *ritual*, see Monclair, 1995: 33-37.
 8. *Adventus regis* or the arrival of the king: the liturgical reception of God's anointed on earth, i.e., the king or higher clergymen. The rituals reflect Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.
 9. Lönnroth, Lars, Det litterära porträttet i latinsk historiografi och isländsk sagaskrivning - en komparativ studie, *Acta Philologica Scandinavica*, 27, 1965: 68-117.
 10. Monclair, 1995: 63-68.
 11. *Ibid.*: 72-107.
 12. Heimskringla, *Jónsson, Finnur*, Oslo, 1966, ÓL. HELG. ch. 84: 247.
 13. Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar, *Marina Mundt*, Oslo, 1977, ch. 19: 17, ch. 48: 32, ch. 77: 47, ch. 99: 59, ch. 199: 187, ch. 224: 119, ch. 249: 139, ch. 254: 141, ch. 294: 178-179, ch. 302: 183, ch. 313: 192-192.
 14. Hákonar saga, ch. 19: 17.
 15. *Ibid.*, ch. 39: 27.
 16. *Ibid.*, ch. 199: 187.
 17. Sawyer, Birgit, Samhällsbeskrivningen i Heimskringla, *Historisk tidsskrift*, nr. 2, 1993: 230.
 18. Sandvik, Gudmund, *Hovding og konge i Heimskringla*, Oslo, 1955, Bagge, Sverre, op.cit., Bagge, Sverre, Samfunnsbeskrivelsen i Heimskringla, *Historisk tidsskrift*, nr. 2, 1994.
 19. I lean on researchers such as Miller, Ian W., *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, Chicago, 1990; Byock, Jesse L., *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas and Power*, Berkeley, 1988; Sigurðsson, Jón Viðar, *Goder og maktforhold på Island i fristatstiden*, Ph.D., Bergen, 1993; Bagge, Sverre, op.cit.
 20. For discussions along this line, see Lars Lönnroth, Tesen om de två kulturerna: Kritiska studier i den isländska sagaskrivningens sociala förutsättningar, *Scripta Islandica*, 15, 1964; Joseph Harris, Genre and Structure in Some Íslendinga þættir, *Scandinavian Studies*, 44, 1972; Lars Lönnroth, The Concept of Genre in Saga Literature, *ibid.*, 47, 1975; Joseph Harris, Genre in Saga Literature: A Squib, *ibid.*; Theodore Andersson, Splitting the Saga, smst. Peter Hallberg, Hrafnkell Freysgoði the "New Man" - A Phantom Problem and Hunting for the Heart of Hrafnkels saga, *ibid.*; Fredrik J. Heinemann, Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða: the Old Problem with the New Man and The Heart of Hrafnkatla again, *ibid.*; Joseph Harris, Theme and Genre in some Íslendinga þættir, *ibid.*, 48, 1976.
 21. Pálsson and Johnston, quoted from Acker, Paul, Valla-Ljóts saga. An Icelandic Family Saga, *Comparative Criticism*, 10, 1988: 209, Heinemann, Fredrik J., Intertextuality in Bjarnar saga

Hítðælakappa, *Proceedings from the Eighth International Saga Conference*, Gøteborg, 1991: 199. See also Hughes, G.I., A Possible Saga Convention, *English Studies in Africa*, 12.2., 1969: 167-173.

22. ÓL. HELG. ch. 33: 198.

23. ÓL. HELG. ch. 123: 301, HAR. HARÐ. ch. 90: 505, MAGN. BLIND. HAR. GILL. ch. 14: 568.

24. Acker, 1988: 209.

25. Steblin-Karnenskij, M.I., *Islendingesogene og vi*, Oslo, 1975: 32-33; Durrenberger, E.P., *The Dynamics of Medieval Iceland*, University of Iowa Press, 1992: 101; Lunden, K., The Conversion, unpublished paper, 1995: 4; Sigurðsson, J.V., op.cit.: 24.

26. Lönnroth, 1975: 421.

27. Sigurðsson, op.cit.: 29, Lönnroth, 1964: 30.