

## Sverrir and St Óláfr: Symbolology of Power in a Saga Dream

"He had remarkable dreams," says the author of *Sverris saga* about his protagonist before introducing one of them into his narrative.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, dreams accompany Sverrir throughout the saga: one of them announces his birth; from another he gets to know that his death-day is coming upon him. Not only do they portend momentous events in his life; in some cases at least, the relation of a dream to the reality turns out to be more complex than just that of the harbinger to what it points to, and the dream appears to possess an uncanny actuality in its own right. What is happening in it, is in a meaningful sense real.

Sverrir's dream in which he meets St Óláfr is perhaps the clearest example of this. The story is introduced at that stage of the narrative where Sverrir has just become aware of his royal birth and contemplates if he should venture from the Faroes where he grew up to Norway in order to avenge his kinsmen and claim the throne. The dream gives him confidence:

He dreamt that he had come to Norway over the sea from the west, and had attained some position of honour, chosen to be bishop most likely. And there was much unrest in the land, because of the contention of kings. He dreamt that King Óláfr was contending against King Magnús and Jarl Erlingr, and he was pondering in his mind which side he should join. He chose rather to go to King Óláfr, and on his arrival the king welcomed him with great joy. He had not been long with him when this event happened. One morning, as it seemed to him in his dream, there were few men with the king, not more than fifteen or sixteen, and the king was washing himself at a table in an upper room (*loftstofu*). When he had finished, another man wished to go to the table and wash himself in the same water, but the king pushed him aside with the hand and bade him desist. He then called Sverrir Magnús by name, and bade him wash in the same water (*Síðan nefndi hann Sværi Magnus oc bað hann þva ser i því sama vatni*); and Sverrir dreamt that he did as he was bid.<sup>2</sup>

Let us pause for a moment at this point. Óláfr gives Sverrir a new name. A similar situation where a king renames a boy or a grown-up man is also described in other sagas, and characteristically, this act often marks acquirement by this person of a new and higher social status.<sup>3</sup>

The name *Magnús* which Sverrir receives in his dream is worth noting, too. By this time it has already had a remarkable history in Scandinavian tradition. The son of Óláfr, King Magnús góði, was reportedly the first to bear it. In his *Óláfs saga helga* Snorri tells that, under exceptional circumstances, the scald Sighvatr named the new-born son of the king after King Charlemagne (*eptir Karla-Magnúsi konungf*), without the father's knowledge.<sup>4</sup> There might be some truth in this account: later Sighvatr seems to be addressing Magnús in a verse by the word *skirinafni* which would be natural to take for an allusion to this event.<sup>5</sup> However it may be, attention which the saga pays to the origins of the name *Magnús* clearly indicates that it stood out against the background of other royal names.

<sup>1</sup> *Sverris saga* 2, ed. Gustav Indrebe, *Sverris saga etter Cod. AM 327 4°* (Kristiania, 1920), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Sverris saga* 5, ed. Indrebe, p. 4. I cite the translation of J. Septon in *The Saga of King Sverri of Norway* (London, 1899), p. 4–5, with modification of name forms.

<sup>3</sup> See F. B. Uspenskij, *Имя и власть: Имя как инструмент династической борьбы в средневековой Скандинавии* [*Name and power: Name as an instrument in dynastic conflicts in medieval Scandinavia*] (Moscow, 2001), pp. 77, 118–19.

<sup>4</sup> *Separate saga of Óláfr helgi* 111, ed. Oscar Albert Johnsen and Jón Helgason in *Den store saga om Olav den hellige*, 2 vols. (Oslo, 1941) 1: 317–19; *Óláfs saga helga* 122, in *Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, 3 vols., Íslenzk fornrit, vols. 26–28 (Reykjavík, 1941–51) 2: 209–11.

<sup>5</sup> *Den norsk-isländske sljaldedigning*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, 2 vols. in 4 (Copenhagen, 1912–15) 1B: 253.30; *Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 3: 18–19.

The markedness of this name is also apparent from another saga story, this time in *Morkinskinna*. When Magnús góði was lying on his deathbed, we are told, his retainer, the Icelander Þórsteinn, came to him and asked for a present – the name *Magnús* for his own son. The king replied that the request seemed to him somewhat presumptuous since Þórsteinn was not a noble man, but gave in nevertheless. But it was likely, he then added, that there would be both nobility and grief (*harmr og tign*) attached to this name.<sup>6</sup>

It will be enough for our purposes to note two essential facts concerning the later history of the name *Magnús*. First, it has become one of the most characteristic dynastic names in the Norwegian royal family. Sverrir's rival, Magnús Erlingsson, was already the fifth king of Norway bearing this name. Second, it has occasionally been adopted, out of political considerations, as a second name; this was clearly the case with King Sven Estridsen of Denmark.<sup>7</sup>

What did Sverrir need this name for? We may speculate that Sverrir did not feel quite comfortable with his own name. In fact, it derived from a nickname ('one who swirls or whirls', 'tearaway'), and this association could scarcely have been entirely obliterated by that time. It was not by any standards fitting for a king – he ought to bear an ancestral name hallowed by tradition. In this situation changing the name would commend itself as a likely solution to the problem. Sverrir utilized this possibility adopting the name *Magnús*. Moreover, following the same pattern, he changed his son's name from *Únáss* to *Sigurór*,<sup>8</sup> and in the latter case the new name seems to have completely replaced the old in everyday usage.

Sverrir's other name, too, existed not only in the dream. There is no doubt that it was invested with major significance. Both his names stood side by side in the official usage. In documents written in Norwegian he styled himself as *Sverrir Magnus konongr sun Sigurðar konongs*.<sup>9</sup> His coinage bore the Latin legend *REX SVERVVS MAGNVVS*.<sup>10</sup> Finally, his seal announced him as *Suerus rex Magnus, ferus ut leo, mitis ut agnus*, "fierce as a lion, mild as a lamb."<sup>11</sup> But it is only in the account of the saga that the significance attached to it is revealed with full clarity. In his dream Sverrir receives his new name directly from St Óláfr. This situation creates a very special link between them: it is the name of Óláfr's son, Magnús góði. The message communicated by the story is unambiguous. As Frederik Paasche has remarked, "the name *Magnús* implies that he has a son's right with the saint king."<sup>12</sup> That was not all. The dream had a continuation:

<sup>6</sup> *Morkinskinna*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen, 1932), p. 142–43.

<sup>7</sup> See Gertrud Thoma, *Namensänderungen in Herrscherfamilien des mittelalterlichen Europa* (Munich, 1985), pp. 210–13; Uspenskij, *Язы и власть*, pp. 52–53, 109.

<sup>8</sup> Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum* 14.53, ed. J. Olrik and H. Ræder, 2 vols. (Copenhagen: Levin & Munksgaard, 1931–57) 1: 502.

<sup>9</sup> *Norges gamle Love indtil 1387*, ed. Rudolf Keyser et al., 5 vols. (Christiania, 1846–95) 1: 409; *Akershusregisteret af 1622*, ed. G. Tank (Kristiania, 1916), nos. 980, 1083, 1169. See also King Hákon Hákonarson's diploma from c. 1225 mentioning Sverrir's other name, *Norske diplomer til og med år 1300*, ed. Finn Hødneha, *Corpus codicum Norvegicorum medli ævi*, fólio series, vol. 2 (Oslo, 1960), no. 4.

<sup>10</sup> L. C. Schive, *Norges Mynter i Middelalderen* (Christiania, 1865), tab. 6, nos. 73–77, 79.

<sup>11</sup> William of Newburgh, *Historia rerum Anglicarum* 3.6, ed. Richard Howlett in *Chronicles of the Reigns of Stephen, Henry II and Richard I*, 4 vols., Rolls Series (London, 1884–1889) 1: 232. On the symbolism of lion and lamb see Frederik Paasche, *Kong Sverre*, 2nd ed. (Kristiania, 1923), pp. 232–33. Cf. also Halvdan Koht, *Kong Sverre* (Oslo, 1952), p. 76.

<sup>12</sup> Frederik Paasche, "Sverre prest," *Edda* 3 (1915) 204. Paasche's suggestion was followed by other scholars, see Koht, *Kong Sverre*, p. 75; Ludvig Holm-Olsen, "Kong Sverre i søkelyset," *Nordisk Tidsskrift* 34 (1957) 181; Aaron Gurevich, "From saga to personality: Sverris saga," in *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, ed. Gisli Pálsson (London, 1992), p. 82.

When he had washed, a man rushed into the room with the sudden tidings that the king's foes were at the door, and he bade them seize their weapons as quickly as they could. But the king spoke, and said there was no danger, and bade the men take their axes and swords and march out, while he himself would take his shield and protect them all. And they did as the king commanded. Then he took his sword and offered it to the young man Sverrir, and placed his standard in Sverrir's hand, saying, "Take my standard, lord, and know of a surety that henceforth you shall be its bearer always." And Sverrir in his dream received the standard, though with a feeling of dread. Afterwards the king took his shield, and they all walked out together somewhat hastily. The vestibule (*fordýrt*) seemed long as they marched through, not less than sixty ells in length, and while they were in the building, Sverrir was unable to carry the standard upright. But when they reached the door through which they had to pass, seven men came against them with weapons, intending to cut down the standard-bearer (*merkismaðrinn*). But the king moved forward in front of him, and with his shield protected him and all the others, so that they were unharmed. Afterwards they came in his dream to an open country and a fair field, where he carried the standard upright, and bore it against the array of King Magnús and Jarl Erlingr. And as soon as the attack was made, that host fell away.<sup>13</sup>

Handing over a sword and a standard clearly had a symbolic significance. In accordance with a long-established tradition kings received at their anointment a sword which had first been placed on the altar and blessed. In this context the sword was primarily to stand for the military power, which the king possessed, the power of coercion; but at the same time it was to serve as a reminder of the king's duty to maintain external and internal peace, to protect the church, widows, and orphans.<sup>14</sup> The rite of handing over the sword to the king originated in the Frankish kingdom as early as in the ninth century. It gained entrance to Norway with the coronation of Magnús Erlingsson in 1163-64, to judge from the words attributed to Magnús in *Sverris saga*: "I swore at my consecration that I would observe the laws of the land and defend it against the greed and enmity of wicked men with the sword that I received at my consecration."<sup>15</sup>

The significance of the sword as a symbol of rulership was, however, not confined to the sphere of the ecclesiastical rite. When the German emperor bestowed the title of king on a vassal of his, a sword could be transmitted as a token of the royal dignity.<sup>16</sup> Not long before the events described in *Sverris saga* two rivalling members of the Danish royal family, Sven Eriksson and Knut Lavard, became participants in such a ceremony at the court of Frederick Barbarossa. Relating this story, the chronicler Otto of Freising asserts that this function of the sword became customary by that time.<sup>17</sup>

It seems that the meaning of Óláfr's gestures in the saga dream should be seen against this background. Last ambiguities disappear when the saint king addressed Sverrir as *herra*, "lord". In that epoch this greeting was reserved for the king, and to all appearances, for no one else.<sup>18</sup> We can see that Sverrir's expectations at the opening of the dream story – "he dreamt that he had come to Norway ... and had attained some position of honour (*tígn*)" – come true, but not in the way he anticipated: Sverrir is not chosen to be bishop – instead, St Óláfr make him king.

Sverrir receives a standard (*merki*) from the saint's hand and becomes his standard-bearer (*merkismaðr*). This role is becoming for Sverrir as king. We know that elsewhere in the medieval west kings not only handed over banners to others, but could themselves be

<sup>13</sup> *Sverris saga* 5, ed. Indrebø, pp. 4-5; transl. Sephton, p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> Jean Flori, *L'idéologie du glaive: Préhistoire de la chevalerie* (Geneva, 1983), pp. 83, 89, 90-93.

<sup>15</sup> *Sverris saga* 60, ed. Indrebø, p. 67; transl. Sephton, p. 78.

<sup>16</sup> Percy Ernst Schramm, *Herrschaftszeichen und Staatssymbolik: Beiträge zu ihrer Geschichte vom dritten bis zum sechzehnten Jahrhundert*, 3 vols. (Stuttgart, 1954-56) 2: 651.

<sup>17</sup> Otto of Freising, *Gesta Friderici I. imperatoris* 2.5, ed. B. de Simson, MGH, Scr. rer. Germ., vol. 46 (Hannover, 1912), p. 106.

<sup>18</sup> Lars Hamre, "Herretitel," in *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder*, 22 vols. (Copenhagen, 1956-78) 6: 509.

conceived as standard-bearers of celestial powers. The picture of a king receiving a banner from Christ's hand formed a stock motif of medieval iconography.<sup>19</sup> In twelfth-century France and Castile ideas of this sort took a more definite shape. In these countries specific banners were venerated as the banners of the saint patrons of the realm and served as the royal battle standard. The French monarch became the bearer of the banner of St Denis, succeeding in this capacity the counts of Vexin.<sup>20</sup> The Castilian king was *beati Iacobi vexillifer*, the "standard-bearer of St James".<sup>21</sup> These religio-juridical concepts were invested with a great significance in both countries' political life.

There may have been many reasons why in Norway similar notions were never embodied in an equally clear-cut form. Here royal banners did not as usually pass from one king to another, but every king had his own battle standard. Names of the banners changed, too. The extant sources do not say what happened to Óláfr Haraldsson's banner after his death, but there is no indication that a banner used later by Norwegian kings was somehow linked with Óláfr's name. To judge from the saga, the war banner of Sverrir himself, *Sigrflugan*, was also void of such associations.

Apart from war banners, there were also church banners in Norway at this time, and the one in the possession of the cathedral church of Niðaróss where the relics of St Óláfr rested could appropriately be said to be of St Óláfr. It is not unlikely that this or other church banners could occasionally serve as war banners, as the case often was on the Continent at that time,<sup>22</sup> but there is no positive evidence to substantiate this conjecture. In any event, it is clear that this practice never became institutionalised in Norway.

Against this background, what we read *Sverris saga* in the Birkibeinar's expedition to about Niðaróss in June 1177 might appear all the more perplexing. When Sverrir and his men approached the town, the townsmen marched out in orderly array intending to attack them. According to the saga, "the townsmen showed such audacity – barons and yeomen as they were – that they took the banner of King Óláfr the Saint (*merki hins helga Ólafs konungs*), to bear it against King Sverrir."<sup>23</sup> But despite the sheer weight of numbers on their side, Sverrir's enemies were, miraculously as it were, put to flight. The townsmen's standard-bearer, mounted on horseback, fell to the ground. The banner got into the Birkibeinar's hands and was then carried into the town as a sign of victory.

What this banner actually was, is totally unclear. Was it a real battle standard which had once belonged to Óláfr and was later kept in his church as a relic? Or did the townsmen carry a church banner into battle? Perhaps, neither was the case. The banner that figures in the saga as the *merki hins helga Ólafs konungs* may never have had any firm link with the saint king before that very day when Sverrir, who readily seized every opportunity to stress his closeness to St Óláfr, gave it this name.

This episode of the 1177 expedition and the dream story interrelate in a curious way. It is not that the dream forebodes this or any other particular event. Rather the combat incident appears from the perspective of the saga as a consequence of what has really happened in the dream when St Óláfr gives to Sverrir his banner. Henceforth, only Sverrir has the right to the banner of the saint king.

<sup>19</sup> Schramm, *Herrschaftszeichen* 2: 652.

<sup>20</sup> Percy Ernst Schramm, *Der König von Frankreich: Das Wesen der Monarchie vom 9. bis zum 16. Jahrhundert*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Darmstadt, 1960) 1: 139.

<sup>21</sup> Klaus Herbers, "Politik und Heiligenverehrung auf der Iberischen Halbinsel: Die Entwicklung des 'politischen Jakobus'," in *Politik und Heiligenverehrung im Hochmittelalter*, ed. Jürgen Petersohn (Sigmaringen, 1994), pp. 244–45.

<sup>22</sup> Carl Erdmann, *Die Entstehung des Kreuzzugsgedankens* (Stuttgart, 1935), pp. 40–44; Cl. Gaier, "Le rôle militaire des reliques et de l'étendard de saint Lambert dans la principauté de Liège," *Le Moyen Age* 72 (1966) 240–249.

<sup>23</sup> *Sverris saga* 15, ed. Indrebø, p. 15; transl. Septon, p. 18.

In the same sense, from the perspective of the text, everything that happens in this dream – the change of the name, the bestowal of the royal dignity, the pledge of assistance given by the saint – happens in deed. Halvdan Koht once remarked that Sverrir's dreams were the "sole proof of his right to the throne."<sup>24</sup> I think it is fair to say that this right itself in a sense derived from the dream.

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<sup>24</sup> Halvdan Koht, "Norsk historieskrivning under kong Sverre," in his *Imhogg og utsyn i norsk historie* (Kristiania, 1921), p. 167. Cf. Ludvig Holm-Olsen, *Studier i Sverres saga* (Oslo, 1953), p. 95; Gurevich, "From saga to personality," p. 82.