

Sanctity of a Christian King in *Heimskringla* in Narratological Perspective

Óláfs saga helga, the central part of *Heimskringla* (a collection of *konungasögur* supposed to be written by the famous Icelandic scholar and politician Snorri Sturluson, 1179-1241) deals with the life story of a Norwegian king who acquired the status of a holy patron of Norway after his tragic death in the battle of Stiklastaðir and got the title of a 'saint' as his second name. According to Snorri, the cult of Olaf was formed very soon after his death and was closely connected with the fresh remembrances of the battle. The supernatural healings at his relics described as taking place during and immediately after the battle appear to have given irrefutable proofs of the king's sanctity for the medieval audience. At the same time, the saga presents a lot of quite realistic details of Olaf's behaviour, very often not only resolute but aggressive, which don't respond to the traditional image of a 'holy man'. This paper is an attempt to understand (by means of narratological analysis) how these contrasting features could be combined in the mind of the author and his audience. Was the author able to achieve the integrity of the image of the 'holy king' and to show any signs of Olaf's sanctity other than the miracles? And what kind of sanctity does Olaf reveal in the saga?

To my mind, the transformation of Olaf from a viking to a saint is being prepared in the text by a gradual shift of narrative accents. In contrast to the hagiographical tradition, the saga represents Olaf's character in development. Most striking seems the imperceptible at first sight but consistent change of the king's behaviour from aggressiveness to tolerance resulting in his sacrificial death for the idea of national union and independence (the independence of Norway from the Danish dominion). This idea is closely associated in the saga with the establishment of Christianity (the religion of law and justice) which is thus described as not only a more powerful but as a more 'right' faith. Through the change of his hero's character the author manages to represent Olaf's policy of Christianization (often tough and cruel as it probably was) as something appealing for his audience. Olaf does not only show the external signs of faith (building temples, taking part in the church services, using the outward Christian attributes during the battles, etc.) – he undergoes an internal change, too. This change does not make him a paragon of Christian virtue (his behaviour very often remains within the boundaries of the tribal ethic) but clearly distinguishes him not only from some of his compatriots adhering to heathendom but also from his Christian royal counterparts.

The contrast between the 'true' and the 'superficial' conversion manifests itself already in a number of the preceding sagas describing the beginnings of Christianization of Norway. Hakon góði, the first Christian king of Norway, baptized as a child in England, is clearly contrasted to his aggressive brother Eirik who, being converted by the same English king Adalstein, breaks the peace treaty and falls in the battle. And though Eirik is also said to have "réttá trú" (*Hákonar saga góða, chapt. 3*) but only Hakon is characterized as "vel kristinn" (*Haralds saga hárfagra 41*). It is remarkable that the conversion of Hakon becomes immediately connected with some moral advantages which show the new faith in the favourable light: "ok kenna réttá trú ok góða siðu ok alls konar kurteisi" (*Ibid.*). The conversion accepted for purely political reasons is distinguished by Snorri from the conversion implying the transformation of personality.

A similar contrast can be found in the story of the king Olaf Tryggvason who is considered to be the "baptizer" of Norway as he was the first to convert his country on a large scale. Olaf himself (as it is related in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*) was baptized by a Christian hermit who foretold him his future mission. The saga emphasizes the seriousness of Olaf's attitude towards his mission as well as the significance of learning and learnedness which the

new faith implied. On the contrary, his rivals, the Norwegian king Harald gráfeldr as well as the Danish king Harald Gormsson with his son Svein, perceive Christianity merely as one more instrument of political power.

Olaf's 'moral rebirth' is sometimes stated even rather straight-forwardly: "Óláfr... fór þá með friði, þvíat England var kristit, ok hann var ok kristinn" (*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* 32). But in many other cases his behaviour is described much more realistically: Olaf does not give up his viking raids, he only becomes more merciful (for example, he understands what damage his army does to the local inhabitants, and allows one of them to take his cattle back). And though the king does not reject violence as a method of the conversion of Norway he at first tries to find some other ways of influence upon his subjects (persuading them or demonstrating the absurdity of their old beliefs). And when he is forced to take more resolute measures a miracle often comes to his help making violence unnecessary. Even the episodes of unconcealed violence include some detail which helps the reader to see the situation in a different light: for instance, the inhumane murder of Eyvind seems to be approved by his inhuman nature – he says about himself that he is "einn andi kviknaðr í mannslikam með fjölkynngi Finna" (*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* 76). Moreover, Olaf displays tolerance in those cases where it can hardly be expected: for instance, he does not revenge the relatives of Gudrun after her attempt to stab him immediately after their wedding.

At the same time, the growth of violence and even greediness in the king's behaviour is little by little associated with his betrayal of his mission. His death in the battle is preceded by his foolish consent to win the dowry of his wife from her first husband. It is noteworthy that the more violence Olaf performs towards the enemies of Christianity, the more powerful become his own political opponents. Interestingly enough, the episode of the horrible execution of Raud (bearing almost mythological allusions to Gunnar's execution in the snake pit related in the "Edda") is very soon followed in the text by another nearly symbolic episode of a master having spoilt his own work (the close connection between the two is also emphasized by the fact that both mention the ship named the Serpent).

Thus, having become the baptizer of his native country, Olaf Tryggvason fails to become its holy protector because of his inability to morally resist his native milieu. His death (the mysterious disappearance under the water) can probably be interpreted as a symbol of ambiguity of his character and his historical role.

Hakon góði and Olaf Tryggvason are contrasted to each other both in their characters and achievements but neither of them succeeds in solving the dilemma – how to combine the behaviour of a Christian and the duties of a king. Hakon prefers peace with the bonds – and, being forced to concede to the pagan traditions of the country, fails to convert it. Olaf Tryggvason chooses war and violence – but finally gets entangled in the vernacular affairs and loses sight of his primary mission. The figure of Olaf helgi compensates the extremes and shortcomings of each demonstrating a stable development from aggressiveness to tolerance and from sacrifice to sanctity. Olaf helgi becomes a saint patron of his native country because he manages to resist its behavioural stereotypes. The conflict of Olaf with his environment is not only a political one. It is a conflict of life views and perceptions, behavioural preferences and appreciations. This appears to be seen from the organization of the narrative.

His ambitions and aggressiveness become clear already in his childhood: once, feeling hurt by his stepfather's request to saddle a horse, he saddled a goat for him. The same features, demonstrated later in his viking raids, help him to come to power in Norway. In his policy of the conversion of the country he, like his predecessor and godfather Olaf Tryggvason, uses quite resolute measures and very soon succeeds. But at the same time it is characteristic that while discussing his chances on his first arrival to Norway he asserts his obedience to God: "Vera má svá, ef guð vill" (*Óláfs saga helga*, 29). Whatever methods of

struggle he may choose to apply afterwards, from the very outset his self-will appears to be limited by his boundless faith. It is not his faith, of course, which makes him spare Hakon's life – his behaviour may be explained like a clever trick of a politician who does not wish to soil his reputation by one more murder. Nevertheless, he does not only proclaim but also proves his love for peace by refusing to pursue his enemy (he is rewarded by the Providence for that – Svein jarl soon dies) as well as to burn the five kings who conspired against him. His capture of the conspirers much improved his reputation but his mercy seems to have been ignored by the public opinion. Evidently, tolerance as a model of social behaviour did not yet take root in the mind of his contemporaries and remained an individual choice which might even spoil the image of a king.

However, king Olaf's choice was made, and he didn't only spare his worst enemy's life (having blinded and fettered Hrærek, of course) but for a long time tolerated his attempts to revenge (even when Hrærek tried to stab the king in the altar Olaf did not allow his friends to pay him back). In this respect Olaf differs a lot from his royal counterparts such as Olaf king of Sweden and Knut king of Denmark. Olaf the Swede is shown to stick to the law of vendetta; he agrees to make peace with Olaf Haraldsson under the pressure of his own subjects only. And it is here that a miracle first appears in the narration. The king of Norway who had long been waiting for that peace was rewarded for his patience by winning a happy (and even miraculous) lot and thus overcoming his rival (*chap. 94*). Knut the Dane is represented in the saga as an irritable and violent person ready to take rash and cruel decisions. For example, he immediately orders to kill Ulf jarl for beating him at chess – Knut sends the killer to the altar and orders the monks to continue their service after the murder (*chapt. 153*). The game of chess seems to acquire here a symbolic meaning: Knut is presented both as a short-sighted politician and a poor Christian. Olaf is also able to get into a rage but he is ready to forgive, too (*chapt. 155*). And he displays an ability to take into account other people's view while his political opponents are always concentrated on their own interests.

Whatever Olaf Haraldsson does in the saga he does for the sake of law and justice in his country (and for this very reason he is ready to show mercy for his enemies) while the noble men and bonds of Norway more appreciate their own independence, too often understood as a mere wilfulness. Here is an example. A man named Asbjörn breaks the king's veto bying corn in the south of Norway, afterwards gets insulted by the king's manager Thorir and some time later revenges the insult by chopping Thorir's head off in the presence of the king. The people who were present at the banquet did much to persuade the king to forgive Asbjörn appealing to the king's Christian feelings. Asbjörn was forgiven but later broke his promise to serve the king under the influence of his kinsmen's. The new 'state' consciousness of Olaf is contrasted in the the saga to the old 'tribal' consciousness of his opponents, and this contrast little by little begins to be associated with the opposition 'Christianity vs. paganism', too.

Like his predecessor Olaf Tryggvason, Olaf Haraldsson pursues his policy of Christianization in different ways – both peaceful and military and miraculous, among others. But the miracles themselves (not very numerous during his reign in Norway) only prove and make more explicit his personal concern for the state of matters in his country. In spite of many cases of violence Olaf's personal belief impressed the people, and this can be seen in the following episode: "Þat var einn dag, at konungr reið leið sína ok söng psálma sína; en er hann kom gegnt haugunum, nam hann stað ok mælti: "Þau skal segja orð mín maðr manni, at ek kalla ráð, at aldri siðan fari Noregskonungr í milli þessa hauga". Er þat ok sögn manna, at flestir konungar hafi þat varazk siðan." (*Óláfs saga helga, 121*). The seeming absurdity of the request became probably abated due to a charismatic gift of Olaf (his gift of insight is also described in the episode with a killer who could not stand Olaf's glance fixed upon him – *Óláfs saga helga, 81*).

And though betrayed by his friends (who were bribed by Knut) and having to go to exile, king Olaf sends Norway his blessing – erecting the roods at the places where he stops and spending nights in prayers. From this very moment everything he does is accompanied by miracles: Olaf appears to be covered by the aura of his future heavenly glory. And his intention to regain his power in Norway begins to be perceived not as an aggressive plan but as an aspiration for sacrificial service. As if summing up the saga says: “Svá er sagt, at Óláfr konungr var siðláttr ok bænærækninn til guðs alla stund ævi sinnar, en síðan er hann farnn, at ríki hans þvarr, en mótstöðumenn elfdusk, þá lagði hann allan hug á þat at gera guðs þjónustu.” (*Óláfs saga helga* 181). But even at this stage of the narration the author never idealizes the king: Olaf does not hesitate to chop off the head of an Icelander named Jökull who dared to seize his best ship. It is true, Olaf’s decision to return to Norway is shown to be prompted by a vision. But it is not only the visions and miracles which attract people to Olaf but his personal qualities which demonstrate his sincerity, faith, justice and love for his country.

In fact, the miracles which take place after Olaf’s death can be interpreted as a visual manifestation of his personality which reveals itself in numerous episodes before the battle of Stiklastaðir. He does not allow the unbaptized vikings to join his army as he wants to fight in the name of Christ – his earthly victory does not matter much for him in comparison to his heavenly mission. At the same time he refuses to punish those bonds who do not want to be on his side in the battle. His followers can’t understand him arguing that he had punished the same bonds when they rejected Christianity. Olaf explains: “Áttu vér þá guðs réttar at reka... Nú á ek hér nökkuru heimilla at veita nökkura frian, er þeir misgera við mik, en þá er þeir hötuðusk við guð... ok ef vér föllum í orrostu, þá er því vel ráðit at fara þangat eigi með ránfé...” (*Óláfs saga helga* 205). The most intimate connection between Olaf’s personality and his miracles can be illustrated by an episode in chapter 203. Olaf asks his warriors not to harm the fields and, though the harvest turns out to be trampled, it is restored due to Olaf’s prayer.

Approaching his end he looks at Norway from without and sees it as a whole (*chapter* 202). At this moment he appears to be a ‘stranger’ who can rise above and look upon his motherland in a different perspective. He at once does and does not belong it. His friends don’t always understand him but his enemies become struck by the aura of sanctity on his face at the moment of his death and get healed from their wounds. Thus, Olaf’s sanctity is presented by Snorri not like a formal attribute ascribed to the miracles – it is becoming an intrinsic feature of Olaf’s personality prepared by his personal rebirth.