

Sverris saga and Early Saga-Style

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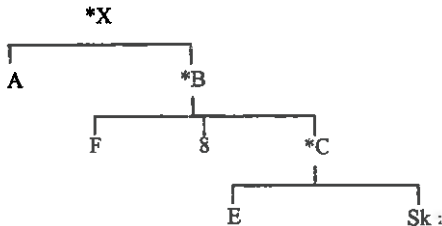
Sverris saga is in many respects unique in saga literature. It is one of the very first secular king's sagas, one of the oldest contemporary sagas, and also one of the oldest preserved sagas in the vernacular. According to the prologue, its first part is in fact a kind of an autobiography, dictated by King Sverrir himself, and the rest of the saga is said to be based on eye-witness accounts, presumably from both sides of the conflict. No saga provides as vivid a portrait of its protagonist as *Sverris saga*. The personality of this Faroese priest who became King of Norway has enchanted many scholars and inspired comments like the following:

Who was King Sverrir? There is something mysterious about him in all respects, just like some kind of a magic surrounding him. He fascinates and thrills us, we sense the spell of a genius, we feel that we are in the presence of a man about whom nobody can be indifferent, whom we indeed almost cannot resist admiring. And yet, we never quite can make him out. Many times he speaks in an ironic tone which makes us uncertain. We are left with a number of questions, and they all boil down to one central question: Who was he? (Koht 1952, 7—8)

On the other hand there are scholars who refuse to let themselves be allured and regard everything the saga says about Sverrir with scepticism, especially with regard to his parentage and his claim to the Norwegian crown.

The strong feelings which this medieval King has aroused present a true compliment to the author who nearly 800 years ago painted this striking portrait of a remarkable personality.

What follows is based on my work on an edition of *Sverris saga* for *Íslensk fornrit*. The saga is preserved in twenty-seven manuscripts of the full text, including five vellum manuscripts. I have compared all these manuscripts and this work has resulted in the following stemma:



Only two scholars have previously examined the relationships among the vellum manuscripts of the saga: Gustav Indrebø and Lárus H. Blöndal (Indrebø 1920, xxxi—li; Lárus H. Blöndal 1982, 12—52). My stemma diverges from theirs mainly with

: A: AM 327 4to, F: Flateyjarbók, G: Kgl sml 1005 fol., 8: Stock. perg. fol. nr 8, E: Eirspennill, AM 47 fol., Sk: Skálholtsbók yngri, AM 81a fol.

regard to the placement of Flateyjarbók, and also with regard to the Stockholm manuscript, which has not previously been examined and compared with the others. All the paper manuscripts turn out to be derived from preserved vellums with the exception of the three *Gullinskinna-copies containing the first fourteen chapters, excluding the prologue, and AM 304 fol. where there are lacunae in its original, Stock. perg. fol. nr 8.

A closer look at the stemma reveals that the preserved manuscripts fall into two separate groups. AM 327 fol. (A) must be considered a fairly accurate transcript of its original, but it contains some accidental omissions and errors which in most cases can be corrected through a comparison with the B-manuscripts. Thanks to this lucky coincidence of manuscript preservation, it is possible to get closer to and reconstruct a somewhat earlier stage of the saga-text. On this basis, it is worthwhile to try to reconsider some of the points of conflict in the early scholarship concerning *Sverris saga* and early saga-style.

The extent of 'Grýla'

The disputes about *Sverris saga* have mainly concerned two related topics: whether Karl Jónsson can be considered as a sole author of the saga, and the exact parameters of his 'Grýla', which, to quote Theodore Andersson, 'have led to one of the most inconclusive debates in all of our kings' saga studies' (Andersson 1985, 215). Let us begin by looking once again into this question.

According to the prologue, the beginning of the book (*upphaf bókarinnar*) was written by Abbot Karl Jónsson of Þingeyrar in the presence of and at the command of King Sverrir himself. About this 'beginning' we learn that it was relatively short (*er sú frásögn eigi langt fram komin*), and that it included descriptions of some of Sverrir's battles:

and as the book advances, his strength grows, foreshadowing the greater events. They therefore called this part of the book *Grýla*, that is bugbear (*Kölluðu þeir þann hlut bókar fyrir því Grýlu*). The latter part of the book is written according to the relation of those who remembered what happened, having actually seen or heard it, and some of them had been with King Sverri in battles.²

Many scholars have had difficulties in correlating this information with historical facts and the saga itself. Karl Jónsson is believed to have been in Norway 1185—1188, and since he began writing the biography of Sverrir, it is most unlikely that his account wasn't meant to extend beyond the decisive battle at Fimreiti, which took place the year before he arrived in Norway. This battle was an absolute turning point in Sverrir's career, and for this reason many scholars have drawn a line between *Grýla* and 'the latter part of the book'. But as others have pointed out, this conflicts with other information and circumstances: this part is not short; it includes 100 chapters, more than half of the saga; there are descriptions of not only some, but a considerable number of Sverrir's battles, and also accounts of episodes which must derive from 'the relation of those who remembered what happened', not only in Sverrir's camp but in

² J. Sephton's translation: *Sverrissaga, the Saga of King Sverri of Norway*. London 1899, p. 1.

his enemy's as well. It has also been pointed out that this section of the saga includes a couple of episodes which are not exactly flattering for King Sverrir, so that it is not likely that he 'sat over' Karl here and 'settled what he should write' (Sephton, 1).

On various grounds different scholars have assumed *Gryla* to have included chapters 17, 31, 39, 40, 43, 100 or 109 of the present *Sverris saga*. One of the reasons why it has been so difficult to draw the line between *Gryla* and the 'latter part' is the saga's homogeneity in vocabulary and style. Ludvig Holm-Olsen and Lárus H. Blöndal came independently to the conclusion that Karl Jónsson's *Gryla* only extended to chapter 31 (the year 1178). In these first chapters, Holm-Olsen observed some traits that differed from the rest of the saga. This included instances where Sverrir is quoted as an informant, statements in the narrative about God's intervention in his favour and descriptions of Sverrir's own thoughts, feelings and personal reactions (Holm-Olsen 1953, 57—67). A further argument is that from chapter 32 onwards, we have many examples of simultaneous narration where we are being plunged alternately into Sverrir's camp and that of the enemy.

Lárus H. Blöndal's theory also held that Karl Jónsson first wrote *Gryla* (c 1—31) and later, presumably upon returning to Iceland, concluded 'Abbot Karl's book', containing the first 100 chapters, ending with the battle at Fimreiti and the death of King Magnús Erlingsson. Whether it was Abbot Karl or another writer who at a later date completed the saga is left uncertain.

Practically all the scholars who have discussed this question have automatically assumed that what in the prologue is called 'the beginning of the book' (*upphaf bókarinnar*), written under the personal direction of King Sverrir himself, is the same text as what people designated the 'part of the book called *Gryla*' (*Kölluðu þeir þann hlut bókar fyrir því Grylu*). In *Flateyjarbók*, which contains an amplified version of the prologue, there is no connection made between these different first parts. According to this, on the one hand you have *Gryla*, where Sverrir's 'strength grows', and on the other 'Perfecta Fortitudo', where 'God granted him such might that he crushed and destroyed every band of unruly men that rose against him' (Sephton, 240).

Let us first confirm that there is no philological evidence for the independent existence of *Gryla*, no matter how that part of the saga is delimited; nor is there evidence for an 'Abbot Karl's Book', containing the first 100 chapters. As Ludvig Holm-Olsen himself pointed out, the aim of these often-quoted lines of the prologue is above all to demonstrate the reliability of the saga. The informant of the first part is the hero himself, and the undefined rest is written after the narration of those who had seen and heard what really happened (*visa et audita*). (Holm-Olsen 1953, 45). And *memoria* can be unreliable, so it is important that '[s]ome of these stories were fixed in memory, having been written down directly the events occurred, and they have not been altered since.' (Sephton, 1).

I think that the reason why scholars have found it so difficult to determine the parameters of *Gryla* is simply that it extended far beyond Sverrir's own dictation. The beginning of the book (*upphaf bókarinnar*) and the part of the book called *Gryla* are two different things. Gustav Indrebø and Ludvig Holm-Olsen made some very useful stylistic observations about the saga-text which confirm the impression of homogeneity in the vocabulary, and also that the beginning is narrated almost entirely through Sverrir's own focalization. Holm-Olsen pointed out that one of the main

characteristics of the first chapters is the way in which the feelings of Sverrir and his reactions to what befalls him are described (Holm-Olsen 1953, 65):

Honum fékk þessi saga mikillar áhyggju, ok reikaði hans hugr mjök, þótti torsóttligt ... honum sýndisk lítilmannligt at hafask ekki at ... ok er hann minntisk hversu þeir draumar höfðu þýddir verit ... þessir sömu draumar kveikðu huginn hans til hefndar eftir sína frændr (c. 4)

Sverrir var á hverri stundu mjök hugsjúkr um sitt mál (c. 6)

Þetta þótti Sverri mikit auka sína harma ok vandkvæði (k. 7)

Var honum þá mjök angrsamt (c. 11)

Gerðusk margir hlutir erfiðir ok þungligir (c. 12)

Such examples can only be found in the first twelve chapters. A close parallel is the narrator's evaluative comment in chapter 18:

því at margan villistíg varð hann at troða ok hans menn áðr bæði væri rekit svá margra ok stórra harma sem hann átti þeim feðgum at gjalda.

Holm-Olsen also examined instances of verbs in the narrative denoting Sverrir's feelings, thoughts and perceptions: *hugsa*, *koma í hug*, *hugleiða*, *finnask*, *sýnask*, and *sjá* in the sense conceive, realize. Ten out of twenty-one examples of the verb *þykkja*(*sk*) are located in the first 22 chapters (Holm-Olsen 1952, 66—67. (In fact, this is not the total number of occurrences of *þykkjask*. For some reason, Holm-Olsen did not count the seven examples of the verb in the dream episode in chapter 5 or the ten examples in chapter 10)). Such instances in the narrative are only to be found in the beginning of the saga. They are most frequent in the first 12 chapters; after chapter 22 there is only one example, in chapter 32. The first instance of simultaneous narration comes in chapter 28.

Only the beginning of the book was written in the presence of and at the command of Sverrir himself. This part possibly extends to the first twenty-five chapters. From chapter 28 onwards, the narration is no longer confined to the point of view of Sverrir and his men. Here we come across the first instance of simultaneous narration, alternating between Sverrir and his enemies. Still, the author continues to rely upon sources from Sverrir's closest supporters, and it is quite plausible that Sverrir himself was Abbot Karl's informant for some episodes, even though he no longer 'sat over him and settled what he should write'.

Questions about composition and style

If we consider *Sverris saga* as the creation of one author, we must necessarily ask new questions concerning its composition. Carol Clover has pointed to Latin influence in the middle part of the saga (chs. 32—100), and that it is 'thoroughly and richly stranded', whereas the preceding part is 'almost wholly monothematic' (Clover 1982, 165—167). The first chapters of the saga are clearly monothematic and subjective. They are also characterized by a couple of authorial interventions and some abstract and evaluative words, compared with the seemingly objective narrative in the rest of the saga. But these features have close parallels in the speeches, which bear witness to the skill of the author and his solid rhetorical education.

In an article on the structure of *Hrafnkels saga*, Sverrir Tómasson inserted the following brief comment on Sverris saga's composition:

Sverris saga hlutast og í tvo helminga, *fortitudo* og *perfecta fortitudo*, og geta menn þá hætt leitinni að Grýlu Karls ábóta. (Sverrir Tómasson 1994, 792)

I can say that the second part of this sentence proved very useful to me when I was beginning to look into the saga. But concerning the first part, I am doubtful.

Lately, Ármann Jakobsson has asserted, with reference to the statement of Sverrir Tómasson above, that

Structurally, *Sverris saga* is a diptych. The first half follows Sverrir's road to the throne and ends with the fall of King Magnús Erlingsson. The second revolves around the troubles of King Sverrir in his kingship, since the death of King Magnús certainly did not bring strife to an end in Norway, and Sverrir still had to deal with countless rivals and pretenders. (Ármann Jakobsson, 2000, 393).

William W. Ryding's examples of bipartition in twelfth-century narrative certainly seem to have little in common with the structure of *Sverris saga* (Ryding 1971, 115—139). The saga is told in chronological order. The sacral mission of Sverrir and his legitimate claim to the throne of Norway are predicted and proved by his dreams and later by his deeds. These dreams, as well as Sverrir's implied identification with King David in the Scripture, are confined to the very first chapters of the saga, and they are recalled in chapter 99, in Sverrir's speech at the burial of King Magnús Erlingsson, where he quotes David's Psalm 56.2 and interprets it as a prophecy, now fulfilled:

for Magnus, my kinsman, fought against me, prepared to destroy my life; but God delivered me, now as aforetime, and transferred his kingdom to me (Sephton 124, cf Gurevich 1992, 83—84).

Here we have an indisputable turning-point in the saga, but it is difficult to see the part concluded here and the second half (chs. 101—182) as a deliberately organized bipartite narration. *Sverris saga* is told in a direct chronological order, as a *historia*, and resembles in many ways the Latin classical historical monographs. This is a description of constant raids and battles, with a shift of focus from one camp to another, and where the speeches of the leaders are interwoven with the episodes described. It may be relevant here that according to recent research, *Rómverja saga*, the translation of Sallust's *Catilina* and *Jugurtha* and Lucan's *Pharsalia*, are older than formerly believed and have been dated to around 1180 at the latest (Hofmann 1986). Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, who is preparing a critical edition of *Rómverja saga* for Stofnun Árna Magnússonar in Iceland, has pointed to the monastery at Þingeyrar as its possible place of origin (Þorbjörg Helgadóttir 1996, 205—206).

Style of the A-manuscript

The manuscript AM 327 4to differs somewhat in style from the other vellum manuscripts of *Sverris saga*. It is slightly more elaborate, contains some additional descriptive adjectives and adverbs, as well as figures of speech such as simple similes and metaphors and parallelisms and antithesis which are less frequent in the *B*-manuscripts. This also applies to abstract word-pairs like the following:

gaman ok skemtan (c. 6), *harma ok vandkvæði* (7), *traust ok trúnað* (43), *grið ok frið* (49), *svik ok vélræði* (65) *ágirnd ok ofsa* (80), *fals ok hegómi* (116), *stoð ok styrk* (150), *fǫng eða efni* (151), *hjúkun ok hjálp* (180).

All these examples are taken from the narrative, but they are of course more frequent in the speeches.

What strikes us here is the similarity to the style of the oldest translated Saints' Lives, and the dissimilarity with the classical saga-style with its simple sentence-structure, terse narrative and absence of all rhetorical ornament. Also striking is that the *A*-manuscript contains more of these 'foreign, learned' traits than the others.

I am not going to plunge deeply into the discussion about learned style and popular style, but these categories have been referred to as arguments for establishing the version of *Sverris saga* closest to Karl Jónsson's original, or that of his successor. I am referring to Halvdan Koht's article in *Edda* 1914, where he compared the manuscripts AM 327 4to (*A*) and Eirspennill (*E*) and asserted that these two texts showed in a nutshell the difference between Icelandic and Norwegian literary style. Koht counted the words in one chapter and found out that the *A*-text contained 40% more words than *E*, without any additional substance. The difference, he thought, was due to the tendency of the writer of *A* towards rhetorical amplification, e.g. heaping up parallel nouns where the *E*-text only contained one well-chosen word, showing the concentration and moderation of Icelandic saga-style with its roots in oral narrative tradition. Koht's conclusion was that the *E*-text was close to the original. Shortly after it was written, a Norwegian cleric living in Trondheim obtained it and wrote his own version (*A*), containing some amplification and learned digressions which were fashionable at the time and typical for Norwegian saga-style. When the essay was reprinted, in 1921, Koht had abandoned this theory, because Finnur Jónsson had then demonstrated by a comparison of the texts that *E* contained a condensed version of the original.

Now, a further comparison shows that such traits can be traced back to an older original of all preserved manuscripts of the saga. I shall take just a few examples:

Chapter 9:

bundu þeir ráð sín ok félag *A*; bundu þeir sitt félag *F, E*, bundu þeir ráð sitt saman *Sk*

Chapter 20:

bráða ok háleita miskunn *A*, bráða miskunn *E*, háleita miskunn *F*

Chapter 26:

En er bændr hættu at berjask ok fundu at þeir drápusk sjálfir *A*; er bændr hættu at berjask *F*; en er Jamtr fundu at þeir drápusk sjálfir *E*; ok er bændr fundu þat *Sk*

Chapter 33:

hverr við sína skipsögn sem á land steig ok búinn varð *A*; hverr með sinni skipshöfn sem búin var *F, E*; hverr með sína skipshöfn sem á landit sté *Sk*

Chapter 88:

á þiljunum eða fram í söxunum *A, Sk*; fram á saxinu *F*; fram á söxum *8*; fram á þiljunum *E*

Chapter 92:

felmr eða flótti *A*; felmr *F, Sk, 8*; flótti *E*

Chapter 106:

skipum eða skútum *A*; skútum *E, F, 8*; skipum *Sk*

Chapter 124:

er þar vǫru ok fyrr vǫru nefndir *A*, cf *8*; er nefndir vǫru fyrr *F*; er þar vǫru *E, Sk*

It is rather rare for manuscript relations to be such that it is possible to use them to reconstruct an earlier stage of the text. If the *A*-manuscript had got lost, we should have a quite different idea about the original. What we find here is a tendency in the transcripts to pare down the rhetorical and syntactical figures in favour of a more concise and straightforward narrative style.

In fact, we come across a similar tendency in some other sagas. It has turned out that some of the saga-versions which have been considered most original because of their classical style, so close to their oral prototype, in fact owe this compliment to having been trimmed by a clever copyist (see e.g. Guðni Kolbeinsson, Jónas Kristjánsson, 1979). So they are most likely very far from the oral tales which they originally sprang from.

The style of *Sverris saga*, with its simple *ornatus* in the narrative and more complicated rhetorical devices in the speeches, has close similarities to the style of the oldest saints' lives, as demonstrated by Collings (1969), Jónas Kristjánsson (1985) and Roughton (2002). It was not less 'oral' on that account. We must not forget that all the sagas were intended for reading aloud through the centuries. The way they are formulated shows us what appealed to their audiences at different times.

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