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Ideology and Propaganda in *Sverris saga*

1 The Problem¹

The “objectivity” of the sagas has for a long time been a matter of dispute between historians and literary scholars. Since the research of Halvdan Koht early in this century, the more or less accepted opinion among historians has been that the sagas are biased under their deceptively objective surface. They are the products of the violent struggles between the monarchy, the Church and the aristocracy in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries and can be grouped according to their attitude to these struggles. Consequently, it is an important task for any editor or commentator to identify the “party label” of the work in question (Koht, 1921a and 1921b; Schreiner, 1926; Sandvik, 1955:45 ff., 98 ff.; Brekke, 1958:49 ff. etc.; Helle, 1958:72 ff.). This has provoked reactions from literary scholars, who have defended the relative objectivity of the sagas, even expressing anger at these accusations against “the honest old saga writers”.² Recently, however, literary scholars seem to have moved in the historians’ direction (Lönnroth, 1970 and 1976; Magerøy, 1988).

In earlier studies of *Heimskringla* and other historical works from the medieval North, I have argued that Koht interprets the sagas according to a model derived from nineteenth and to some extent twentieth century politics, when history served to give identity to social groups and historical arguments were used to demonstrate that “the logic of evolution” worked in a specific direction and could not be resisted, and that medieval historiography was far less concerned with propaganda for particular parties or ideologies than has often been maintained, primarily having a narrative function (Bagge, 1989:128 ff.; 1991:68–82, 109–11, 192–201; 1991a). In this article I want to treat *Sverris saga* from a similar point of view. However, while *Heimskringla* deals with the fairly distant past and belongs to an Icelandic milieu without any strong attachment to Norwegian parties or dynasties,

¹ The article is a revised and extended version of my paper for the saga conference in Gothenburg, printed in Vol. I of the collection of papers, pp. 32–42.

² Lie, 1960–61:30. See also Lie, 1960–61:29 ff. with references and 1937:85 ff., 119 ff. and Paasche, 1967. Helle, 1960–61:348 partly agrees with Lie, pointing to the problems in the traditional historical approach and suggesting further research.

Sverris saga is clearly written in more or less close connection to the king and his successors. It is thus far more likely to express some kind of dynastic or party ideology.

So far, historiographical studies have largely aimed at tracing the attitudes of individual authors to controversial issues of the period. According to Koht, such attitudes have to be uncovered through reading between the lines, noticing small remarks that point at an evaluation and so forth (Koht, 1921a:77 f.). But how much do these attitudes actually tell us about the saga literature? As is well known, the sagas mostly consist of narrative of events. This narrative is not neutral information that can be overlooked by modern scholars. It reflects the main interests of the author and his audience. Any theory of saga ideology must explain why this is so. In this way, the sagas can be used to understand more fundamental aspects of culture, mentality and society in the Nordic countries in the Middle Ages than emerge from a traditional analysis of the ideology or bias of individual sagas. To make use of a modern analogy – which may turn out to be fairly close: We all know that newspapers are biased and that their presentation of the news are influenced by the political or other loyalties of editors or journalists. However, we do not understand the function of the modern press by analysing this bias. The fundamental fact is that there is a market for news in modern society and that both the definition of “news” and the contents of newspapers in general are largely determined by some kind of shared ideology in society as a whole.

According to these principles, I shall in the following discuss both the general ideology, common to *Sverris saga* and the saga literature in general, and the ideology of this particular saga. As for the latter, I shall try to analyse its contents more precisely, or, in other words, answer the question: how did a twelfth century Norwegian king want to appear before his people, and what kind of arguments did he use to impress them?

2 Grýla

The picture of *Sverris saga* as propaganda is above all based on the first part, called *Grýla*, which according to the prologue was written by the Icelandic abbot Karl Jónsson while the king himself was “sitting by” and telling him what to include. *Grýla* is commonly dated to Karl’s stay in Norway between 1185 and 1188. Both the statement in the prologue and the actual contents of *Grýla* strongly suggest that it was intended to present the king in a favourable light. It also seems likely that the propagandistic aim of the saga was to prove that Sverrir had a just cause. Holm-Olsen, particularly, has emphasized this in showing that *Grýla* must have ended early in Sverrir’s career, in

1178, i.e. before his great victories. Holm-Olsen further points to *Grýla*'s similarity to hagiographic literature in its emphasis on God and the miraculous and in its descriptions of signs and portents accompanying Sverrir from his birth (Holm-Olsen, 1953:71 ff.).

Sverrir's origin would seem to be the crucial problem in any apology for him. He claimed to be the son of King Sigurðr munnr. His arguments for this claim, as brought forward in *Grýla*, do not appear particularly convincing, nor have they convinced the majority of modern historians. We cannot exclude the possibility that they seemed more convincing to Sverrir's contemporaries but there is a strong likelihood that they were not. Sverrir had not been formally recognized by his alleged father, in contrast to most pretenders before him. Neither had he undergone an ordeal to prove his case, as did several other pretenders, both before and after Sverrir. He had no other evidence for his origin than what his mother had told him. And above all: when initially refusing the demand of the exiled Birkibeinar to become their leader, Sverrir himself expresses his doubt on the matter.³

Another feature that seems curious to a modern reader expecting an apology for Sverrir is the description of Erlingr skakki's and his son's government in the beginning of the saga. They are popular rulers, with strong support from the people. This point is repeated in several episodes, both in *Grýla* and in the second part (SS: 3, 52, 63, 103 etc.). Sverrir is thus not represented as the liberator from tyranny. Quite the contrary, the saga author is not afraid of representing him and his men as disturbers of the peace and the subjects of violent hatred from the people (Lunden, 1977:64 f.).

These features are best explained from what may be called the "David and Goliath"-pattern of the saga. The evidence of Sverrir's just cause is neither his good arguments for his royal origin nor his superior political programme. It is his astonishing success, despite all odds. There are plenty of references to God as the cause of this. Sverrir dreams that he fights in St. Óláfr's army against Erlingr and Magnús (SS: 4) and that the prophet Samuel gives him royal unction in a church (SS: 9 f.). Some of his successes are sheer miracles, as when his men cross a lake on a raft, which sinks as soon as they leave it (SS: 13). On other occasions, Sverrir's success or salvation is due to curious coincidences, which any pious believer will interpret as God's intervention. Thus, a terrible storm suddenly ends after Sverrir's speech and the sun breaks through (SS: 22 f.). He saves his men by managing to light a fire when all others have failed (SS: 23). In a desperate situation, when Sverrir is

³ "weit æk oc eigi um æt mina. oc ganga þes allir dulþir nema þat eina er ec segi fra ein saman" (SS: 8). In the second part of the saga Sverrir's alleged half-brother, Eiríkr, undergoes an ordeal to prove that he is the son of Sigurðr but refuses to swear that he is also Sverrir's brother (SS: 65). On Sverrir's origin, see most recently Stefánsson, 1984.

attacked by Erlingr and Magnús with a greatly superior fleet, he prays to God and St. Óláfr and is saved by fog (SS: 35). Even Sverrir's whole life may be taken as evidence of this. The saga underlines Sverrir's obscure origins, the wretched creatures he had under his command, their hardships and difficulties and their immense numerical inferiority in battles against their enemies. The prologue underlines this in its discussion of credibility: no one would believe these stories if they were not attested by trustworthy witnesses (SS: 1).

Despite the strongly religious flavour of *Grýla*, the same applies to this work as to the rest of the saga literature. It mainly deals with wars and battles and dramatic events. To a modern observer it seems curious how little "ideology" there is in the religious propaganda. Why does God protect Sverrir? Why does he want him to be king instead of Magnús? Evidently, Sverrir did have a legal claim, and God's assistance may be interpreted as evidence of its justice. But the main content of *Grýla*'s message simply seems to be that Sverrir has God's support.

Turning to the "ideological" aspect of the "secular" story of *Grýla* we find a strong similarity to the religious one. We still have to do with the "David and Goliath"-pattern. Sverrir defeats enemies that are greatly superior in numbers (e.g. SS: 14 f., 15 f., 24, 25 f.). But he also knows his and his men's limits and withdraws when the strength of the enemy is too overwhelming (e.g. SS: 17, 24). He finds a solution in every difficulty. And he inspires his men to do their best and to endure defeats, dangers and hard marches (e.g. SS: 22). Despite the sensational and even miraculous aspect of Sverrir's victories, the author does not generally describe Sverrir's success as a miracle. On the contrary, we understand it better than most military events described in the saga literature. The author describes in detail Sverrir's various plans and stratagems and makes it clear that the principal reason for his success is his own ability as a commander. Thus, God seems to have very much the same function in *Grýla* as luck in other sagas, including the second part of *Sverris saga* (see below): it is in principle unpredictable, but tends to favour the man of superior ability.

To sum up so far: the main point in both the "religious" and "secular" ideology of *Grýla* is to present Sverrir as an extremely successful commander, who, like David, defeats largely superior forces through his own ability and God's help. This does not necessarily exclude the possibility that *Grýla* was composed to defend Sverrir's right to the throne. As pointed out by Holm-Olsen (1953:103 f.) and others, the author of *Grýla* may have regarded Sverrir's success as an argument for his claim. Sverrir's success can therefore be interpreted as a kind of ordeal. The question then remains whether the defence of Sverrir's right to the throne is the author's ultimate aim or the description of Sverrir's success is an end in itself.⁴

3 The Second Part of the Saga

The rest of the saga, which was written without Sverrir's direct influence, differs from *Grýla* in its more "objective" style, leaving the protagonists, notably Sverrir, to comment and draw conclusions from the events. Thus, as Koht and others have pointed out, it is Sverrir and not the author who refers to God's providence (Koht, 1921b:184 f.; Indrebø, 1920:lxiv; Holm-Olsen, 1953:61 ff.). Further, while *Grýla* almost always presents the events from Sverrir's point of view, the author of the second part frequently changes the point of view from Sverrir to his adversaries and back, often giving the latter as much attention as the former.⁵ It is also noteworthy that the second half of *Sverris saga*, and particularly the part of it covering the years 1179–84 (the last phase of the war against Magnús Erlingsson) has an unusual number of very elaborate speeches, many of which are held by Sverrir's adversaries, though the majority by Sverrir himself. The author has thus made an effort to present the arguments and ideas of the parties.⁶ The difference between the two parts may then be explained as the result of the author's greater independence, as Sverrir was not "sitting by" any longer. However, this difference can also be explained as part of the general trend in the development of the classical saga: the author retreats into the background, while speeches and dialogues serve as comments and interpretation (Holm-Olsen, 1977, 1987).

Consequently, the fact that Sverrir rather than the author himself interprets the events, does not necessarily mean a more "objective" attitude on the part of the latter. Actually, Sverrir's speeches contain essentially the

⁴ As pointed out by James Knirk in the discussion in Gothenburg, the emphasis on success in *Grýla* may have some consequences for Holm-Olsen's argument that *Grýla* only covers the first 31 chapters of the extant saga, i.e. the first two years of Sverrir's career. If the point of *Grýla* was to demonstrate Sverrir's right to the throne, this is entirely logical, whereas it is more difficult to explain why a work intended to celebrate Sverrir's success did not include his great victory over Erlingr skakki in 1179. However, as Holm-Olsen himself admits, it is difficult to pin down one exact point where *Grýla* ended; we must allow for the possibility that the author of the second part rearranged the final part of *Grýla* to fit it into the rest of the work (Holm-Olsen, 1953:82 f.). Further, even though *Grýla* most probably did not include the death of Erlingr skakki in 1179, we do not know whether the author planned to stop in 1178 or he meant to continue his narrative later. In any case, even in its present form *Grýla* gives ample evidence of Sverrir's success, skill as a commander and God's protection of him. In the prologue the author also refers to *Grýla* as containing the first examples of Sverrir's successes, which indicate that greater victories are to come. "... er su fra-sogn eigi langt fram komin. þar er sagt fra nockorum hans orrostum. Oc sva sem a liðr bokina vex hans styrkr" (SS: 1).

⁵ E.g. in the description of the two great battles of Kalvskinnet and Fimreite (SS: 36–45 and 89–101). Particularly the latter is a masterpiece of composition, with frequent shifts in point of view at dramatic moments.

⁶ Evidently, it is difficult to know to what extent speeches reflect what was actually said and to what extent they are the author's own composition. See Knirk, 1981:114 ff. with references.

same message as *Grýla*.⁷ Sverrir outlines his tactics before battles and urges his men in eloquent words to fight well, thus demonstrating his skill as a commander. He refers to his luck and to God's help, and he interprets his victories as the sign of God's favour, in full accordance with the "David and Goliath"-ideology of *Grýla*. Like the author of *Grýla* he is vague regarding the evidence of his origin but comes forward very strongly in favour of the alleged ancient law that only the son of a king can succeed to the throne, a law Erlingr skakki violated by making his son king (e.g. SS: 43, 68, 106). By contrast, Erlingr and Magnús appeal to the unction and coronation of Magnús and the consent of the people as the legal foundation of Magnús' rule (e.g. SS: 67, 96). Comparing the battle-speeches one would be inclined to trust Sverrir more than Magnús, because of his confidence in himself and his grasp of the strategic situation. Apart from the fact that Sverrir is allowed to speak more often than his adversaries, the author does not seem to exert himself to make Sverrir's arguments sound more convincing. Sverrir, however, is the winner. There is thus reason to believe that the author of the second part, like the author of *Grýla*, regards Sverrir's success as the proof of God's favour.

Sverrir's speeches are mostly directed at his own men. Occasionally, however, he appeals to the population in general. Two of the most important of these speeches are the ones following the death of his greatest adversaries, Erlingr and Magnús. He then addresses the townspeople of respectively Nidaros and Bergen, including the adherents of the dead enemies. Both speeches are strongly religious. The first one opens with the statement that a great change has taken place, one man having replaced three: Sverrir has become king, earl and archbishop. He then refers to Archbishop Eysteinn's promise that all who die fighting for Erlingr and Magnús will be received directly in heaven, exhorting the people to rejoice at the thought of so many men entering heaven on one day. Then he changes, uncovering the irony of the first half of the speech: But if these promises do not hold true, then it is necessary to pray God to forgive these men their sins. Sverrir then turns to his favourite topic, Erlingr's sin in usurping the throne for his son (SS: 42 ff.). In the second speech, he develops this topic further, starting with a quotation from a psalm, which he then applies to himself: Evil men have oppressed him all day but God has saved him. For God has always been against the arrogant, as is evident from the stories of the Old Testament, of Adam, Pharaoh and Saul. From these exalted examples Sverrir turns to the present, that is to Erlingr and Magnús, their arrogance and oppression of Sverrir's kinsmen and even the whole people of Norway, who were governed by men who had no right to rule. Now, God has raised "a little and low man

⁷ On these speeches, see Indrebø, 1920:lxvii ff. and Knirk, 1981:99 ff.

from the skerries” to put an end to this arrogance. In the rest of the speech Sverrir then refers to the actual feelings of the people, most of whom would have preferred him to be dead and Magnús to be alive. Nevertheless, Sverrir may happen to die in his bed (SS: 105 ff.).

Despite a few references to the king as the ruler of the people, these speeches differ very little from the “internal ones”, directed to Sverrir’s own men. Sverrir has no illusion of being popular or of fighting on behalf of the people. His ideology concerns only his right to the throne. Evidently, he insists very strongly on this, depicting his enemies as sinners and usurpers. But he gives no detailed evidence for the justice of his cause, thus behaving in full accordance with the “David and Goliath”-ideology of *Grýla*: Sverrir’s success proves that he is favoured by God and thus that his claims are just. However, both these and other speeches show Sverrir as a good Christian, forgiving his enemies and urging others to do the same. One of the chief examples of Sverrir the ruler speaking to the people is his speech against drink and against the German merchants, selling wine in Bergen (SS: 110 f.). The saga gives other, occasional references to such matters, but they remain marginal (SS: 103, 110 f., 137 f., 195). Sverrir of *Sverris saga* is primarily a leader in war, and the relationship between him and his men is far more important than his relationship to the people. This is also expressed in the author’s last characterization of him (the *elogium*), in which he is mainly depicted from his men’s point of view as the great leader in war, while the inscription on his grave that is quoted contains a few conventional phrases on him as the ruler of the country (SS: 194 f.).

The part of the saga covering the years 1179–84 seems fairly “objective” in its description of Sverrir’s enemies. In particular Magnús Erlingsson receives considerable sympathy, and during his last years, he is depicted as something like a tragic hero (e.g. SS: 96). The description of his father, Erlingr skakki, is more negative but even he emerges as a great man, dying bravely in battle (SS: 41). The sympathetic portrait of Magnús could possibly be explained by the assumption that this part of the saga was originally commissioned by Magnús and was then integrated into the saga of Sverrir after his victory (Blöndal, 1982). Although we cannot exclude this possibility, it is hardly sufficient as an explanation. This part of the saga is so well arranged that the passages on Magnús must have been thoroughly reworked to fit into the new context. Consequently, it would not have been difficult for the author to change the characterization of him, had he so wished. It must also be noted that *Grýla* does not differ from the second part by presenting Sverrir’s adversaries in an unfavourable light but simply by not saying very much about them.

By contrast, the part of the saga covering the war against the Baglar (1196–1202) has sometimes been described as more propagandistic and less

“objective” than the one dealing with Magnús (Brekke, 1958:49 ff.; Blöndal, 1982:104 ff., 142 ff., cf. 197, 201). Admittedly, none of the chieftains of the Baglar is described in such detail and given such tragic-heroic dimensions as Magnús, and one of them, Bishop Nikolás, even emerges as the villain of the story. However, we cannot draw too general conclusions from this. The description of Magnús may have been determined both by literary reasons, that the author had been able to work more carefully with this part, and by the fact that he was by far the most important of Sverrir’s enemies. He was the most difficult to defeat and he had the highest rank: he was the only one of Sverrir’s enemies who had been anointed and who had ruled as sole king of the whole country. The latter aspect should not be overlooked in the status conscious “saga society”. To judge from *Heimskringla*, persons of the highest status usually – though not universally – receive more detailed and more favourable characterizations than persons of lower rank (Bagge, 1991:152 f.).

Then why is Nikolás pictured so negatively? The most obvious explanation is that he fails to measure up to the saga standard of how a leader should behave in war. He is a coward and runs away under attack. However, the author or the Birkibeinar may well have invented this trait to blacken their enemy. Moreover, both Sverrir himself and the author hint that the great king himself was not particularly brave in face to face combat (e.g. SS: 136) – as a matter of fact, Sverrir’s self-irony in this field is truly remarkable, almost shocking in this masculine, warrior society. But it was probably evident to all of Sverrir’s men that the king avoided face to face combat in order to lead his men. Did Nikolás do the same? Was he the only one of Sverrir’s enemies with the same tactical and strategic skill, so that he had to be ridiculed because he was so dangerous? We do not know, but we can point to other reasons for the Birkibeinar to hate Nikolás. First, he was an apostate. This was by no means unusual in the Norwegian civil wars and both parties seem generally to have taken a relaxed attitude towards this problem. But Nikolás was an apostate to an unusual degree. He had been Sverrir’s enemy, had been pardoned, been appointed bishop with Sverrir’s consent, had held a high position at Sverrir’s court and had then been one of the instigators of the rebellion against him. Secondly, he might be accused of not playing the game by the rules. As a bishop, he had a special protection, and the contemporary churchmen loudly announced that they were too holy to intervene in the horror and bloodshed of war. One can easily understand the indignation of warriors who had to fight an enemy whom they were forbidden to kill but who was nevertheless able to do them considerable damage.

In any case, the negative description of Bishop Nikolás is an exception. The author has little, either negative or positive, to say about the rest of the leading Baglar. Towards the end of the saga, we get a closer view and a fairly

sympathetic impression of Hreiðarr sendimaðr, the leader of the small group of Baglar who heroically withstood Sverrir's siege of the castle of Tønsberg for twenty weeks, until they had to surrender shortly before Christmas 1201 (SS: 185–92). When Sverrir fell ill shortly afterwards, “he had many conversations with Hreiðarr, who was a wise man and knew many things” (SS: 193).

As for the Baglar in general, the author often refers to descriptions of them by Birkibeinar as well as by ordinary people as rapacious and disturbers of the peace (e.g. SS: 157 f.). He describes in some detail how they decided to put Bergen to fire in 1198 and how they carried out their plan, adding that the inhabitants of the city remembered Bishop Nikolás as responsible for this act (SS: 157 f.). Actually, this was a kind of “total war” that was quite exceptional during the Norwegian civil wars. However, the author does not attempt to embellish the behaviour of the Birkibeinar towards the civilian population, often hinting at their bad reputation (e.g. SS: 77, 88, 123, 154, cf. also 87 ff., 183 f.). This is partly to be understood against the same background as the references to the popularity of Erlingr and Magnús in *Grýla*. The saga reflects the attitude of professional warriors, who did not care very much about the reactions of the ordinary people and who were not afraid of being accused of plundering farmers and merchants. However, according to Sverrir's ambition of being a great ruler in peace as well as in war, the author presents the king himself as not responsible for such acts (e.g. SS: 77, 88, 137), except when he punishes the farmers for insubordination or rebellion.

One field in which Sverrir emerges in a more favourable light than his adversaries is in his treatment of captive enemies (SS: 83, 85, 124, 160 f.). In some instances, notably after the surrender of the Baglar at Tønsberg, he points to the Christian doctrine of forgiveness as his motive (SS: 192). By contrast, Erlingr and Magnús usually kill captive Birkibeinar (e.g. SS: 71). Whether true or not, this is clearly an example of the author wanting to give a more favourable picture of Sverrir than of his enemies. However, it is not only a question of Sverrir's personal behaviour or of virtue versus vice. Pardoning one's enemies war first and foremost a political question (Bagge, 1991:166 f.). In twelfth century Norwegian warfare it was impossible to win a total military victory. The best one could hope for was a victory that was impressive enough to convince the opposite party that they had little to gain by continuing to resist and that it was preferable to join the victors. A means to achieve this was to pardon defeated enemies. Enemies that did receive pardon were then normally supposed to join the victorious army. Of course, there was then the risk that they might defect. Killing them had the advantage of permanently eliminating dangerous opponents and in addition demonstrating strength and showing the danger of fighting in the opposite camp.

In practice one had to balance between the two extremes. As an upstart, trying to win the kingdom with a small army, Sverrir had every reason to pardon his enemies. He had to broaden his support, and pardoned enemies meant potential supporters. By contrast, Magnús, who was the established king, had little to gain by including some Birkibeinar in his army and good reasons to use harsh means to prevent future rebellions. As an established king, Sverrir also became more restrictive. After his victory over the Baglar at Strindsjøen in 1199, he stated his reasons for this: His lenient attitude had not worked, he had to suppress the Baglar ruthlessly (SS: 167). He also comments on “the politics of pardoning” in an earlier episode: Jón kuflungr had demonstrated that he was not qualified to be a king by pardoning captive Birkibeinar when besieging Sverrir in Nidaros without letting them swear an oath of fealty (SS: 112). Sverrir’s scorn was probably mainly directed at Jón’s failure to extract an oath but the circumstances were not much in favour of a lenient attitude. Jón had taken Nidaros by surprise, without a real battle, but Sverrir held the castle, so that the Birkibeinar could easily defect to him. These episodes also make clear that the author is aware of the political aspect of pardoning. He does not camouflage Sverrir’s political attitude as idealism and he does not consistently present him as the champion of mercy versus the cruelty of his adversaries.

The last years of Sverrir’s reign saw his most dramatic ideological conflict, the one against Archbishop Eiríkr. The author gives a brief treatment of this conflict until the year 1196. In speeches and dialogues the author lets his protagonists use violent language but does not immediately imply that the Archbishop is in the wrong (SS: 119, 122 ff.). The rest of his story strongly indicates this, however. The Archbishop goes into exile in Denmark, where he loses his eye-sight. According to Sverrir’s interpretation, God turned his condemnation of the Birkibeinar into his own eyes (SS: 129 f.). In the end, the pope decides in Sverrir’s favour (SS: 133 f.). After that, the author hardly mentions the conflict, thus implying that Sverrir was on good terms with most of the churchmen during the rest of his reign. While the first part of the story to some extent corresponds to what we know from other sources – the ecclesiastical ones – the end of it is manifestly wrong.⁸ The author thus passes over the most bitter phase of this conflict, when Sverrir was excommunicated by the pope, the country placed under interdict and all the bishops were in exile. As several authors have suggested, the reason for this may well have been that this period was too awkward for Sverrir or for the author himself or that the saga was written during a period of reconciliation between the king and the Church. As a matter of fact, one of the first steps of Sverrir’s successor Hákon was to achieve a settlement with the Church.

⁸ See Gunnes, 1971:269 ff. for an account of this conflict.

On the other hand, the royalist ideology of this struggle, as developed in *The Speech against the Bishops*, lingered on for a long time within the Birkibeinar party, even to the middle of the thirteenth century (Bagge, 1987:143 ff.). If the author of *Sverris saga* was really so concerned with party ideology as modern scholars generally believe, it is difficult to understand that he would have solved this problem in such a way. After all, a lot of people must have known that he was wrong. There must have been more efficient ways of avoiding the most awkward points in the conflict between Sverrir and the bishops than simply to pass it over in silence. Thus, this particular way of solving the problem can hardly be understood without taking into account the fact that ideology plays a subordinate role and the wars and battles are the main theme of the saga. Characteristically, the most detailed account of the conflict with the Church comes when there is not very much else to tell.

The most important aspect of the author's evaluation of the persons he is describing concerns their performance as warriors. Here evidently, Sverrir gets the highest score, and the Birkibeinar usually, though not universally, perform better than their opponents. But the author often points to skill and bravery in Sverrir's enemies, giving details of exceptional performances by men who are otherwise unknown (e.g. SS: 61, 169). In a speech during the siege of the castle of Tønsberg, Sverrir points to the endurance of the Baglar as an example for his own men (SS: 189), and the author is clearly full of admiration for their behaviour. He occasionally blames Magnús for bad tactics, but usually treats both him and his men and the Baglar with respect. The latter gave Sverrir as many difficulties as Magnús had done. The author has a condescending attitude to the less successful rebels during the period 1185–96. But the great dividing line goes between the members of the conflicting parties on the one hand and the ordinary farmers on the other. The latter are almost always described with contempt. They are defeated despite overwhelming numerical superiority, and they are usually frightened and run away when attacked.⁹ Thus, the author reflects the attitude of the professional warriors in general more than a "party ideology" of the Birkibeinar.

4 The Purpose of *Sverris saga*

The conclusion to be drawn from these observations is that *Sverris saga* is neither neutral information, collected by an author who was interested in the past for its own sake, nor what can be reasonably called party propaganda.

⁹ See e.g. the description of the battle in Oslo in 1200, SS:174 ff. On the contempt for the people among the elite in Sverrir's age and the following period, see Lunden, 1977:65 ff. However, there are reasons to believe that the sagas exaggerate the military inefficiency of the peasant levy (Bagge, 1986:183 ff.).

Sverrir is clearly the hero of the saga but his enemies are not generally depicted as bad men, some of them even showing heroic traits. The saga sides with Sverrir in ideological controversies but such controversies do not play a prominent part in the saga. Even the arguments for Sverrir's right to the throne are vague and unconvincing. Sverrir emerges as the hero because of his success, which is due partly to his own ability and partly to God's favour. Finally, the saga contains a lot of information about persons and events that is clearly impartial, showing good and bad performances on both sides in the conflict. How can these observations be explained?

If we want to explain why the saga as a whole got its present form, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that its main purpose was simply to describe heroic deeds and dramatic events as completely as possible. There is every reason to believe that any author who collected this material and presented it, either in Norway or in Iceland, would find readers or listeners. To turn to the analogy of the modern press, it contains "good news". The many detailed descriptions of battles and campaigns appeal to the connoisseurs of such matters. This does not mean that the saga literature was simply harmless, "non-ideological" entertainment. What is entertaining in a given society often corresponds to the fundamental values of this society. In *Sverris saga*, like in other sagas, we get a glimpse of a warrior aristocracy – admittedly less exclusive than that of most other European countries – which celebrated bravery, endurance, military success, eloquence and political ability and to which stories of this had a great appeal. From this point of view, the saga literature had a double function. It celebrated the greatest virtues of this society and urged its members to practice them. And as "war reports" the sagas guaranteed that great men and their deeds were not forgotten but continued to live in men's memory (Bagge, 1991:202 ff.). This applies to *Sverris saga* as well as to other sagas. The numerous references to the performance of individual warriors, often mentioned by name, was probably important information in a society in which fame and glory were supreme values.

In principle, the sagas are then supposed to give an objective record of events, in which men and their actions are evaluated according to universally accepted standards. Admittedly, the author of *Sverris saga* may be suspected of exaggerating the virtues of Sverrir and the Birkibeinar, particularly in making their victories more sensational than they actually were. But he does not consistently blacken their enemies. And why should he, even if he wrote his work in favour of the Birkibeinar? There is no honour in defeating a coward. The better the enemies' military performance, the greater glory to the ones that defeat them. Thus, *Sverris saga* is essentially Sverrir's *res gestae*. This applies to *Grýla* as well as the rest of the saga.

Nevertheless, the description of Sverrir as a charismatic and successful

leader may also have had a more direct propagandistic purpose. The parties in the Norwegian civil wars were not formed on the basis of social origin or sympathy for certain higher principles. They were factions, based on the interests of their individual members. A leader had to build up his faction through personal charisma, generosity and above all success. Successful leaders increased their following, while unsuccessful ones were deserted (Bagge, 1986:156 ff., 165 ff. and 1991:85 ff.). It was thus far more important for Sverrir to point to his successes than to his legal claims – though the latter were not without importance for achieving the former.

Although both Sverrir himself and the authors of his saga may have regarded his successes as evidence for his right to the throne, this cannot have been their main purpose in stressing this point. Some degree of legitimacy was probably essential in order to gain adherents in a conflict, particularly over the throne. One could hardly mobilize sufficient support for a claim that was manifestly false. But once this minimum condition was fulfilled, success, personal charisma and other resources were decisive. This is the conclusion to be drawn from *Heimskringla* (Bagge, 1991:85 ff.), and it seems to be confirmed by the numerous examples of alleged descendants of Magnús Erlingsson and other members of his dynasty who rebelled against Sverrir and his successor in the period after 1184, and who were able to gather a large following, apparently without presenting very detailed evidence for their descent.

This emphasis on Sverrir's success may even to some extent explain the numerous references to God in the saga. God in *Sverris saga* plays very much the same role as luck in other sagas, that is, an inscrutable force, above human control, which nevertheless tends to favour the man of superior ability ("fortem fortuna iuvat"). Theoretically, this might support the "revisionist" view that the idea of luck in the sagas is not of traditional or popular origin, but derived from the Christian belief in God's providence (Baetke, 1951:47 ff., 1964:19 ff. and 1973:345 ff.; Lönnroth 1963–64:29 f. and 1986:76 ff.). Without wanting to explain away the undoubtedly Christian elements in the saga, however, I find it more likely that the description of God's support in *Sverris saga* has been influenced by traditional ideas of the king's luck (Bagge, 1991:218 ff.). A strong belief in luck is exactly what we should expect in a society in which "nothing succeeds like success" (Douglas, 1970:129 f.). The natural conclusion to draw from the description of Sverrir's successes, on the natural as well as the supernatural level, is that there is every reason to follow such a man, who is not only exceptionally able but even favoured by God. Though the author of *Gryla* may also have intended Sverrir's successes as arguments for his right to the throne, this strongly indicates that they are primarily important in themselves. This applies even more to the second part of the saga.

While the great majority who joined a faction did so to serve their own interests and were fairly loosely attached to the leader, there was also a hard core of relatives or close, personal friends. In one sense, Sverrir made a new departure, linking this hard core more closely to himself than had previously been usual and building up a clientele of professional warriors, which eventually became the core of a new aristocracy of royal servants. To this clientele, Sverrir's person became extremely important. This group of men was bound together by their great leader, whose charm, intelligence, humour, imagination and ability to endure all kinds of hardship and turn the most depressing circumstances into victory, impressed his adherents so much, as they continue to impress readers of *Sverris saga* 7–800 years later. The portrait of Sverrir in the second part of the saga may therefore very well have its background in this milieu, reflecting the strong, emotional ties between the men and their great leader.

In this way, *Sverris saga* fits in with the main trend in the secular saga literature, which concentrates on narrative and is fairly "objective" in its treatment of the opposing parties in a conflict (Bagge, 1991:201–08). Nevertheless, it contains stronger religious and ideological elements than most other works in the genre, such as *Heimskringla* and the Icelandic family sagas.¹⁰ Actually, during the civil wars and the period immediately after, the Norwegian monarchy did develop an ideology based on the Christian idea of the king as the representative of God, to whom everyone in the realm owed obedience. *The Speech against the Bishops* shows the familiarity with this ideology in the milieu around Sverrir (Gunnes, 1971:62 ff., 357 ff.). There are also traces of it in the saga, in Sverrir's dreams, particularly in his unction by Samuel, in his references to himself as God's elected in his great speeches, and in a few references to his coronation towards the end of the saga.¹¹ However, the Christian ideology of the king as the representative of God – in its Birkibeinar variety – is more prominent in *Hákonar saga* than in *Sverris saga*, the former saga showing some similarity to the contemporary European portraits of the Christian king.¹² By contrast, the author of *Sverris saga*

¹⁰ As for Holm-Olsen's reference to hagiography as a model from *Sverris saga*. I find his parallels largely convincing, though we cannot exclude the possibility that some of them may be common to hagiography and tales of secular heroes. I also want to underline Holm-Olsen's conclusion that these parallels do not make *Sverris saga* a saint's biography (Holm-Olsen, 1953:102).

¹¹ The saga gives a brief description of Sverrir's coronation (SS: 131). More important is the episode when Þórsteinn kúgaðr, who has defected to the Baglar, seeks Sverrir's pardon, kissing his foot and addressing him as his true lord, "þvi at þu ert coronaðr konungr oc allir eigo til at luta ef rett gerði" (SS: 161).

¹² For a comparison with European portraits of kings, see Bagge, 1991a. In *Hákonar saga* government and administration and peaceful activities are more prominent than in the earlier sagas. Thus, at the end of the saga, the author gives a characterization of King Hákon in which he describes him as the good and just Christian king and enumerates his many good works for

focuses on Sverrir as a person and a hero and his relationship to his men.

In the age of Sverrir, the factions changed into more permanent parties, whose members became more willing to fight to the bitter end. The support of the population in general became increasingly important (Bagge, 1986:189 f.). Both these factors suggest a need for something more than personal appeal to link people together, in other words: an ideology. However, the doctrine of the king as God's representative was embraced by both parties in the civil wars. Admittedly, they differed in their relationship to the leaders of the Church during most of Sverrir's lifetime. But neither *Sverris saga* nor other sources suggest that the attitude to the Church formed a permanent line of division between the parties or became the foundation of conflicting political programmes. It is rather a question of "ideological escalation", in which both parties tried to use this religious ideology to secure obedience from the population as a whole (Bagge, 1992).

The only consistent line of division between the parties concerned succession to the throne. This division might to some extent concern the principles that were to be followed. *Sverris saga* gives the impression that Sverrir fought for the "ancient" principle of agnatic succession, regardless of legitimate birth, while Erlingr and Magnús fought for legitimate birth, combined with royal unction and support by the Church.¹³ However, these "principles" were hardly more than a generalization of the reasons each of the two candidates happened to have for furthering their claims. The main ideological appeal was to a particular dynasty, not to particular principles. Thus, there is a thin line of division between Sverrir's personal appeal and his ideology.

This then poses the question whether the ideological elements of the saga are mainly reflections of Sverrir's actual propaganda or they were intended to influence people to take sides at the time the saga was written down. To some extent, *Grýla* may have served as propaganda in the second sense, as Sverrir was still fighting against alternative pretenders at the time when the work was written. But he was in a stronger and more secure position during this period (1185–88) than in the period before or during the last years of his reign (1196–1202). It is more difficult to see the relevance of the second part of the saga, written after Sverrir's death, despite the fact that the dynastic conflict was still going on, the two parties being led by relatives of respectively Sverrir and Magnús. Between 1204 och 1217 the Birkibeinar were ruled by

the country and the Christian community (*Hákonar saga*: 357–60), in contrast to the characterization of Sverrir in *Sverris saga* (above . . .). Nevertheless, war and dramatic episodes are still the main theme of the saga.

¹³ See particularly the debate between the two kings over this question in *Sverris saga*: 66 ff. It is doubtful how ancient the principle of agnatic succession actually was, see Krag, 1989 and Bagge, 1991:130.

a king related to the royal family through his mother, thus violating the principle of agnatic succession that Sverrir defended so eloquently in the saga. Sverrir's arguments for this principle in the saga would make sense as arguments for his grandson Hákon to succeed Ingi Barðarson after his death in 1217, rather than Ingi's brother Skúli. On the other hand, according to the same line of reasoning, the references to the poverty of the Birkibeinar and Sverrir's agitation against their wealthy and powerful adversaries would suggest a date far earlier than a period when the Birkibeinar belonged to the established aristocracy and – together with the majority of the Baglar – were fighting a new faction of poor rebels, the Ribbungar.¹⁴ Further, we come up with similar difficulties if we choose the interpretation of Sverrir's successes that is most likely to be directly relevant in later propaganda, that they were evidence of his right to the throne. This interpretation would be most relevant in the period before the final reconciliation between the Birkibeinar and the Baglar in 1217. But at that time, the king of the Birkibeinar had no right to the throne according to Sverrir's own criteria. After 1217, the adherents of Hákon Hákonarson would have good reasons to point to the connection between their pretender and his great ancestor, but would have found it less necessary to defend Sverrir's right to the throne against the adherents of another Birkibeinar candidate.

The arguments of Erlingr and Magnús in favour of legitimate birth and royal unction seem even less relevant in the early thirteenth century. Most of the pretenders of the Baglar claimed to be illegitimate sons of Magnús Erlingsson. Unction and coronation, which play an important part in the propaganda of Magnús and to some extent even in that of Sverrir, were irrelevant during a long period after Sverrir's death, as no king was crowned between the coronation of Sverrir in 1194 and that of his grandson Hákon Hákonarson in 1247.

These observations do not exclude the possibility that an author in the early thirteenth century made Sverrir and his contemporaries the spokesmen of arguments or ideas that he considered important to bring home to his own readers. But it is very difficult to find a consistent series of arguments that points to one particular time when the saga was composed. Consequently, a considerable part of the ideology and arguments of the saga must be reflections of Sverrir's actual propaganda, perhaps even that of his successors at various periods, and most probably have been included in the saga as monuments to the great king's learning and eloquence. We then once more come up with the emphasis on Sverrir as a person. Whatever the exact date

¹⁴ The strongest adherent of the "ideological" interpretation of *Sverris saga*, Egil Nygaard Brekke, dates its composition to the period before 1208, when the antagonism between the Birkibeinar and the Baglar was still at its strongest (Brekke, 1958:49 ff. with ref.).

of the composition of the second part of *Sverris saga*, the portrait of him no doubt had its political and ideological importance for the Birkibeinar and the milieu around Sverrir's successors. Dynastic continuity played an important part in the royal ideology of the thirteenth century. In some of his statutes Hákon Hákonarson calls himself "son of King Hákon and grandson of King Sverrir" (NGL I:121, 263–1260). According to his saga, the kings' sagas were read to him at his deathbed, and he died when *Sverris saga* was finished (*Hákonar saga*: 355). From a dynastic point of view, it was clearly of some importance that Sverrir belonged to the line of the ancient Norwegian kings, and the evidence that God supported him might be used to bolster the position of his successors. But the main importance of *Sverris saga* was the knowledge that the fame and glory of this great king and leader would be reflected on his descendants and adherents.

Sverris saga is primarily the *res gestae* of a great king and war leader, celebrating the virtues of the warrior aristocracy of contemporary Norway, thus conforming to the general ideology of the saga literature. But it also expresses a party ideology in favour of the Birkibeinar, which in a similar way emphasizes Sverrir's personal performance. This can be understood against the background of party formation in contemporary Norway, where a leader's following depended on his charisma and success. Finally, in the early thirteenth century, when the saga was written down, the description of Sverrir served as a monument to the contemporary dynasty or regime.

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