

Insigne Crucis: A European Motif in a Nordic Setting

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‘And if the brother dies doing his penance, he should be treated like any other brother, and the cross should be sewn on him as on any other brother.’

*The Rule of the Templars*¹

‘I am branded with this sign so that, conforming to the Crucified in His suffering, I may be found worthy to share in the glory of His resurrection.’

*Peter Damian*²

An episode from the most celebrated of the Icelandic Family sagas, *Njáls saga*, is my point of departure.³ This epic of the late thirteenth century focuses on events that allegedly took place in the first half of the eleventh century or shortly after the conversion of Iceland to Christianity. The saga is constructed around two climactic death scenes: the slaying of the valiant Gunnar Hámundarson and the burning of his best friend, the wise and conciliatory Njáll Þorgeirsson. Outnumbered, Gunnar meets his fate in a heroic manner whereas, in contrast, Njáll faces his end in a passive frame of mind. As his farmstead is set ablaze he makes no effort to protect himself or seek clemency.

¹ *The Rule of the Templars: The French Text of the Rule of the Order of the Knights Templar*, tr. and introduced by J.M. Upton-Ward, *Studies in the History of Medieval Religion*, IV (Woodbridge, 1992), p. 124. ² ‘Ego hoc stigmatē signatus inveniari, ut crucifixo configuratus in poena, consors fieri merear resurgentis in gloria’, S. Petri Damiani, *Carmina sacra et preces: Oratio 26*, in *Opera Omnia*, II, *Patrologiae cursus completus*, series latina, CXLV (Paris, 1853), p. 927. ³ *Brennu-Njáls Saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson in *Íslensk Fornrit*, 12 (Reykjavík, 1954), pp 342–44. The translation is from *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders. Including 49 tales*, ed. by Viðar Hreinsson, III (Reykjavík, 1997), pp 162–64. For a good introduction to the Icelandic Family sagas see Carol J. Clover, ‘Icelandic Family Sagas’, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature. A Critical Guide*, ed. by Carol J. Clover and John Lindow, *Islandica*, 45 (Ithaca and London, 1985), pp 239–316.

Njáll's stoic attitude is memorably expressed in his famous utterance that 'God will not let us [referring to himself and his wife] burn both in this life and the next.' In a world consumed with misplaced pride and the often twisted logic of feuding, Njáll's resignation at a moment of dread demonstrates his moral superiority. Njáll's own conscience is clear; the burning of his farmstead is the culmination of a process initiated and escalated, not by him, but by his immediate relatives; his wife Bergþóra and his violent and enigmatic son, Skarphéðinn.

Following the burning, the earthly remains of Njáll's family and retinue are recovered from the rubble. A certain Hjalti, a well respected and pious man, is entrusted with this task. Beforehand he is told that 'everybody will believe what you say you have seen.' Hjalti assumes here a role familiar to readers of hagiography, the inspector of corporal relics. He and his men first discover the bodies of Njáll and Bergþóra, completely untouched by the fire, underneath an oxhide. Astounded by this sight, Hjalti asks those present what they make of it:

þeir svöruðu: 'þinna atkvæða vilju vér at bíða.' Hjalti mælti: 'Ekki mun mér verða einarðarfátt um þetta. Líkami Bergþóru þykki mér at líkendum ok þó vel. En Njál's ásjána ok líkami synisk mér svá bjartr, at ek hefi engan dauðs manns líkama sét jafnbjartan.' Allir sögðu, at svá væri.

They answered, 'We'll wait for what you have to say.' Hjalti said, 'I'll be frank about this. Bergþóra's body is as I would have expected, though well preserved. Njál's countenance and body are radiant, and I've never seen such radiance in a dead man's body.' They all agreed that this was the case.

The attention of the group now turns to Skarphéðinn who is found standing upright by a wall with his legs burned up to his knees: 'He had bitten into his upper lip. His eyes were open and not swollen. He had driven his axe into the gable wall so hard that half the blade was buried and it had not lost its temper.'

When Skarphéðinn has been stripped of his unburnt clothes the following is revealed:

Hann hafði lagit hendr sínar í kross ok á ofan ina hægri, en tvá díla fundu þeir á honum, annan meðal herðanna, en annan á brjóstinu, ok var hvártrveggi brenndr í kross, ok oetluðu menn, at hann mundi sik sjálfir brennt hafa.

He had folded his arms in a cross, with the right arm above, and they found two marks on him, one between his shoulders and the other on his chest, both burned in the shape of a cross, and people thought he had probably burned these marks himself.

At this point the attitude of those attending the grim spectacle is highlighted. Regarding the appearances of Njáll and Bergþóra it is Hjalti again who calls the tune. With a brief and somewhat understated speech he indicates that there is

something extraordinary about Njáll's countenance. The reader is clearly meant to conclude that Njáll's soul is saved and that he now reaps his just reward in heaven. His serene appearance partly vindicates his last words that 'God will not make us burn in this life as well as in the next.' Only partly though, for he speaks in the plural and includes his wife in his optimistic utterance, but regarding the posthumous fate of Bergþóra, we are left in the dark. When the men first behold the well-preserved bodies they 'thought it a great miracle.' As we have seen, Hjalti qualifies this opinion for he sees nothing extraordinary about Bergþóra's body surviving the fire unscathed; its good preservation is simply due to chance or luck.

Matters are hardly less ambiguous in relation to Skarphéðinn. The contrast between his tortured appearance and Njáll's calm exterior is dramatic; it is as if Skarphéðinn, trapped between the collapsing walls and facing certain death, was forced to confront his uncertain fate in the afterlife. This impression is enhanced by the mysterious crosses found on his body, not least by the statement that Skarphéðinn himself made them: 'people thought he had probably burned these marks himself.'

Einar Ól. Sveinsson, arguably the most influential commentator on *Njáls saga*, interpreted Skarphéðinn's act as a christianized version of a ritual in which warriors branded themselves with the point of a spear as a dedication to the Germanic God of war, Óðinn/Wotan. Thus doing 'he expiates the heinous crime he committed against Höskuldur [that is, the single act which more than anything led to the burning] by burning it away. Now everything is complete.'⁴ Margaret Cormack has also stressed the penitential side of Skarphéðinn's behaviour. Precisely because of his violent deeds in the past nothing less than a striking sign of his piety and penance was sufficient.⁵ Indeed it is tempting to interpret the marks as representing an outward illustration of a profound shift in Skarphéðinn's spiritual outlook at his hour of death. It designates his belated baptism to Christianity and thus in a sense signifies his rebirth. It may be of some relevance that in the thirteenth-century Norwegian law-code of Frostathing it is decreed that a women who delivers a child alone shall 'take spittle and make the sign of the cross with it on the breast and the shoulder'.⁶ The parallel with the marks on Skarphéðinn is evident.

The interpretations of Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Margaret Cormack rest on the assumption that the common verdict – that Skarphéðinn burnt the two crosses on himself – is the only conceivable one. However the fact that the author does not explicitly claim that this was the case but rather steers us

⁴ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Njáls Saga: A Literary Masterpiece*, ed. and trans. by Paul Schach, with an introduction by E.O.G. Turville-Petre (Lincoln, 1971), p. 155.

⁵ Margaret J. Cormack, 'Saints and Sinners: Reflections on Death in some Icelandic Sagas', *Gripla*, 8 (1993), p. 190. ⁶ *The Earliest Norwegian Laws being the Gulathing Law and the Frostathing Law*, trans. by Laurence M. Larson (New York, 1935), pp 226–27.

towards this interpretation by referring to common opinion, suggests that an alternative interpretation is possible, namely that the crosses appeared on Skarphéðinn's body as a result of divine intervention.

Rory McTurk in his study of the supernatural in *Njáls saga* argues that the reference to the crosses should be classified with supernatural incidents that we are to believe to be genuine. In this category we find phenomena such as the appearances of Gunnar's ghost and the miraculous healing power of King Brian Boru's corpse following the battle of Clontarf. Moreover the fact that these incidents 'are narrated on the first level [that is, told by the narrator directly] *as well as* focalized in the first degree [that is, without references to witnesses] suggests that the author wishes them to be regarded as more unambiguously supernatural than any of the other incidents considered here.'⁷ However, as already mentioned, matters are not so straightforward regarding the crosses on Skarphéðinn's corpse. Most notably Rory McTurk's interpretation must be modified in the light of the fact that the author chose specifically to underline the opinion of those attending. Although the narrator tells us directly that crosses were found on the corpse, we are subtly drawn to the interpretation that they were not of supernatural origin.

It has been observed that the author felt no need to dwell on the symbolic implications of Njáll's appearance. A medieval reader well versed in hagiography would certainly have associated it with the salvation of the soul. Indeed we need scarcely speculate on this matter for it has been noted that in a *Vita Eustaci*, translated into Old-Norse in the early twelfth century, the Roman martyr and his family are placed inside a brazen ox which is then set on fire. When the ox is opened the corpses are found perfectly preserved.⁸ The similarities here with the scene in *Njáls saga* are clear. In other words, we are left in no doubt as to the posthumous fate of Njáll. Even in death he assumes the centre stage and no other member of his family is allowed to cast a shadow over this hero, or rather anti-hero, of the saga. This much is clear and needs no further comment.⁹

Still we have an unsolved problem on our hands. Namely, why did the author find it necessary to stress the apparently obvious point that Skarphéðinn branded himself with the crosses?

7 Rory McTurk, 'The Supernatural in *Njáls Saga*: A Narratological Approach', *Saga-Book of the Viking Society*, 23 (1990), p. 43. 8 Lars Lönnroth, 'Kroppen som själens spegel', *Lychnos* (1963-64), p. 32; *Heilagra manna sögur*, ed. by C.R. Unger, II (Christiania, 1877), p. 203. 9 It is thus only Njáll's appearance which is presented as miraculous. This distinction has been overlooked by scholars: see, for instance, Richard F. Allen, *Fire and Iron. Critical Approaches to *Njáls Saga** (Pittsburg, 1971), pp 156-57; Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Njáls Saga*, p. 178.

On 5 April 1097, a fleet under the leadership of Count Stephen of Blois embarked from Sicily and headed for the Holy Land. The ships, all loaded with crusaders, had barely left the harbour when one ‘suddenly cracked through the middle for no apparent reason’ and ‘four hundred of both sexes perished by drowning’. The same vessel was then washed ashore and

Nam quum corpora jam mortua qui circumstabant pro posse collegissent, repertae sunt in carnibus quorundam super spatulas scilicet cruces insignitae. Nam quod in pannis suis vivi gestaverant, competebat, Domino volente, in ipsis servitio suo sic praeoccupatis idem signum victoriosum sub pignore fidei permanare; simul etiam tali miraculo patefieri considerantibus merito dignum erat, ipsos defunctos sub misericordia Dei jam quietem vitae perennis adeptos fuisse.

When those standing round about had collected as many bodies of the dead as possible, they found crosses actually imprinted in the flesh of some of them, between the shoulders. For it was fitting that this same symbol of victory, which they had worn on their clothes while living, should remain by the will of God as a token of faith upon those occupied in His service. At the same time it was also proper that such a miracle should show those who witnessed it that the dead had now attained by the mercy of God the peace of eternal life.

This account appears in the *Historia Hierosolymitana*, written around 1100 by a French participant in the First Crusade, Fulcher of Chartres.¹⁰ In it Fulcher transforms the dismal failure of the crusaders in question into victory. Their death by drowning is presented in terms of martyrdom. From Fulcher’s perspective, the appearance of the miraculous crosses between their shoulders is a divine revelation that the crusaders were saved, that they ‘had now attained by the mercy of God the peace of eternal life.’

About a decade or so later Fulcher’s compatriot, Guibert of Nogent, commented on both the symbolic significance of this particular incident and,

¹⁰ Fulcher of Chartres, *Historia Hierosolymitana*, I, viii, in *Recueil des Historiens des Croisades: Historiens Occidentaux*, III (Paris 1865), p. 330. The translation is from *Fulcher de Chartres Historia Hierosolymitana. A History of the Expedition to Jerusalem 1095–1127*, trans. by Frances Rita Ryan and ed. with an introduction by Harold S. Fink (Knoxville, 1969), p. 65. On the significance of this description in the context of the development of stigmata in the Middle Ages see Giles Constable, *Three Studies in Medieval and Religious Thought. The Interpretation of Mary and Martha; The Ideal of the Imitation of Christ; The Orders of Society* (Cambridge 1995), p. 220. On martyrdom and the First Crusade see Jonathan Riley-Smith, ‘Death on the First Crusade’, in *The End of Strife*, ed. by D. Loades (Edinburgh, 1984), pp 14–31; Colin Morris, ‘Martyrs on the Field of Battle before and during the First Crusade’, *Martyrs and Martyrologies*, ed. by D. Wood, *Studies in Church History*, 30 (Oxford, 1993) pp 93–105; H.E.J. Cowdrey, ‘Martyrdom and

interestingly, Fulcher's interpretation of it.¹¹ In his *Gesta Dei per Francos* Guibert found his version of this event both naive and lacking in critical acumen. Although Guibert conceded that if he had so wished God might well have imprinted the marks on the crusaders' bodies, he pointed out that in the early stages of the crusade 'men of the lowest social class, and even worthless women' claimed that such signs appeared on their bodies:

Ille paulisper intextas ex suffusione sanguinis rigas, crucem astruens, ostentabat in oculo; iste pupillarem, qua faede caecutiebat, masculam, cundi sibi commonitorium perhibens, pro caelesti exhibebat oraculo. Alius, aut novorum pomorum succis, seu quolibet genere fuci, cuilibet particulae corporis moliebatur speciem crucis; ut sicut oculorum subsellia pingi solent stibio, ita divini in se spectaculi vel vireret vel ruberet, fraude facta et commentis, ostensio.¹²

One man scratched his cheeks, drew a cross with the flowing blood, and showed it to everyone. Another showed the spot on his eye, by means of which he had been blinded, as a sign that a heavenly announcement had urged him to undertake the journey. Another, either by using the juices of fresh fruit, or some other kind of dye, painted on some little piece of his body the shape of a cross. As they used to paint the area below the eyes with antimony, and deceitful exhibition, they might claim that God had showed himself in them.¹³

In line with his generally cautious attitude towards matters supernatural,¹⁴ Guibert thought it more prudent to conclude that the marks were made by those involved. Those familiar with Guibert's general frame of mind will probably suspect that the humble status of the crusaders in question was not an insignificant factor in shaping his opinion on this issue.

Thus in two quite different medieval settings and sources we find the sign of the cross appearing on the bodies, more specifically between the shoulder-

the First Crusade', *Crusade and Settlement*, ed. by P.W. Edbury (Cardiff, 1985), pp 45–65. ¹¹ Guibert of Nogent, *Gesta Dei per Francos*, VII, xxxii, in *Recueil des Historiens des Croisades: Historiens Occidentaux*, IV (Paris, 1869), p. 251. ¹² *Ibid.* p. 251. ¹³ *The Deeds of God through the Franks: Guibert de Nogent's 'Gesta Dei per Francos'*, trans. by Robert Levine (Woodbridge, 1997), pp 155–56. ¹⁴ His attitude is most clearly expressed in his treatise on relics in which he criticised the ease with which miracles were proclaimed and incipient cults emerged in this period: *De pignoribus sanctorum in Patrologiae cursus completus*, series latina, CLVI (Paris, 1844–46). See Benedicta Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind. Theory, Record and Event 1000–1215* (Aldershot, 1982), pp 126–27. On the curious championing of Guibert as a rationalist by modern critics see John F. Benton, *Self and Society in Medieval France* (New York, 1970), p. 8; *A Monk's Confession. The Memoirs of Guibert of Nogent*, trans. with an introduction by Paul J. Archambault (Pennsylvania, 1996), p. xx.

blades, of people who came to a violent or an unexpected and tragic death, in a late thirteenth-century Icelandic saga telling of an event which took place in the first half of the eleventh century, and in a near contemporary account of an incident that occurred in the early stages of the First Crusade.

Indirectly, the French accounts may hold a key to the unanswered question of why the author of *Njáls saga* chose to emphasize the non-miraculous nature of Skarphéðinn's cross-marks. For without this reference to the communal voice the medieval reader could easily have interpreted the marks in a different fashion, namely that the two crosses were of miraculous origin and implied that Skarphéðinn's soul was saved. Moreover, in both the French and the Icelandic sources, one can detect a certain tension between the natural and the supernatural, explicit in the former but latent in the latter. The Icelandic author is aware that it is possible to explain the appearance of the crosses in terms of both the ordinary and the extraordinary.¹⁵ But, as I emphasized earlier, he wants to present Njáll as the outstanding figure. Of Njáll alone can it be said with certainty that he reaped the fruits of his exemplary life. In order to bring out the difference between Skarphéðinn and Njáll in this respect, the author resorts to a simple but effective stylistic device that precludes the reader from interpreting the crosses as signs of divine grace.

III

In 1157 King Eysteinn Haraldsson of Norway was executed by a supporter of Ingi, his brother and co-regent. *Heimskringla*, a compilation of Kings' sagas composed by the Icelandic historian Snorri Sturluson in the fourth decade of the thirteenth century, describes the scene of his death in the following manner:

Konungur bað, at hann skyldi hlyða messu áðr [en hann var tekinn af lífi], ok þat var. Síðan lagðisk hann niðr á grúfu ok breiddi hendr frá sér út ok bað sik hoggva í kross á milli herðanna, kvað þá skyldu reyna, hvárt hann mundi þola járn eða eigi, sem þeir höfðu sagt lagsmenn Inga. Símun mœlti við þann, er hoggva skyldi, bað hann til ráða, kvað konung hólzti lengi hafa kropit þar um lyng. Hann var þá hoggvin ok þótti verða við þrúðliga. Lík

¹⁵ On the ambiguous appearance of the supernatural in the Icelandic sagas (including the contemporary sagas) see J. Lindow, 'Þorsteins þátrr skelks and the verisimilitude of the Supernatural Experience in Saga Literature', *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature: New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism*, ed. by John Lindow et al. (Odense, 1986), pp 264–80. Lindow's words that the 'individual and later the community will test the supranormality of the experience, and if interpreted generally as supernatural, the experience will reinforce the value of the broken norm' are particularly appropriate regarding the evaluation of Njáll's and Skarphéðinn's corpses, *ibid.* p. 270.

hans var flutt til Fors, en fyrir sunnan kirkju undir brekkunni var lík hans náttsoett. Eysteinn konungr var jarðaðr at Forskirkju, ok er leg hans á miðju kirkjugólfi ok breiddr yfir kögurr, ok kalla menn hann helgan. Þar sem hann var hoggvin ok blóð hans kom á jorð, spratt upp brunnr, en annarr þar undir brekkunni, sem lík hans var náttsoett. Af hváru tveggja því vatni þykkjask margir menn bót hafa fengit. Þat er søgn Víkverja, at margar jarteinir yrði at leiði Eysteins konungs, áðr óvinir hans steypði á leiðit hundssodi.¹⁶

The king asked to hear mass [before being slain], and that was granted him. Then he laid himself with his face down, spreading out his arms, and asked them to slash him crosswise between his shoulders – then they would find out whether he could stand cold steel as King Ingi’s followers said he could not. Símun spoke to the man who was to hew him, asking him to go to work, and saying that the king had crept all too long through the heather. Then he was beheaded and was considered to have behaved manfully. His body was brought to Fors and placed for the night under the hill south of the church. He was interred in Fors Church, with the resting place in the middle of the church floor, and a rug spread over it. Men called him holy. At the spot where he was beheaded and his blood touched the ground, a spring came up, and another one, under the hill where his body had been placed for the night. Many consider that they regained their health from the water of either spring. People from Vík have said that many miracles happened at the tomb of King Eystein before his enemies poured broth made from dog on it.¹⁷

For those acquainted with Old-Norse literature the tone of this scene is not an unfamiliar one. Confronted with imminent death, the main protagonist, in this case King Eysteinn of Norway, keeps his composure and, for good measure, taunts his executioner with a sharp remark. It hardly needs emphasising that the ability to leave this world manfully, preferably with a witty quip on the lips, was a particularly potent way of expressing manhood in medieval Norse society. In brief, King Eysteinn conducts himself in a manner befitting a hero and, at the same time, a martyr.

The martyr-like feature of the scene is underlined by the physical stance which Eysteinn assumes before Símun’s retainer wields the axe: ‘he laid himself

¹⁶ *Heimskringla*, III, ed. by Bjarni Aðalbarnarson, *Íslensk Fornrit*, 28 (Reykjavík, 1951), p. 345. Snorri is here partly following *Fagrskinna*, an early thirteenth-century Norwegian Kings’ saga compilation, which includes Eysteinn’s wish to be hacked crosswise between the shoulders. However, *Fagrskinna* neither mentions his spreading out of the arms or his saintly reputation, *Agríp af Noregskonunga Sögum. Fagrskinna – Noregskonunga tal.*, ed. by Bjarni Einarsson, *Íslensk Fornrit*, 21 (Reykjavík 1985), pp 294–95. ¹⁷ *Heimskringla: Sagas of the Norse Kings*, trans. by Samuel Laing; revised with introduction and notes by Peter Foote (Dent, 1961), p. 261.

with his face down, spreading out his arms ... ' Eysteinn thus confronts his executioner with his body shaped in the sign of the cross. The Norwegian king was not the first to have reportedly made this gesture of *imitatio Christi* for it has been associated with martyrs from the earliest centuries of Christianity. For instance the apologist Eusebius of Caesarea, writing around AD 308, tells in his *Ecclesiastical History* of a certain youth who was caught up in the persecution of Christians in Palestine in the second half of the third century:

[He was] ... not twenty years of age, standing unbound and stretching his hands in the form of a Cross ... while bears and leopards almost touched his flesh. And yet their mouths were restrained, I know not how, by a divine and incomprehensible power.¹⁸

According to the so-called *Tabula Othiniensis*, an inscribed copper-plate made on the occasion of Knud II's (*d.*1086) *elevatio* in 1095, the martyred Danish king fell before the altar with his hands outstretched in the shape of a cross before he was killed.¹⁹ As also, reportedly, did Earl Waltheof of Northumbria, executed at the orders of William the Conqueror in 1076 and subsequently venerated as a martyr. *Fagrskinna*, a Norwegian work of the early thirteenth century, tells how the earl gave his silver-tunic to the executioner and then spread himself on the ground in the shape of a cross. The saga states that the informant for this scene was the Icelander, Þorkell Þórðarson, a member of Waltheof's retinue.²⁰ Although Ordericus Vitalis's description of the same execution differs in many important details from the Icelandic account, it is noteworthy that the earl is said to have 'stretched out his arms' at the moment he faced the sword.²¹ In light of these two independent accounts of Waltheof's behaviour at his hour of death it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that in reality he did strike this particular pose. Here it is worth noting the appearance of this hagiographic commonplace in the near-contemporary *Sturlunga saga* which states that three thirteenth-century Icelanders made an identical gesture before their execution.²² It is tempting to conclude that we are here faced with life imitating art, or rather hagiography.

There is an obvious penitential side to this form of *imitatio Christi*. Note can be taken, for example, of the curious behaviour of Henry III of Germany at the

¹⁸ Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, VIII, 7, trans. by J.E.L. Oulton, II (Loeb Classics: Cambridge Mass./ London, 1932), p. 273. ¹⁹ 'ante aram manibus solo tenus expansis in modum crucis latere lancetus', *Vitae Sanctorum Danorum*, ed. by M. Cl. Gertz (København, 1908–12), p. 61. ²⁰ *Íslenzk Fornrit*, 21, pp 294–95. ²¹ 'Illis autem permittentibus surrexit et flexis tantum genibus oculisque in caelum fixis et manibus tensis.' *The Ecclesiastical History of Ordericus Vitalis*, Book IV, ed. and trans. by Marjorie Chibnall, II (Oxford, 1969), p. 323. ²² *Sturlunga saga*, ed. by Guðbrandur Vigfússon (Oxford, 1878), I, pp 256, 265; II, pp 339–40. For these and other examples from Old-Norse literature see Johan Fritzner, *Ordbog over det gamle norske sprog*, II (Kristiania,

funeral of his mother in 1043 where the emperor, according to a letter written by Abbot Bern of Reichenau, threw off his purple and assumed the mourning habit of penitence. In the presence of all the people, Henry sank to the ground with his hands stretched out in the shape of a cross. On another occasion, before a battle against the Huns, the emperor set aside his mantle and regalia, dressed in penitential clothing, and prostrated himself, assuming a cross-like shape.²³ A ritualized display of humility of this sort must be placed within the context of the christological perception of the medieval ruler, most illuminatingly displayed in Ottonian iconography where attributes of the suffering Christ are often associated with the office of emperor.²⁴ A correspondence between a secular ruler and the *passio* of Christ is also manifest in an *Ordo* for the coronation of Roger II on Christmas Day 1130, where the prospective king of Sicily is required to cast himself before the altar in the shape of a cross: 'ibi humiliter totus in cruce prostratus iaceat.'²⁵

If King Eysteinn's posture displays a form of penitence and an identification with the crucifixion of the Saviour, the same can hardly be said of his final request – that the executioner should hack the sign of the cross between the shoulder-blades. On the contrary, Eysteinn makes this curious request in order to display his courage and manliness at the hour of death, or as we are told, so that 'they would find out whether he could stand cold steel as King Ingi's followers said he could not.'

Eysteinn's strange request represents, I believe, a variation of the cross motif found in *Njáls saga*, and in Fulcher's account of the First Crusade. However, the context in which it appears in *Heimskringla* is quite different from those two cases. The penitential aspect is absent and so is the miraculous. To comprehend the latent meaning of King Eysteinn's request we need to place it within an altogether different framework.

The key to that undertaking is Eysteinn's royal status. Marc Bloch in his study *The Royal Touch* discusses the medieval belief that those rightly born to kingship had a mysterious birthmark upon their bodies as a proof of rightful pedigree.²⁶ The most common sign is the cross, usually found on the right shoulder of the person in question or, alternatively, between the shoulder-blades. According to

1886), pp 351–53. ²³ For a discussion of these two scenes see Karl Schnith, 'Recht und Friede: Zum Königesdanken im Unkreis Heinrichs III', *Historisches Jahrbuch*, 81 (1962), pp 22–57. For ritualised humility of royal figures in general see Geoffrey Koziol, *Begging Pardon and Favour. Ritual and Political Order in Early Medieval France* (Ithaca & New York, 1992). ²⁴ Robert Deshman, 'Christus rex et magi reges: Kingship and Christology in Ottonian and Anglo-Saxon Art', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 10 (1976), pp 367–406, esp. pp 381–90. ²⁵ Reinhard Elze, 'The Ordo for the Coronation of King Roger II of Sicily: An Example of Dating from Internal Evidence', *Coronations: Medieval and Early Modern Monarchic Ritual*, ed. by János M. Bak (Berkeley/Los Angeles/Oxford, 1990), p. 171. ²⁶ Marc Bloch, *The Royal Touch. Sacred Monarchy and Scrofula in England and France*, trans. by J.E. Anderson (London/Montreal, 1978;

one troubadour, Charles of Anjou is said to have born the cross on his body. Likewise, around the year 1260 a contemporary chronicler notes that people saw the cross between the shoulders of Frederick II's grandson and namesake. At the end of the fifteenth century the leading members of the Hapsburg family all allegedly had this mark on their backs. The sign is usually associated with reigning kings or pretenders to the throne who were cut off from their rightful inheritance at birth but were nevertheless destined to occupy it in the future. Although the earliest example Bloch could find was from the early thirteenth century, he assumed, quite correctly as we shall see, that the motif in its royal context originated in the twelfth century.

Seven years after *The Royal Touch* saw the light of day Arthur Dickson published his study of *Valentine and Orson*, a relatively obscure late medieval romance.²⁷ In this work, which has survived in both the English and a Swedish version, the royal pedigree of the two main protagonists of the story is revealed by a birthmark: a cross between the shoulder-blades. Dickson pointed out that this motif appears in numerous late medieval romances from England, France, Germany and the Netherlands. In an extended footnote he criticized Bloch for not having sufficiently emphasized its ubiquity in medieval literature and folklore. The criticism was not altogether a fair one, for in fact Bloch had drawn attention to the appearance of the motif in the *Lay of Havelock the Dane*, an English Romance from around the year 1300, where the royal status of the hero is confirmed by a blazing cross on his right shoulder, and in the German thirteenth century poem, *Kudrun* where Hagen the Irish bears a cross mark between his shoulder-blades. Thus the sign is attributed to both fictitious and historical figures; it crosses the boundaries between reality and art.

Marc Bloch suggested, almost as an afterthought it seems, that the origin of this belief was Isaiah 9:5, 'the government shall be upon his shoulders', which Christians have through the ages interpreted as a prophecy relating to the coming of Christ. Hence the positioning of the cross on the shoulder, the back or between the shoulder-blades in medieval tradition. This explanation leaves matters hanging in the air for it does not address the question why the motif cannot be found in the medieval sources before the turn of the twelfth century. A different approach is called for, one which takes into account the two-dimensional nature of the motif in question: its atemporal dimension and its historical one.

In the most diverse cultures we encounter a strong belief that a physical peculiarity of some sort designated from birth a person of inherent importance or quality. Particularly common is the belief that a child born with a caul around its neck will later in life possess powers out of the ordinary. For instance, in the Inquisitorial trials conducted in the last decades of the sixteenth century, over the so-called *benendanti* from the region of Friuli in Italy, the

originally published 1923), pp 142–46; see the references given there. ²⁷ Arthur Dickson, *Valentine and Orson. A Study in Late Medieval Romance* (New York, 1929), p. 49.

accused claimed that a child born with a caul around its neck was destined to become a witch (albeit a benign one).²⁸ In Greek mythology and legend lameness or malfunction of one foot is often associated with fated heroes who linked with the world of the dead.²⁹ Considering that the king was ultimate symbol of hereditary privilege, it is not surprising that there was a strong tendency to associate his inherent invisible qualities with corporal peculiarities of some nature. A browsing of Stith-Thompon's motif index for folklore bears this out clearly. In an Indian tale the golden hue of a certain boy's body denotes his royal status. In an African tale it is a red tooth that does the same job. In one Irish saga a luminous face is a sign of royal pedigree and in Old-Norse literature it is frequently the shining eyes or blond hair which mark the king, or the future king, from the rest. It is worth noting that in the case of royals the distinguishing mark is frequently shining, luminous or otherwise appropriate to their exalted status.³⁰ Whereas the peasants of Friuli were marked from birth by a somewhat earthly sign, that is, a caul around their neck, the heroes of the fifteenth-century English romance, *Cheuelere Assigne*, six princes and one princess, were born with silver necklaces around their neck.³¹ Similarly in an Indian folk-tale, eight princesses and one prince were brought into the world with golden necklaces strung around their heads.³²

There is nothing particularly Christian about these identifying peculiarities or even particularly pagan for that matter. We are here in the realm of folklore and folk-customs, where the person who is destined to fulfil a role beyond the ordinary carries a corporal sign of some nature.

This is the atemporal or ahistorical dimension relevant to the motif under discussion. Let us now turn to the temporal one. As mentioned above, Marc Bloch believed that the motif in its royal context originated in the twelfth century. This was the century in which the cross, not least as a result of Pope Urban II's exhortation, was adopted by the crusaders to the Holy Land as a visible demonstration of their undertaking.³³ Crusaders frequently had the sign imprinted on their garments and, according to contemporary or near-contemporary commentators some, in the wake of the religious enthusiasm which followed the first crusades, literally imprinted the crosses on their

²⁸ Carlo Ginzburg, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. by John and Anne Tedeschi (London, 1983), pp 9–10.

²⁹ Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*, trans. by Raymond Rosenthal (London, 1992), pp 230–40. ³⁰ *Motif-index of Folk-literature*, ed. by Stith Thompson, III (Copenhagen, 1956), pp 79–380; Riti Kroesen, 'Hvessir augu senn hildingar. The Awe-Inspiring Eyes of the King', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 100 (1985), pp 41–58. ³¹ *The Romance of the Cheuelere Assigne*, ed. by Henry H. Gibbs, Early English Text Society, extra series, VI (London, 1868), lines 42–44. ³² *The Oral Tales of India*, ed. by Stith Thompson and Jonas Balys, Indian University Publication: Folklore Series, no. 10 (Bloomington, 1958), p. 215. ³³ See James A. Brundage, "'Cruce Signari": The Rite for Taking the Cross in England', *Traditio*, 22 (1966), pp 289–91.

bodies.³⁴ Thus, in his *Itinerarium Kambriae*, *The Journey through Wales*, Gerald of Wales tells how in 1188 Archbishop Baldwin of Canterbury exhorted people on Anglesey to take up the cross to free Jerusalem from Saladin. 'Many of the common people were persuaded' but a band of youths, whom the archbishop addressed personally, were unmoved and did not follow their example. Within three days the same young men were beaten, and some killed, by a band of robbers. Seeing this as a divine retribution for their indifference to the archbishop's exhortation, the cross 'which they had previously scorned they now of their own free will marked on their own bodies.'³⁵

Gerald does not specify here where the Welshmen in question imprinted the crosses on their bodies. Here, however, we may recall Fulcher of Chartres's statement that the drowned crusaders carried the sign between the shoulder-blades. This particular positioning of the mark is naturally highly symbolic for it evokes the scene of Christ carrying the cross to Golgotha which in turn highlights the pilgrim status of the crusaders. One of the earliest surviving eye-witness accounts of the First Crusade, the *Gesta Francorum et aliorum Hierosolimitanorum*, describes how during Bohemond's siege of Amalfi in Southern Italy the Norman war-lord was informed that the crusaders were 'all well-armed, they wear a badge of Christ's cross on their right arm or between the shoulders.'³⁶ In Reginald of Durham's twelfth-century *Life and Miracles of St Godric* we read that a certain pilgrim carried the sign of the cross between his shoulder-blades.³⁷

The hypothesis can be put forward that the enhanced status of the cross as an outward symbol of *individual* piety in the twelfth century had a part to play in the simultaneous emergence of our motif as a sign of royal legitimacy. In this respect it can be placed within the general shift towards a more physical, humanising, expression of Christian spirituality in the course of the twelfth and thirteenth century; here we can see a certain correspondence with the development of *stigmata* in the same era.³⁸ As to the placement of the cross between the shoulders, it is worth noting that this part of the body had a strong association with royal succession. In an *Ordo* for the Roman emperor dating

34 See Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The First Crusade and the Idea of Crusading* (London, 1986), pp 34, 81–2, 114. See also the references to such acts during the First Crusade, *ibid.* p. 187.

35 *Gerald of Wales, The Journey through Wales and The Description of Wales*, Bk. II, c.7, trans. by Lewis Thorpe (London, 1978), pp 185–86; 'cruces quam antea spreverant in carne sibi invicem jam ultronei affixerunt.' Giraldi Cambrensis, *Itinerarium Kambriae et Descriptio Kambriae*, II, 7, ed. by James F. Dimoch (RS. 1868), p. 126. 36 'Deferunt arma ad bellum congrua, in dextra uel inter utrasque scapulas crucem Christi baiulant', *Gesta Francorum et aliorum Hierosolimitanorum*, ed. by Rosalind Hill (Edinburgh/Oxford), p. 7. On the role of the cross sign in the *Gesta* see Colin Morris, 'The *Gesta Francorum* as Narrative History', *Reading Medieval Studies*, 19 (Reading, 1993), pp 64–65. 37 'et scapulis signum peregrinantium bajulavit', *Libellus de Vita et Miraculis S. Godrici, heremite de Finchale, auctore Reginaldo Monacho Dunselmensi*, ed. by J. Stevenson (SS, 20; London, 1848), p. 166. 38 Constable, *Three Studies*, pp 213–16.

from the tenth or eleventh century, the ruler is anointed with the oil of catechumens on the right arm and between the shoulders.³⁹ According to the coronation rite by which Frederick Barbarossa was crowned in 1155, the prospective emperor first lay prostrate before the altar of St Peter before being anointed on the right arm and between the shoulder-blades.⁴⁰ Similarly, in a tenth-century French *Ordo*, the Capetian king is anointed both on the shoulders and between the shoulder-blades.⁴¹

It is possible to detect three stages of increasing symbolic intensity in the cases examined so far: the cross worn on the clothes, the cross branded on the body by human hands and, finally, the cross appearing as a sign of divine grace. In the royal context, however, the mark is there from birth as a tangible expression of an invisible quality: the sanctity of royal blood. In view of the apparently well known belief in the cross on the back or between the shoulder blades as denoting royalty, Eysteinn's last words acquire a highly sarcastic tinge. By requesting this potent symbol of kingship to be hacked on his shoulder at the time of his death the request becomes a defiant statement of his royal status.

Could I be reading too much into Eysteinn's final words by placing them within the context I have expounded above? Although Marc Bloch assumed that the cross motif had emerged in the twelfth century, the oldest example he could find is from the early thirteenth century. Moreover he did not list a single example from the nordic sphere.

IV

The political situation in Norway in the three decades following the killing of King Eysteinn was highly volatile. The royal line of Eysteinn exhausted itself in internal strife and in 1179 an outsider by the name of Sverrir Sigurðarson appeared on the scene and, after a long and fierce campaign, usurped the throne.

His reign was marked by sporadic opposition to his rule as one pretender after another stepped forward. One of the less distinguished figures of this sort, Þorleifr *breiðskeggr*, a former monk, is mentioned in the near-contemporary *Sverris saga*. The short chapter telling of Þorleifr begins thus:

Þat sama sumar er iarll hafði andaz var floccr a Marcum austr. En firir þesom flocki var sa maðr er callaðr var Þorleifr breiðscegr oc væri son Eysteins konugs Haralds-sonar oc þat til iartegna at a meðal herða honom var eyr groit i cros.⁴²

39 Melchior Hittorp, *De divinis Catholicae Ecclesiae officiis* (Paris, 1610), pp 153–54.

40 E. Martène, *De antiquis ecclesiae ritibus* (Antwerp, 1763), p. 212. 41 Ibid. p. 630.

42 *Sverris saga etter Cod. AM 327 40*, ed. by Gustav Andrebo (Kristiania, 1920), p. 121.

The same summer that the earl [Eiríkr *skakki*] had died a band appeared east in the Marker region. The leader of this band was a man named Þorleifr *breiðskeggr*; he was said to be a son of King Eysteinn Haraldsson, and as a sign of that he bore between his shoulders the scar of a wound healed in the shape of a cross.⁴³

Þorleifr attracted a substantial following not least, we are told, because of his alleged wisdom and scrupulous morals: ‘his life resembled a monk’s life, subject to the rules of his order, rather than a layman’s. Þorleifr’s appearance on the Norwegian political stage was a brief one as he and most of his followers were killed in a surprise attack by king Sverrir’s forces. However, following his death, a rumour was spread abroad that he was a saint’, a notion that the author of *Sverris saga* dismisses outright.

The interesting feature here is Þorleifr’s claim that a cross-shaped scar between the shoulder blades can prove that he is the son of King Eysteinn. It is noteworthy that the author of *Sverris saga* felt no need to explain why this peculiarity was able to prove anything of the sort. As we have seen, a cross-mark between the shoulder-blades was associated with royal status in medieval Europe. If this tradition was known in Norway as early as the late twelfth century – as I think one must assume – Þorleifr’s reference to the cross on his body becomes more comprehensible. Moreover, it is the echo between his own claim – substantiated by a scar that had healed in the shape of a cross – and the tradition of his father’s execution that particularly captures the attention. It is as if the wound hacked between the shoulder-blades of his father was, by miraculous intervention, stamped on his own body. Here the mark not only proves royal descent but also kinship with another person of royal pedigree associated with a similar mark.

In the late medieval romance of *Valentin und Namenlos* the sign is used for similar purposes.⁴⁴ Phila, the sister of the king of France, and newly married to the king of Hungary, gives birth to twin sons. At their birth, however, they are exposed by a wicked bishop and the king’s mother who, spurred on by the prediction of an astronomer, both fear that the twins will be a threat when they come of age. The infants survive and one, Valentin, is found in a box floating on the river and rescued by Clarina, Phila’s sister, who instantly recognizes that the child is of noble descent by the cross between its shoulders.⁴⁵ Some years later Valentin meets his twin brother Namenlos and observes that both have identical marks on their body.⁴⁶ This discovery convinces them that they are closely related, and together they set out to find their royal parents which, of course, they eventually do after various colourful adventures.

⁴³ My own translation. ⁴⁴ *Namlös och Valentin, en Medeltidsroman. (Namenlos und Valentin). Efter gamla handskrifter*, ed. by G.E. Klemming, Svenska Fornskrift-Sällskapet, Samlingar, Del III, Häft 1 (Stockholm, 1846). ⁴⁵ *Ibid.* ll. 261–64. ⁴⁶ *Ibid.* ll. 1208–10.

Thus Valentin and Namenlos finally came into possession of their rightful inheritance. The fairy-tale ending of their story is in stark contrast with the fate of the historical figure of Þorleifr *breiðskeggr*. Nevertheless, in both narratives, the motif of the cross between the shoulder-blades fulfils a similar double role: as a proof of royal pedigree and a sign of kinship between two members of a kingly dynasty.

The notion that an acquired corporal mark could be handed down from father to son was not unknown in the Middle Ages. Gerald of Wales in his *Itinerarium Cambriae* tells the following story:

Militem quoque in Anglia vidimus, ex Devoniae finibus oriundum, cui nomen Erchembaldus: de quo contigit, ut dum matris in alvo gestaretur patre partum penitus abnegante, et matrem zelotypiae causa ex sola suspicione fortiter accusante, puero in lucem prodeunte, sola litem per se natura diremit. Fissuram namque, quam ictu lanceae militari exercitio per medium sub nare superius labrum genitor olim susceperat, laudabili naturae miraculo eodem in loco genitura praetendit. Erchembaldi quoque filium vidimus, cui nomen Stephanus, eodem indicio patrisantem ; casuali laesione tanquam in naturam jam conversa.⁴⁷

In England I once saw a knight called Erchembald, who came from Devonshire. While he was still in his mother's womb, his father refused to recognize him as his son. For reasons of jealousy, he accused his wife of adultery because he was suspicious of her. At the boy's birth nature settled the argument. As the result of a blow from a lance which he had received in battle, the father had a scar just below his nose in the middle of his upper lip. By some miracle of nature, when the child was born, he, too, had a scar in the same place. I myself saw Erchembald's son, whose name was Stephen, and there is no doubt that he had the same mark.⁴⁸

Here we encounter clearly a similar phenomenon to the one found in *Sverris saga*: in both cases an acquired physical peculiarity is transmitted to the next generation and in turn functions as proof of particular ancestry. However, the case of the Norwegian pretender carries a much clearer supernatural connotation. The mark on Eysteinn's body is imprinted (if it ever was) *after* he (allegedly) conceived Þorleifr and thus can only be explained within a miraculous context. The incident recorded by Gerald of Wales, however, is a clear case of a marvel, that is, a remarkable occurrence or a strange phenomenon which was nevertheless a work of nature⁴⁹ rather than an example of divine intervention. A comparable

⁴⁷ Giraldi Cambrensis, *Itinerarium Cambriae*, pp 131–32. ⁴⁸ Gerald of Wales, *The Journey through Wales*, Bk. II, c.7, pp 190–91. ⁴⁹ The crucial distinction in Gerald's mind between a marvel and a miracle was that the miracle was produced by divine

attitude towards a similar phenomenon can be found in Pliny the Elder's *Historia Naturalis* where we are told that 'a thought suddenly flitting across the mind of either parent is supposed to produce likeness or to cause combination of features' in the offspring.⁵⁰ It appears more than possible that Gerald of Wales was influenced by Pliny in his discussion of hereditary peculiarities in *Itinerarium Kambriae*.⁵¹

The curious echo between the Eysteinn's death scene in *Heimskringla* and the reference to Þorleifr *breiðskeggr* in *Sverris saga* strongly indicates that the motif of the cross between the shoulder-blades as a sign of royal pedigree was known in Norway around the turn of the twelfth century. It is important to emphasize that the motif does not appear in the two Icelandic Kings' sagas as a literary embellishment or stylistic device. Rather it seems to serve a very real political purpose in a society where succession to the throne was disputed and there was a clear need for outward symbols to legitimize royal authority. Indeed King Sverrir Sigurðarson himself justifies his claim to kingship by telling about a dream in which St Ólafr Haraldsson, *rex perpetuus Norvegiae*, appears to him and promises to aid him in his struggle against the then reigning king, Magnús Erlingsson.⁵² It is this peculiar situation in Norway which may explain the surprisingly early appearance of the cross-motif in the Kings' sagas.

Moreover we are dealing here with an oral tradition associated with two leaders who were venerated as martyrs following their death; it is not difficult to envisage how their cults could function as rallying points for their supporters. Indeed the veneration of Eysteinn and Þorleifr appears to have taken deeper roots than the cursory references to their veneration in the Old-Norse sources may lead us to believe. Thus it is known that in the sixteenth century '*Hellig Thorlofs Capel*' (St Þorleifr's Chapel) was located at Elverums in the Marker region.⁵³ No other saint is known by that name, and considering that that chapel was located in the region where Þorleifr *breiðskeggr* was active, it is safe to assume that it was dedicated to him. Similarly, in a nineteenth-century source, 'St Østeins kilde' (St Eysteinn's spring), is recorded to have been situated near the place where the king was executed,⁵⁴ information which squares with the reference in *Heimskringla* to the healing spring which emerged following Eysteinn's execution. Thus through the manifestation of the cross-

power, usually, though not exclusively, working through a saintly man or woman, while the marvel, however remarkable it might be, was a work of nature.' R. Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales 1146-1223* (Oxford, 1982), p. 106. 50 'cogitatio etiam utriuslibet animum subito transvolans effingere similitudinem aut miscere existimatur.' Pliny, *Natural History*, Bk. VII, c.12, trans. by H. Rackham, II (*Loeb Classics*: Cambridge Mass., 1962), pp 540-41. 51 'It is possible that physical peculiarities of this sort may be produced in a child because the mother remembers something which she has seen, concentrating on it and thinking of nothing else.' Gerald of Wales, *The Journey Through Wales*, p. 191. 52 *Sverris Saga*, pp 4-5. 53 L. Daae, *Norges helgener* (Christiania, 1879), p. 129. 54 *Ibid.* p. 192.

motif in relation to King Eysteinn Haraldsson and his alleged son, Þorleifr *breiðskeggr*, we get a decidedly rare glimpse of a sort of ‘oral hagiography’ which could sustain and enhance the saintly reputation of martyred secular leaders in the absence of official promotion of their cults.

In the medieval period the enigmatic Skarphéðinn of *Njáls Saga*, the crusaders drowned on their way to the Holy Land, the defiant king Eysteinn, Þorleifr the failed pretender to the Norwegian crown, and many other figures, imaginary or real, were associated with a special sign: a cross on the shoulder or between the shoulder-blades. It is the manner in which this mysterious sign appears in different contexts that makes it a motif of interest. In the historical works of two Frenchmen, Guibert of Nogent and Fulcher of Chartres, writing at the turn of the twelfth century, the origin and nature of the sign reveals their different attitude towards the miraculous. In *Njáls saga* the sign illuminates an unexpected side of the violent Skarphéðinn: the seemingly unflappable hero etches it on his body as he faces his ultimate judgement. In *Heimskringla* the mark – appearing in a novel form – neither carries with it notions of penance nor of salvation but rather those of royalty and heroism at the hour of death. Ironically, of the three Scandinavian examples, it is only in the case of Þorleifr, the obscure and somewhat pathetic pretender, that the sign appears in its most common form: as an indication of royal status. In his case and that of his alleged father, King Eysteinn Haraldsson, the motif shows how the boundaries between political propaganda, literary motifs and folkloric beliefs could overlap – even in the far North.