

# Kingship and Individuality in Medieval Historiography

SVERRE BAGGE

## Introduction

This discussion of kingship and individuality in some medieval historians forms part of a larger project on the concept of the individual personality in Western culture. “Individual” and “individuality” are ambiguous concepts, and the history of the individual in the cultural tradition of the West can be very different according to one’s definition of the term. In this context, I shall focus on individuality in two senses. The first is an understanding of individuality as opposed to hierarchy, that is, a contrast between a society in which an individual’s position mainly depends on his or her success in competition with other individuals, and a society whose members have their fixed rank and duties and have relatively little opportunity to change their position in life through their own efforts<sup>1</sup>. The second sense has to do with ideas of the uniqueness of the individual person, e.g. the idea of the individual soul, created separately by God, in Christian thought, or the idea of subjectivity, every individual experiencing the world in a different way. Whereas contemporary ideas of individuality include both aspects, there is no necessary correspondence between their occurrence in the past. On the contrary, individuality in the first sense is more often to be found in small-scale and fairly primitive societies, while in the second sense, it is more compatible with hierarchy and a complex social organization, as may be illustrated by the growth of ideas about the individual soul in the Church in the High Middle Ages and the expression of the individual self in intimate diaries and subtle psychological analyses at the early modern, absolutist courts.

In the following I shall use portraits of kings in written sources to exam-

---

1. Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, London 1970, and *Essais sur l’individualisme*, Paris 1983.

ine medieval ideas of individuality. At first sight, the king would not seem a very good example of the position of the individual in a given society, particularly not in the first sense of the term. As the leader of society, the king is supposed to have considerable liberty of action in whatever way the society is organized, while at the same time, the way of ascending to the throne can hardly be considered evidence of social mobility or the contrary in general. However, royal biographies are important in showing contemporary ideas of the relationship between the person and the “office” or social role. In Europe in the Middle Ages, as well as in other cultures, there are radically different ways of depicting this relationship, from focusing on the actions and intentions, successes and failures of individual persons, to portraits arranged according to the stereotype of the just king (*rex iustus*), or, negatively, the evil king (*rex iniquus*). I shall illustrate these contrasts by comparing three royal biographies belonging to different social and ideological contexts, Otto of Freising’s *Gesta Frederici* and the Old Norse sagas of King Sverre and King Håkon Håkonsson.<sup>2</sup>

## Frederick Barbarossa – the Rex Iustus

In his account of the young Frederick’s participation in the Second Crusade, Otto of Freising tells the following story. On their journey to The Holy Land, the Crusaders pitch their camp in a beautiful field and prepare to celebrate the birth of the Virgin on the next day (8 September). During the night, a heavy rainfall suddenly breaks out, and the Crusaders’ camp is flooded, more likely as the result of divine punishment than from natural causes. Confusion and panic reign in the camp, people try to escape but many are caught by the flood and drowned. Only Frederick and his men, who have raised their tents on a foothill, remain unharmed, and gather to celebrate the mass of the Virgin. This episode is the only event Otto refers from the crusade, despite the fact that he was himself one of the participants and that surely many important and dramatic events must have taken place. Otto’s explicit reason for this omission is that the crusade was a disaster, while in his biography of

2. For a more detailed treatment of these problems, I refer to my forthcoming publications, “The Individual in Medieval Historiography”, in the collection *The Individual in Political Theory and Practice*, edited by Janet Coleman (part of the project, *The Origins of the Modern State in Europe*, organized by the European Science Foundation), and my book *From Gang Leader to the Lord’s Anointed*, which will contain more complete references to the sources and literature.

Frederick, he is writing a joyful history.<sup>3</sup> By picking out just this episode, he wants to underline two points. First, it shows how Frederick is favoured by *Fortuna* (luck), who from his youth till the present day has never turned “a clouded face” towards him (I.47), and second, it demonstrates the fragility of human happiness and the power of the Divine Majesty (I.48). On the implicit level, Otto probably also alludes to the story of Noah’s Ark in the Bible, showing Frederick, like Noah, as elected by God to escape disaster, in order to be the founder of a new age: While Noah became the father of a new generation of men, Frederick is destined to be the saviour of the Empire.

*Gesta Frederici* is rightly considered one of the masterpieces of medieval historiography – with its exalted style, Roman grandeur and profound philosophy of history – but makes dull reading if one expects a portrait of Frederick as a person. Hardly anywhere is there a personal touch in Otto’s description of Frederick. In connection with Frederick’s election and coronation, Otto refers two events (*Gesta* II.3). The first is about a man in disgrace, who approaches him on his coronation day, hoping that the King will be favourably disposed and forgive him on such a day. But Frederick is unyielding, saying that the man had been disgraced, not because of hatred, but because of justice. Thus, he shows an unusual firmness of character (*constantia*) in such a young man, while at the same time emphasizing that as a ruler, he is the guardian of justice. The second event is the remarkable coincidence between Frederick’s coronation and the consecration of the Bishop of Münster, whose name was also Frederick, on the same day, signifying the two *christi domini* (The Lord’s anointed) ruling the Church. By contrast, Otto rarely mentions Frederick’s plans or aims, and the different events are rarely brought together to form a coherent narrative. He tells that Frederick married a Burgundian princess instead of a Byzantine one, as originally planned (*Gesta* II.11, II.50, II.54), and that he preferred an expedition to Italy to an attack against Hungary (*Gesta* II.52, II.55), without giving the reasons for these decisions. Usually, we follow Frederick from event to event, without getting much information on how they are connected. And above all, we never see Frederick interacting with other men. He is like the famous wanderers in the underworld – except that Dante enters into a much closer

---

3. Otto of Freising, *Gesta Frederici seu rectius Chronica*, ed. F. J. Schmale, Darmstadt 1965, I.47. In his prologue, addressed to Frederick himself, Otto elaborates further on the joyful theme of his work, dealing with the happy age inaugurated by Frederick’s accession to the throne.

relationship with the dead than Frederick with the living.

The conclusion to be drawn from these observations is not that Otto was an incompetent historian, but that he was more interested in the events as symbols of a higher reality than in their causes and consequences in a mundane or human context. His main concern is not human plans or actions, but the inexorable wheel of fortune, which brings human plans to nothing and can only be changed through God's direct intervention.<sup>4</sup> The importance of human acts and choices lies not in their external effects but in the extent to which they conform to God's will.

Otto of Freising is clearly interested in the personality, in the sense that he reports Frederick's actions in order to throw light on his character, rather than for their importance for the course of events. However, his description is not intended to show the unique features of Frederick's character, but to present him as a personification of the traditional ecclesiastical ideal of the just king (*rex iustus*), which goes back to Late Antiquity<sup>5</sup>. This is a general feature of the ecclesiastical tradition, which combines an interest in the internal nucleus of the human being with strict ethical norms, expressed in a clear model for how this internal nucleus should be. The lives of the saints, which are usually very stereotyped, are good examples of this. In the case of Frederick, it may be a question whether Otto describes the person or the office. Though Otto and his contemporaries clearly had an idea of public office, they did not use this idea to draw a distinction between "public" and "private".<sup>6</sup> Rather, they understood the office in a "sacramental" way: through God's election, manifested in unction and coronation or in other ways, the king becomes "a different man". More generally, Otto's society is a society in which a person is identified by his rank or birth rather than by individual character. The office is the man, and there is a standard picture of the ideal emperor, bishop, warrior etc., to which individuals should conform.

- 
4. For Otto's philosophy of history, see the collection of articles in Walter Lammers, (ed.), *Geschichtsbild und Geschichtsdenken im Mittelalter*, Darmstadt 1965, and, most recently, Hans-Werner Goetz, *Das Geschichtsbild Ottos von Freising*, Cologne 1984.
  5. Sverre Bagge, *The Political Thought of The King's Mirror*, Odense 1987, pp. 97 ff. with references.
  6. Otto's description does not aim at describing Frederick in his public as opposed to his private capacity, nor do the contemporary mirrors of princes distinguish very clearly between "public" and "private" virtues (Bagge, 1987, pp. 99-101).

## King Sverre – “the Self-Made Man”

The biography of Frederick’s somewhat younger contemporary, King Sverre of Norway (born c. 1150, king 1177-1202), is an example of an entirely different tradition<sup>7</sup>. According to the saga, Sverre grew up in the Faroe Islands and, in his early twenties, was told by his mother that he was a king’s son. He then went to Norway, became the leader of a small group of poor and defeated men from an earlier rebellion in 1177, and fought his way to the throne, defeating and killing the ruling king, Magnus Erlingsson (1184), but had to fight against rebels during the rest of his reign. The saga gives a vivid account of these struggles.

The saga presents Sverre as chosen by God to become king of Norway. When discovering his true vocation, Sverre receives God’s blessing by dreaming that he fights in the army of St. Olav (the patron saint of Norway, king 1015-30) and becomes his successor, and that he receives holy unction from Samuel, as David did (SS ch. 5, 9). David is an important example for him in other contexts as well (Bagge, 1987, pp. 163 with ref.). Sverre is shown as a good Christian, trusting in God and appealing to him in difficult situations, and forgiving his enemies. God also works miracles in Sverre’s favour, and his incredible victories against numerically superior forces repeatedly make one think of David and Goliath, a resemblance that is surely intended by the author. In contrast to Otto of Freising, however, the author of *Sverris saga* does not arrange his narrative as a whole according to the idea of kingship by the grace of God, or in order to portray Sverre as the *rex iustus*. He describes him as a great leader and an extremely successful military commander. Despite some divine interventions, Sverre’s successes are not normally interpreted as miracles. On the contrary, we understand them better than most military events described in the saga literature. The author describes in detail Sverre’s various plans and stratagems and makes it clear that the principal reason for his success is his own ability as a commander. Sverre organizes the battle, encourages his men in critical moments and moves his troops from one area of the battlefield to another. In this respect, he acts more like a general of later periods than as the conventional war leader of contemporary Norwegian society, who marched in front of his men against the enemy. However, in contrast to the generals commanding the or-

---

7. *Sverris saga* (=SS), ed. G. Indrebø, Oslo 1920; *The Saga of King Sverri of Norway*, transl. J. Sephton, London 1899. (References are to chapters, which are the same in the original and the translation).

ganized armies of the post-medieval period, Sverre has no real authority over his men. The saga describes how they elect him as their leader by threatening to kill him if he refuses, and constantly refers to his deliberations with his men before battles and other decisive events. Sverre has to *convince* his men to make them do what he wants, he exercises his leadership by gaining their confidence through his speeches and actions and ultimately by leading them from victory to victory.

In the large number of speeches the saga attributes to him, Sverre emerges as an excellent speaker. His speeches include clear and intelligent analyses of military situations, pious reflections, encouragement, and demagogic attacks on his adversaries. One of his most distinctive marks is humour and irony – which he occasionally even turns against himself. In one of his early battles he is defeated and has to run ashore from his ship. He stumbles and falls and is lying under a floorboard in the hold of the ship while his men run ashore above him, so that he is unable to get up. One of the last of the men recognizes him and saves him, saying: “Tis a bad parting from our King to leave him lying in the bilge-water”. The king replies: “Don’t ‘king me’ too much for a while!” (SS ch. 28). When challenged by one of his enemies to a single combat, he declines, frankly admitting that neither he nor his adversary has much courage in such encounters (SS ch. 131: 136). This is a truly remarkable pronouncement in this masculine warrior society. But Sverre was sufficiently brilliant and successful as a military commander to be able to joke about his lack of personal courage – whether this was true or not.

A characteristic feature of the numerous battle-speeches in the saga is Sverre’s sensitivity to his men’s reactions. There is a sliding transition between speeches and dialogues before and under the battle. The men’s reactions to the speech are always registered in the saga. Sometimes Sverre continues or makes another speech as a consequence of these reactions. During the battle he often approaches one particular unit facing difficulties or wanting to flee, and makes a short speech of encouragement. This behaviour is clearly a result of the “command structure” in Sverre’s army: he always depends on the support of his men. Before the battle of Nordnes (1181) he starts by asking whether they should fight or retreat, though this time declaring himself in favour of the former alternative. The response is lukewarm. Sverre then goes on with a strongly emotional battle speech, pointing to the better quality of his men compared to the enemy, urging them to trust in God and the saints and expressing his own feeling that they will win. This time he succeeds, the men are convinced, acclaim him as the most successful of all

kings and declare their full trust that he will lead them to victory (SS ch. 51).

The close connection between Sverre and his men and his focus on the exact situation in which they find themselves, may also serve to explain the form of the speeches, or rather their lack of form, according to classical rules of rhetoric. Despite some interesting attempts<sup>8</sup>, we still lack a thorough examination of oratory in the sagas compared to classical rhetoric and its medieval descendants. My impression is, however, that Sverre's battle speeches present their arguments in a more haphazard manner than is normal according to contemporary rhetorical rules. Thus it seems quite possible that the author deliberately chose to give the battle speeches an oral and spontaneous form, to give a more realistic impression of the situation. It is also worth noting that he rarely uses these speeches to make general points, unrelated to the particular situation to which they belong. With a few exceptions, it is difficult to predict the outcome of a battle from Sverre's speeches – apart from the fact that he is mostly victorious.

Thus, the author of *Sverris saga* gives a clear picture of his protagonist as an individual, through his vivid description of Sverre in various situations, his emphasis on Sverre's plans and tactics and his consistent attempts to explain the outcome of events as the result of human actions and intentions. As is usual in the saga literature, however, *Sverris saga* rarely describes Sverrir's "inner life", his thoughts and emotions or tries to give a consistent picture of his personality. There are a few examples of this in the beginning of the saga, describing Sverre's doubts and deliberations when receiving his vocation, according to the model of contemporary hagiography. But the aim of these passages is more to show the contrast between Sverre's "royal" or "warrior" nature and his modest circumstances, than to describe personal development. The "individuality" in the saga's portrait of Sverre comes from a number of vivid glimpses of Sverrir in action, as he is seen by other men. In the traditional saga manner, the author of *Sverris saga* largely regards a man as the sum of his acts<sup>9</sup>. Thus, the saga seems to be an example of individuality in the first sense mentioned in the introduction.

Admittedly, the vivid portrait of Sverre has something to do with the fact that he was a remarkable person. But there is also a number of similar portraits in the saga literature. And the contrast between the descriptions of

---

8. James Knirk, *Oratory in the Kings' Sagas*, Oslo 1981.

9. Sverre Bagge, *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford 1991, pp. 186-90.

Sverre and Frederick Barbarossa evidently cannot be explained simply as the consequence of different persons being described. It has to do with different historiographical traditions, probably also different ideas about the human personality. This difference between the sagas and contemporary European historiography corresponds to differences between Norway and Iceland and contemporary feudal society. Society in the former countries was less rigidly stratified, and the competition between the leading men was more open. A charismatic personality was needed to attract adherents. The king could not expect obedience or respect because of his office or consecration but only through his personal ability, as demonstrated in an attractive personality and above all in success. This social structure may then serve to explain the vivid pictures of individuals in *Sverris saga* and other sagas<sup>10</sup>. The king is supposed to be the best man in the realm and surpass others in military and political abilities. He is more likely to do so if he belongs to the royal line. But there is no certainty that one who has royal blood in his veins will be an able king, and there can be great differences between men of the same descent. Sometimes there is a choice between several heirs, and if they fight one another, the best will normally win.

Different ways of writing history are not necessarily the reflection of different societies. There may be differences between authors, genres and literary milieux. The Christian ideology of the *rex iustus* was already developed in clerical milieux in Late Antiquity or the Early Middle Ages and was in many cases of little practical significance for the monarchy. It is also to be found in Norway in the second half of the twelfth century, even forming the structuring principle of the narrative in some historical works, with Theodoricus Monachus' *Historia de antiquitate regum norwagiensium* as the most important example.<sup>11</sup> And the exalted picture of the king in works like Otto of Freising's *Gesta Frederici* may be very far from reality. There is also a more secular European tradition, which depicts the king as a chivalrous he-

---

10. Bagge, 1991, pp. 137-140, 237-240, and "Propaganda, Ideology and Political Power in Old Norse and European Historiography: A Comparative View", *L'Historiographie médiévale en Europe, Paris 29 mars – 1er avril 1989* (Éditions du CNRS), Paris 1991 (=1991a), pp. 203 f., 207 f.

11. Erik Gunnes, "Rex iustus et iniustus", KLN XIV, 1969, col. 154-56; Sverre Bagge, "Theodoricus Monachus – Clerical Historiography in Twelfth Century Norway," *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 14, 1989, pp. 113-133. For the *rex iustus*-ideology in other sources, see Torfinn Tobiassen, "Tronfølgelov og privilegiebrev", *Historisk tidsskrift* (Norwegian) 43, 1964, pp. 181-273 and Bagge, 1987, pp. 87 ff., 110 ff.



ro rather than as the *rex iustus*, and is more concerned with war and political actions. Nevertheless, it is my impression that even this tradition is less “individualistic” than the sagas, because of its origin in a more strictly hierarchical society (Bagge, 1991, pp. 137 ff., 164 ff., 240 ff.).

Despite these reservations, I believe that it is possible in some contexts to trace a parallel development between the growth of a more hierarchical and authoritarian society, governed by a stronger monarchy – in short the development of the medieval state – and a change in historiography. I shall illustrate this by my third example, the saga of Håkon Håkonsson, which represents the official historiography of the strong Norwegian monarchy of the mid-thirteenth century, while at the same time marking a departure from the “classical saga” tradition of works like *Heimskringla* – Snorre Sturlasson’s great work on the Norwegian kings until 1177 – and *Sverris saga*, in the direction of European clerical historiography.

## King Håkon – Rex Iustus and Head of State

After the long period of internal struggles, which reached its climax in the reign of Sverre, peace was concluded between the warring factions, and Norway was once more united under one king, Håkon Håkonsson (1217-63), Sverre’s grandson. During the reign of Håkon and his successors, a strong royal government was established; the aristocracy – partly consisting of “new men”, who had risen to prominence under Sverre, and their descendants – was more directly linked to the king’s service; public justice was expanded; there was a considerable cultural revival, and Norway held an important position among the kingdoms of the North. The saga of Håkon Håkonsson, written by the Icelander Sturla Tordsson<sup>12</sup>, at the commission of Håkon’s son Magnus, during the years 1263-65, must be regarded against this background.

Like earlier sagas, *Håkonar saga* mainly deals with politics and warfare, showing Håkon’s struggles against rebels and internal rivals, with the Church and with kings and princes of other countries. Håkon starts his reign

---

12. *Håkonar saga* (=HH), ed. Guðbrandur Vigfusson (Rerum britannicarum medii ævi scriptores, 88.1-2), London 1857, repr. 1964. *The Saga of Hakon and a Fragment of the Saga of Magnus with Appendices*, translated by G. W. Dasent, (Rerum Britannicarum Medii Ævi Scriptores, vol. 88.4), London 1894, rpr. 1964. (References are to chapters, which are the same in the original and the translation).

in an inauspicious way, like his grandfather Sverre. As a child, his position is insecure, with another dynasty on the throne, and he has considerable difficulties in being recognized as king and even greater in gaining real control of the realm. However, Hákon is able to end the internal struggles and rule without opposition for the last twenty-three years of his reign. This success story would seem ideally suited to creating a vivid and dramatic narrative, focused on the exploits of a great king and leader, in a similar way as in *Sverris saga*. Nevertheless, compared to *Sverris saga*, *Hákonar saga* is usually considered fairly dull, giving a vague and conventional picture of Hákon as a person, containing relatively little dramatic narrative, and not offering the reader much opportunity to understand the events in political terms.

The most important political conflict in *Hákonar saga* is the one between Hákon and his rival in the election of 1217, Skule Bårdsson, a brother of the late King Inge. After his defeat in the election, Skule is made earl, governing one third of the country. This arrangement lasts until Skule rebels against Hákon and is defeated and killed in 1239-40. During the whole of this period, there is a more or less constant tension between the two men. While Sturla clearly condemns Skule's rebellion, he tries to depict him as a great and noble man, who remained faithful to the king with the exception of the last, unhappy year of his life. The reason for this picture was clearly that Skule was the father of the dowager queen, who was still living, and the grandfather of King Magnus, Sturla's employer. Sturla's way of satisfying his employers in this respect shows a marked contrast with the "classical" saga tradition, which is also representative of his work as a whole.

Sturla gives a vivid glimpse of Skule during a meeting between him and Hákon and their followers in 1233. Hákon, relying on reports from his men, brings forward a number of charges against Skule. According to the saga, his speech is long and eloquent, but its content is not referred. Skule replies in the following way:

"I know one song: 'an eagle sat on a stone'. And another one: 'an eagle sat on a stone'. All are like one: 'an eagle sat on a stone'"

He then continues:

"It is so here today, that each begins his business in his own way, but they all end in one way to lay blame on me" (HH ch. 177).

Sturla then summarizes the rest of Skule's speech by saying that he refuted all the charges brought against him and showed himself willing to serve the king.

This episode resembles the great confrontations between the protagonists

in the classical sagas. *Sverris saga* contains some such confrontations between Sverre and his adversaries, in addition to the fact that the saga as a whole is concerned with Sverre's success in the competition against his rivals. In *Heimskringla* the kings regularly confront their rivals in speeches and dialogues, while in addition, they often show their skill or wit in competitive dialogues with lesser men. The present passage in *Hákonar saga* is remarkable in not showing Hákon in direct confrontation with Skule. Had Sturla done so, he must either have presented the king as really convinced of the charges against Skule or he must have made Skule refute him. Direct confrontations between the two protagonists would thus tend to endanger Sturla's compromise between his view of Hákon as the lawful king and Skule as the rebel, and Skule as a great man who committed a tragic sin and error towards the end of his life. More generally, the reason for the absence of such confrontations in *Hákonar saga* is a new idea of the king and the royal office. The king does not confront internal rivals as if they were his equals. His position does not depend on his performance in direct confrontations, he is appointed by God and holds his office on His behalf. In this way, Sturla deliberately abstains from using the only means available to the classical saga tradition for creating vivid portraits of men in action.

Accordingly, the idea of Hákon as the rightful heir to the throne emerges in the saga as the fundamental principle during the long and complicated discussions on the succession to the throne during the years 1217-23. In contrast to earlier discussions and confrontations over such issues, including the one in *Sverris saga*, the personal qualities of the pretenders are of no importance. Nor does Sturla try to explain in political terms why Hákon is preferred to Skule. He points to Skule's strong position as earl and leader of the king's retainers (the *hirð*), to his generosity, which draws men to him, and correspondingly to Hákon's great poverty which prevents him from competing with Skule in this field. Nevertheless, Hákon is the winner, simply because all men know, if they are really honest, that according to "the law of St. Olav" he is the rightful king. Instead of describing Hákon as "the best man", competing for supremacy and drawing other men to him through his charisma, eloquence and success, Sturla makes him the mouthpiece of an official royalist ideology and largely describes him as an example of traditional royal virtues.

The emphasis on the royalist ideology and lawful succession as the expression of God's will is continued in later passages of the saga in which questions of succession are treated. Hákon points to God's election when re-

fusing to share the kingdom with rebels or other pretenders. And he rejects the demands of the Church for privileges and concessions in return for his coronation in 1247 by pointing to his legitimate right to the throne: If he is to pay the Church for his coronation, his honour will diminish instead of increasing; therefore, he prefers not to have this ceremony performed rather than to lose his freedom (HH ch. 247, 251). These statements imply that the king receives his office directly from God through dynastic succession, the coronation being only an external manifestation, not conferring any additional legitimacy on the king. This principle was elaborated in considerable detail and with great ingenuity in *The King's Mirror* (Bagge, 1987, pp. 43-49). The importance of this external manifestation is nevertheless made clear in the detailed account of the ceremonies and festivities around the coronation (HH ch. 253-55).

While the idea of divine election also occurs in Sverre's interpretation of his own struggle for the throne in *Sverris saga*, the emphasis on dynastic continuity and lawful succession is specific to *Hákonar saga*, or at least far more prominent there. This difference between the two sagas is further expressed in the use of oratory in *Hákonar saga*. In *Sverris saga*, like in other "classical" sagas, oratory is in principle subordinated to the narrative of events. Speeches are used to analyse or interpret political or military situations. Thus, battle speeches clarify the attitudes of the leaders and their men and outline the tactics, while the important, but rare speeches after battles serve to interpret the importance of these particular events and their future consequences. Furthermore, confrontations between great men in the form of dialogues and speeches normally lead to some political or military event. In *Hákonar saga* oratory mainly deals with general principles. A few battle speeches are referred, but even they tend to deal more with general principles than the ones in *Sverris saga*. The great majority of the speeches are to be found in two parts of the saga, in the discussions about the succession to the throne during the years 1217-23, and in connection with Hákon's coronation in 1247. Speeches are an effective means to underline and visualize important points and situations. By using speeches in this way in *Hákonar saga*, Sturla clearly shows the importance he attaches to the question of dynasty and legitimate succession and to the idea of the king as God's representative on earth, and thus his shift of emphasis from the *res gestae* of an individual person to the royalist ideology.

In his narrative of war and foreign policy, Sturla, in contrast to the author of *Sverris saga*, does not focus on Hákon's role as a leader, his relationship

to his men or his ability to make them follow him. In so far as he tries to depict Håkon's attitude and behaviour during these events, he emphasizes his justice, clemency and moderation, in accordance with the ideal of the *rex iustus*. In his relationship to other countries, Håkon is the just and peaceful king, who defends his own rights, while at the same time respecting those of others. He manages to secure the friendship of the Swedes, while refusing to pay compensation for his just punishment of Värmland in 1225 (HH ch. 259, 262-64, 266-68). He stages a harsh but just retribution against the Danes, but by behaving in a chivalrous way in the negotiations with their king, he secures his friendship (HH ch. 285-87, 291-93). He acts with the same firmness towards the Scots when they attack the Hebrides, which then necessitates his last, great expedition against Scotland in 1263 (HH ch. 314-28). In war he is mostly a humane general, who refuses to inflict more suffering than necessary. He is reluctant to burn the farms in Värmland during his punishing expedition there in 1225, and he listens to prayers for mercy (HH ch. 109-17). He acts as a good Christian when breaking off the pursuit of Skule's men after his victory in Oslo in 1240 in order to prevent his men from killing enemies who have taken refuge in churches (HH ch. 237).

However, Sturla's narrative cannot solely be explained as an expression of the *rex iustus*-ideology. His account is detailed and matter-of-fact, thereby giving more concise information on politics and strategy than for instance Otto of Freising. Sturla describes in detail the last rebellions in Eastern Norway, which were put down by Skule and Håkon in the 1220s, the war between Håkon and Skule 1239-40 and the great expedition to Scotland in 1263, and he gives a lot of information on Håkon's relationship to various other countries, particularly Sweden and Denmark. In describing Håkon as a general, Sturla focuses on military strategy rather than on battles and individual episodes. In contrast to the author of *Sverris saga*, who is mainly interested in the action in the field, Sturla regards war more from the point of view of the "general staff". He occasionally refers discussions of strategy between Håkon and other leaders and their counsellors and great men, and although he rarely comments on the merits of their various decisions, his account of the events makes it fairly easy to understand and evaluate them. Further, in contrast to the author of *Sverris saga*, Sturla treats government and politics as a collective enterprise, not in the sense that Håkon has to share his power with other men, but in the sense that he is not personally involved in all that happens during his reign, rather giving general directions, which his numerous representatives in the field have to execute. As the ruler of a rela-

tively large kingdom and responsible for foreign policy in a number of different directions, the man Håkon cannot be in the centre of the narrative in the same way as his grandfather Sverre, who during most of his reign was a faction leader and fought in person in a series of internal struggles. Sturla also regards government as a collective enterprise in the sense that he emphasizes the king's responsibility for the welfare of the people and the realm. Such considerations are almost completely absent from *Sverris saga*, which is mainly concerned with Sverre's personal interests. In short, Sturla's narrative of Håkon's reign must be understood, not only as a portrait of a *rex iustus* but also of a head of state.

Sturla finishes his portrait of Håkon as the *rex iustus* by describing his deathbed, death and funeral in solemn detail, as becomes a great king and a great man. Håkon gives generous gifts to his men, he receives the last unction in the presence of numerous prominent clerics, and he dies in the presence of the most prominent members of the aristocracy in his service. In addition, the idea of dynastic continuity is expressed in a symbolic way. At his deathbed, Håkon has books read to him, first Latin ones – most probably religious books, as becomes a learned and Christian king. When getting weaker and finding the Latin language difficult to understand, he asks for books in Norwegian, first the stories of saints, then *Konungatal* from Halvdan the Black (9th century) onwards – probably what is today known as *Fagrskinna* – and finally *Sverris saga*. “Near midnight the saga of Sverre was finished. And just after midnight, God the Almighty called King Håkon from the life in this world” (HH ch. 329). Håkon descends from the Norwegian royal line through his great and brilliant grandfather Sverre, and he dies symbolically at the moment *Sverris saga* is finished. This symbolism is then combined with that of God's election and vocation: As is repeatedly emphasized in the saga, God has chosen Håkon to be king of Norway, because he belongs to the right dynasty, which He has elected to govern the country. Now God makes another choice, calling Håkon to eternal life and his son Magnus to continue the dynasty by succeeding his father.

Having described Håkon's death and burial, Sturla turns to the traditional portrait of the king (*epilogus*), which is normally to be found after his death<sup>13</sup>. He describes his appearance in some detail, in accordance with classical saga conventions, emphasizing his similarity to Sverre. As for the char-

---

13. Paul Kirn, *Das Bild des Menschen in der Geschichtsschreibung von Polybios bis Ranke*, Göttingen 1955: 41 ff.

acterization as a whole, there is some similarity to the *epilogus* in *Sverris saga* (SS ch. 181), both descriptions pointing to the eloquence of their protagonist and their men's love of him, but their main content is fairly different. First, Sverre is portrayed primarily as a warrior hero, while Håkon is the good ruler and the Christian *rex iustus*: a great speaker at the assemblies, a wise man and one who knows the laws. A particularly striking feature, showing the Christian attitude in the characterization, is the statement that Håkon was very kind to the poor and always spoke in a friendly way to them, whatever his mood. This is the classical criterion of a good Christian and is, to my knowledge, not used before about kings in the sagas, not even about St. Olav.<sup>14</sup> Secondly, the characterization of Håkon is more vague and impersonal than the one of Sverre, even if both may be considered conventional compared to the picture of Sverre in action. A striking example of the attempt to depict Sverre's character is the comparison between him and his father, in which they both emerge as great chieftains but which also underlines Sverre's superior intelligence, self-control and strength of character. Sturla does not attempt such a comparison, probably because he is more interested in general royal virtues than in individual character and different ways of exercising the royal office.

## The Individual, the Symbol and the State

The changes I have traced here from *Sverris saga* to *Hákonar saga* conform to a more general change in the concept of the royal office and the structure of society. The royalist ideology of *Hákonar saga* was extensively and deliberately used to support a strong, centralized monarchy and a more authoritarian social organization after the end of the civil wars. The two sagas may therefore be a direct expression of the change in political thought, royal ideology and actual government that took place in Norway between the 1220s and 1265. *Hákonar saga* marks a considerable step in the direction of the *rex iustus*-ideology of European clerical historiography, as illustrated by Otto of Freising and the twelfth century Norwegian clerical historiography. However, the *rex iustus* ideology can be applied in many different ways. *Hákonar saga* differs markedly from the earlier clerical tradition in Norway, to some extent also from Otto of Freising's *Gesta Frederici*, in also being the

---

14. For characterizations of St. Olav and other kings in *Heimskringla*, see Bagge, 1991, pp. 146-56, 181-86.

history of a head of state, containing a detailed narrative of events and often giving a fairly good explanation to why they took place. This aspect of the work also serves to explain the way in which Håkon is portrayed.

In a long-term perspective the changes I have analysed here form part of a process of modernization, a first step towards the complex, bureaucratically organized society we know today. Bureaucracy and impersonal rule are essential in any large-scale, complex society. From a political point of view, impersonal kingship is an obvious advantage for a monarchy wanting to establish its authority over the whole country, i.e. to create a real state. In an impersonal or idealized form, in seals, coins or statues with the king's idealized portrait, the king can be present everywhere in his kingdom at the same time. By coronation, ceremonial, and dress disguising his individual features, he may claim obedience from men who have never seen him before and who will never know him personally. In the extreme varieties of this ideology, the individual king almost ceases to exist, and is barred from almost every contact with ordinary people: The emperor of China, the Caliph of Baghdad and to some extent the Byzantine emperor are examples of this. European monarchy did not go that far even during the period of absolutism, and less so during the Middle Ages. But a development in this direction did take place, and was an important contribution to the growth of the state.

From a literary point of view, this development meant a loss in vivid narrative and acute perception of individual character in historical texts. This does not mean that the growth of the state and royalist ideology necessarily leads to the suppression of all kinds of individuality, only individuality in the first sense referred to in the introduction, which is the one to be found in the sagas. *The King's Mirror*, slightly earlier than *Hákonar saga*, can be considered a breakthrough for individuality in the second sense, the emphasis on internal life, personal responsibility and intention. To the author of *The King's Mirror*, a man is not the sum of his acts, but the acts are the products of a particular kind of personality, and the moral evaluation of different acts may vary considerably according to the intention behind them. The king, who more than anyone else is responsible for detecting this "interior aspect" of men's acts, needs much wisdom, prayer and meditation to be able to do so. Consequently, the author of *The King's Mirror* shows the king isolated in silent meditation, seeking the highest wisdom, which only God can give, to govern his realm (Bagge, 1987, pp. 61-63, 71-73, 90-94). Although the new, Christian-royalist tradition often gives fairly stereotyped descriptions of the royal character, its emphasis on intentions and internal life means a certain



potentiality for analyses of individual character “from within”, by focusing on a constant nucleus of the personality, rather than on striking examples of individual behaviour. Further, the “general staff perspective” and the concept of a collective royal government offer the possibility of analysing strategy and politics in a long-term perspective and thereby of focusing more closely on the plans and intentions of kings, political leaders and generals. To what extent these potentialities were actually fulfilled in medieval historiography, remains to be seen.