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## A Hero between Paganism and Christianity Håkon the Good in Memory and History

Håkon the Good (king c. 935–961) is depicted as one of the heroes among Norwegian kings, in the saga tradition as well as in modern historiography. Håkon was the third king after Harald Fairhair's foundation of the Norwegian kingdom and Harald's youngest son. After his father's and his elder brother's oppression and harsh rule, he made himself loved by the people, issued good laws, organised the defence of the country, and distinguished himself as a great warrior in the struggles against his nephews, the Eirikssons, who tried to win the country with Danish aid. P.A. Munch (1810–1863), one of the founders of modern Norwegian historiography, describes his reign in great detail, using all the available written sources – which are actually the same as we have today.<sup>1</sup> Subsequent accounts of Håkon's reign have increasingly become less detailed, notably after Lauritz Weibull's attack on the saga tradition.<sup>2</sup> Where Munch saw a firmly established oral tradition, transmitted from generation to generation, his successors in the twentieth century see a combination of guesswork, literary embellishment, and various kinds of ideology. Moreover, kings and warrior heroes are no longer as popular or important as they were in the nineteenth century. Håkon therefore plays a more subordinate part in modern historical scholarship – with one exception: Recent interpretations of the introduction of Christianity have emphasised the early start of this process and its gradual character,<sup>3</sup> as opposed to the earlier view, based on the sagas, that the conversion of the country was the work of Olav Tryggvason (995–1000) and St Olav Haraldsson (1015–1030). If the first conversions to Christianity took place already in the first half of the tenth century, then Håkon's attempt to Christianise the country, which has often been regarded as a failure, assumes new importance. Moreover, even if our possibility of gaining trustworthy information about the real Håkon is limited, the way in which his memory was kept in the literary tradition is an object of study in itself, notably the fact that this alleged apostate was also considered an ideal king and a great hero. In the following, I shall examine the written sources for Håkon's reign once more and attempt some conclusions about his reign, his importance for the Christianisation of Norway, and his reputation in the saga tradition.

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<sup>1</sup> Munch 1852, pp. 710–771.

<sup>2</sup> Weibull 1911.

<sup>3</sup> Birkeli 1973 and 1994; Krag 1995, pp. 104–116, and Jørgensen 1996. For a recent account of Håkon, see also Krag 2001.

### The Sources

The only contemporary evidence about Håkon the Good are some skaldic poems which, though valuable, offer very few details about his reign and its importance. The main prose sources are all much later, i.e. *Historia Norwegiæ* (c. 1150–1200, in Latin), Theodoricus Monachus' *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium* (c. 1180, in Latin), *Ágrip* (c. 1190, in Old Norse), *Fagrskinna* (c. 1220, in Old Norse), and Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla* (c. 1230, in Old Norse). In addition, there are scattered references to him in some other sagas and a brief sketch of his reign in the poem *Noregs konunga tal* from the 1190s.<sup>4</sup> These sources have enough in common to show that they cannot be completely independent of one another, but the exact nature of this interdependence has been the subject of much discussion.<sup>5</sup> It is common opinion that the two latest sources derived much of their information from one or more of the three earlier works, above all *Ágrip*, and also that the author of *Ágrip* used Theodoricus. There are also enough similarities between *Historia Norwegiæ* and *Ágrip* to suggest a connection, whereas there seems to be none between the two Latin works. However, the most difficult question concerns the lost works known to have existed, i.e. the two histories by the Icelanders Sæmundr (1056–1133) and Ari (1067/68–1148) from the late eleventh or early twelfth century, plus an apparently Norwegian *Catalogus regum*, mentioned by Theodoricus. Sæmundr probably wrote in Latin, whereas Ari is explicitly mentioned as the first historian writing in Old Norse. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson maintained that the three Norwegian writers only knew the *Catalogus* and consequently that there existed an independent Norwegian historiographical tradition parallel to the Icelandic one. Svend Ellehøj came to the conclusion that the authors of *Historia Norwegiæ* and *Ágrip*, but not Theodoricus, knew Ari's work and that the author of *Ágrip* also knew Sæmundr. Later studies have argued that even Theodoricus knew Ari.<sup>6</sup> The main arguments against this opinion have been that Theodoricus only mentions skaldic poetry and not written narrative as sources and his statement that he writes about what he has heard and not what he has seen.<sup>7</sup> However, the latter is a commonplace that refers to the distinction between an eyewitness account and second-hand knowledge, not to that between oral and written.<sup>8</sup> As for the former argument, although it would seem reasonable for Theodoricus to have referred to written sources if he had any, Snorri, whom we know to have made extensive use of them, only mentions Ari's work. In a study of Håkon's reign, we have to take this discussion into account, though without attempting any de-

<sup>4</sup> All the Norwegian-Icelandic sources are listed in Kreutzer 1999.

<sup>5</sup> For an excellent summary of the whole discussion until 1985 with references, see Andersson 1985. The most recent contributions are Lange 1989 and Krag 1991.

<sup>6</sup> Guðnason 1977; Andersson 1979 and 1985, pp. 209 f.

<sup>7</sup> "non visa sed audita conscripsimus", *Theod.* ch. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Guenée 1980, pp. 77 f., cf. Bagge 1989, p. 124 n. 32; Lange 1989, pp. 98 ff.

to distinguish between similarities resulting from dependence between two known texts on the one hand and common borrowing from lost texts on the other, and even less to trace the particular lost text from which a particular passage has been borrowed. Moreover, the similarities adduced as evidence are often so insignificant as to make the whole operation meaningless.<sup>9</sup> From a methodological point of view, Tor Ulset's attempt to determine the textual relationship between *Ágrip* and the two Latin works on the basis of a distinction between direct translation and linguistic influence from Latin represents a progress, but, as Ulset also admits, the distinction is difficult to draw in practice.<sup>10</sup> Most important in the present context will be to distinguish between earlier and later layers in the tradition and to form some opinion about what can be regarded as relatively trustworthy information about Håkon.

The two Latin works, which are most probably the oldest, differ significantly in their portraits of Håkon. In *Historia Norwegiæ*, he is first and foremost an apostate, although the author admits that he was a good king from a secular point of view.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, Theodoricus has nothing negative to say about him and does not even mention Christianity.<sup>12</sup> The reason for this difference is certainly not that Theodoricus' attitude is less religious than that of the author of *Historia Norwegiæ*.<sup>13</sup> Nor can Theodoricus have been unaware of Håkon's Christian background, as he mentions that he was brought up in England at King Athalstan's court. A more likely explanation for the omission is Theodoricus' strong focus on the two great missionary kings, Olav Tryggvason and St Olav. Other examples clearly show that he must have known more than he included in his work, as he often confines himself to the basic facts about the actual history of Norway, while adding a number of examples from sacred history to put these

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Andersson 1985, p. 208. See e.g. Ellehøj's argument from the correspondence between the mention of a large company in connection with Halvdan the Black's drowning in *Historia Norwegiæ* and *Heimskringla*, the latter allegedly based on Ari, as an argument for *Historia Norwegiæ* having borrowed from Ari. "Equitatu magno" is supposed to be a translation of "lið mikit", but the two sources do not even agree as to whether the company was mounted or not! Cf. also Lange's argument (Lange 1989, p. 113) for Theodoricus having used Ari as his source, based on an allegedly common reference to Olav Tryggvason's foundation of Nidaros: *Heimskringla*'s prologue (*Hkr.* I, p. 7) contains a brief reference to this event, simply stating the fact, which may be a quotation from Ari. By contrast, Theodoricus ch. 10 tells that Olav held a meeting with the people on the site of the later city of Nidaros, to which he adds a brief description of its present glory, in contrast to its insignificance in Olav's time, but without naming Olav as its founder. Thus, the two passages have no more in common than the reference to Nidaros.

<sup>10</sup> Ulset 1983.

<sup>11</sup> HN ch. 13.

<sup>12</sup> *Theod.* ch. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Thus Kreutzer 1999, p. 90. For Theodoricus' religious interpretation of history, see Bagge 1989.

facts into perspective.<sup>14</sup> The brevity of Theodoricus' account of Håkon's reign is thus evidence of its relative insignificance; despite his good qualities, Håkon is just another king from the dark period before Christianity. The quotations about the inevitable struggles between mighty men, even over a poor kingdom,<sup>15</sup> point in the same direction. Such quotations also occur in some other places of Theodoricus' work, and may be understood against the background of the inner conflicts going on at the time when he wrote his work, to which he also alludes at the end.<sup>16</sup> But they probably also point to a contrast between Håkon's insignificant struggles for "a poor kingdom" and his great successors' fight for Christianity and justice against evil men.

As for the "secular" aspect of Håkon's reign, both sources indicate its length, *Historia Norwegie* twenty-seven years, Theodoricus twenty-four years. Further, both mention that Håkon's elder brother, Eirik Bloodaxe, was exiled by the people and replaced by Håkon, and that his sons later attacked Håkon. According to Theodoricus, Eirik ruled for three years after his father's death, the last of which together with Håkon, while *Historia Norwegiæ* lets Eirik be deposed after only one year. *Historia Norwegiæ* describes two battles against the Eirikssons, Theodoricus only one, but he implies that there were more. Both agree that Håkon's last battle took place at Fitjar on the island of Stord, while *Historia Norwegiæ* places the earlier battle at Rastarkalf on the island of Frøya in the district of Møre, a place recurring in all later sources. As for Håkon's death, Theodoricus' account corresponds to those of his successors in blaming Gunnhild, the Eirikssons' mother. Håkon was hit by an arrow, shot by Gunnhild's servant, which killed him thanks to Gunnhild's sorcery. By contrast, *Historia Norwegiæ* lets Håkon be hit by a spear, thrown by a boy. In this way, he is punished by a child for having renounced the child Christ. This difference may indicate the existence of two versions of this event in the tradition, but a more likely explanation is that the author of *Historia Norwegiæ* was himself responsible for changing the "authorised" version. He is a great rhetorician who loves antithesis, parallelism, and allegory, and his whole portrait of Håkon is determined by Håkon's apostasy. In this perspective, divine intervention becomes a better explanation of Håkon's death than Gunnhild's magic. As *puer* can mean both "boy" and "servant", the step to the parallel between Håkon's killer and the child that he renounced is a small one. Even the change from arrow to spear may be deliberate. Christ was pierced by a spear, which makes this weapon a more suitable expression of divine revenge than an arrow.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Bagge 1989, p. 123 ff.

<sup>15</sup> "pugna est de paupere regno ... Omnisque potestas / impatiens consortis erit" (*Theod.* ch. 4).

<sup>16</sup> *Theod.* ch. 14, p. 25, ch. 27, ch. 34; cf. Bagge 1989, p. 129.

<sup>17</sup> Saxo, *Gesta Danorum* 10.1.7 also mentions a spear, miraculously flying in the open air and then suddenly hitting Håkon, but points to Gunnhild's magic as a possible explana-

*Ágrip* is slightly later than the two Latin works, probably written around 1190, but its account is considerably more detailed.<sup>18</sup> The author sketches the political background to Hákon's ascent to the throne, i.e. Eirik's harsh rule and unpopularity which result in wise men inviting Hákon back from England. Back in Norway, Hákon soon gets such a large following that Eirik sees no option but to leave the country. Further, the work contains a more detailed account of Hákon's wars. Whereas Hákon's relationship to Denmark is not mentioned in the two Latin works, *Ágrip* tells that he went south to Denmark and won a great victory, defeating ten ships with his two, and conquering Sealand, Skåne and Västgötaland.<sup>19</sup> *Ágrip* mentions this expedition immediately after the account of how Hákon won the kingdom, but gives neither date nor context. Further, *Ágrip* also adds an extra battle against the Eirikssons, at Avaldsnes, which the author dates to the fifteenth year of Hákon's reign, thus contradicting Theodoricus' statement that Hákon ruled in peace for nineteen years. The next battle, at Rastarkalf, is said to have taken place "shortly afterwards" and the last, at Fitjar, nine years after the outbreak of the war, which corresponds to Theodoricus' reckoning. *Ágrip* also differs from *Historia Norwegiæ* in the account of the death of Gamle, the eldest of the Eirikssons, in the battle of Rastarkalf. Hákon's last battle, at Fitjar, is told in greater detail than in the Latin works, but the author follows Theodoricus in his description of his death.

Most important, however, *Ágrip* gives far more details regarding Hákon's attitude to Christianity: He was a Christian, but his wife – who is not mentioned in any other source – was pagan. To please her and the people, he took part in pagan cult, but he continued to keep Sunday as a holiday and to fast on Fridays. He built churches and set priests in them, but the pagans burnt the churches and killed the priests. The people of Trøndelag reacted strongly against Hákon's Christianity and eventually forced him to take part in the pagan sacrifices. Hákon tried to participate as little as possible, but he had to pretend to eat horse-meat – an important part of the pagan cult – biting a horse-liver wrapped in cloth. Before his death, Hákon's friends offered to bring his body to England for Christian burial, but he refused, stating that his life as a pagan did not merit it, but asking God for mercy. Thus, *Ágrip* not only gives more details about Hákon's religion but also a picture that differs significantly from that of *Historia Norwegiæ*. Hákon is not really an apostate, but personally a good Christian who is forced to make compromises in a pagan country and who dies as a repentant sinner, asking God for mercy.

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tion. An alternative explanation might therefore be a common Danish source for Saxo and *Historia Norwegiæ*. Steinnes 1946–48, pp. 18–32 has actually suggested that the work was written in Denmark and pointed to influence from Danish sources. This remains a possibility, although there are also others. See Mortensen 2003, pp. 18 f. with ref.

<sup>18</sup> *Ágr.* ch. 5–7, pp. 8–17.

<sup>19</sup> *Ágr.* ch. 5, p. 10.

The two latest sources, *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*, both depend on *Ágrip's* account. As for Håkon's wars, *Fagrskinna* gives some more details about his expedition to Denmark, regarding it as a reaction to Danish Vikings and the Eirikssons attacking south-eastern Norway and dating it to Håkon's seventeenth year. The expedition is preceded by Håkon's appointment of Tryggve Olavsson as king in Viken (see below, p. 193). *Heimskringla* gives the same information, adding a battle in Jutland, and giving the whole story a somewhat different context. Håkon's expedition is an attempt to stop Danish Vikings from plundering in Eastern Norway. Håkon is immensely successful and returns with great wealth. He then appoints Tryggve Olavsson king in the southeast, to protect the country against the Danes. The consequence of this war, however, is that the Eirikssons return to Norway and receive Danish aid to conquer the country. The source for this information is Guttorm Sindre's *Hákonardrápa*, from which *Heimskringla* quotes extensively.<sup>20</sup> Neither *Ágrip* nor *Fagrskinna* quotes any skaldic poem as evidence for Håkon's expedition, but their source is likely to be either Guttorm's poem or some other poem dealing with the same events. As for *Fagrskinna*, the latter is the more probable, as the place names mentioned there differ from those in Guttorm's poem, although they are in the same region.<sup>21</sup> We can therefore conclude that Håkon on one occasion led a raiding expedition against Jutland, Sealand, Skåne, and Götaland, possibly also that these areas were part of the kingdom of Denmark at the time, but we do not know whether it took place before or after the Eirikssons' attack.

*Fagrskinna* dates the Eirikssons' first attack to Håkon's twentieth year, and only mentions two battles. By contrast, *Heimskringla* follows *Ágrip* in adding a third battle, at Avaldsnes, which takes place before the others. Both *Fagrskinna* and particularly *Heimskringla* give a detailed and dramatic account of Håkon's attempt to introduce Christianity and the stubborn resistance from the people of Trøndelag. *Heimskringla* also elegantly links the religious conflict to the war against the Eirikssons: When the people of Trøndelag have destroyed Håkon's churches, killed the priests, and forced him to take part in the *blót*, Håkon gathers an army to fight them, but has to give up his plan when the Eirikssons attack the country, and use the army to fight them instead. *Heimskringla* also gives a detailed account of a *blót*, the authenticity of which has been the subject of much discussion.<sup>22</sup> It seems unlikely that Snorri had much information about such matters. Dramatic events may be passed on from generation to generation over centuries, whereas cultural contexts like religious rituals are likely to be

<sup>20</sup> *HkrHG* ch. 6–9, cf. *Skj.* B I, pp. 55 f.

<sup>21</sup> *Fsk.* ch. 9 mentions Brenneyar, Vardeyar in Myl and in Mystrasund, the first situated near the mouth of the Göta Älv, the others in Halland.

<sup>22</sup> Of more recent contributors, Düwel 1985 rejects the story, whereas Sørensen 2001 and Steinsland 2000, pp. 111 f. take a more positive attitude.

forgotten.<sup>23</sup> Admittedly, Snorri is probably a fairly good source for the understanding of politics and society before his own time, but here his authority rests on the likelihood that such matters had not changed too much during the preceding centuries.<sup>24</sup> By contrast, radical changes took place in the field of religion and particularly religious ritual, which makes it difficult to imagine how he could have any trustworthy information. Most probably, he used a mixture of familiar Christian rituals, his own imagination, and the few scraps of evidence still available in ecclesiastical prohibitions against pagan rituals, such as the eating of horse-meat.<sup>25</sup> Generally, the later sagas' additions to *Ágrip* can easily be explained as literary embellishment or attempts to create a more logical and consistent account of the information found there. Thus, *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* contain no information about Hákon's wars or his attitude to Christianity that cannot be explained as an elaboration of *Ágrip*'s account.

On some points, however, they add new information that cannot be derived from earlier extant sources. Both tell a story of how Hákon became King Athalstan's fosterson, i.e. as a result of a competition between him and King Harald. Harald sent the newborn Hákon to England, and his messenger managed to make Athalstan place him on his knee, then telling him that he had now accepted the responsibility as fosterfather, which, according to normal rules in Norway, was an expression of inferiority.<sup>26</sup> Further, both sagas name his mother, Tora Mosterstong from Moster in Sunnhordland in Western Norway.<sup>27</sup> They both refer to her as the king's servant or slave (*ambátt*), but *Heimskringla* adds that she was a relative of Horda-Kåre, thus belonging to the mightiest kindred in Western Norway. The curious combination of Tora's aristocratic descent and her servile status is then explained as the result of Harald's dominant position, which forced many prominent men and women to obey him.

The story of how Hákon was sent to England is in all likelihood invented, either by the saga writers themselves or by their sources, who probably wanted to show Harald's superiority over his English counterpart. We do not know how fostering was regarded at the time of Athalstan and Harald Fairhair, but it was considered a sign of superiority in feudal Europe in the High Middle Ages.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps each party at the time believed that he was the superior one? The fact that Hákon's mother appears at such a late stage in the tradition also gives room for suspicion. On the other hand, genealogies are easy to remember and were often remembered over long periods of time, although there might be motives

<sup>23</sup> Hodne 1973, pp. 185 ff.; cf. Bagge 2002, pp. 193–197.

<sup>24</sup> Bagge 2002, pp. 173 ff., 207 ff.

<sup>25</sup> Düwel 1985, pp. 21 ff. shows convincingly that most of Snorri's concrete information can be explained in this way.

<sup>26</sup> *Fsk.* ch. 3, *HkrHH* ch. 38–39; Lárusson 1981, pp. 544 f.

<sup>27</sup> *Fsk.* ch. 3, p. 21; *HkrHH* ch. 37, p. 155.

<sup>28</sup> Bloch 1968, pp. 317 f.

for improving one's line of descent. We cannot exclude the possibility that there were people in the thirteenth century who claimed descent from Horda-Kåre and wanted to have a king among their ancestors. This is probably Koht's reason for rejecting the statement about Tora's connection to Horda-Kåre.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, this information about Håkon's mother makes excellent sense in light of his reign as a whole. Like his father, Håkon was mainly king of Western Norway. Support from the mightiest family here would be an important asset in his struggle for the throne and may serve to explain both his easy acceptance as king and his firm position in the area for the rest of his reign. Moreover, there was enmity between Håkon's successors, the Eirikssons, and Horda-Kåre's kindred. Sigurd Eiriksson was killed by Klypp, according to *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* a descendant of Horda-Kåre. Klypp's motive for this act was that Sigurd had raped his wife.<sup>30</sup> Towards the end of the tenth century, another descendant of Horda-Kåre, Erling Skjalgsson, became the virtual ruler of Western Norway, in alliance with Olav Tryggvason, but ran into conflict with his successor St Olav Haraldsson and was killed by him. These scattered references may indicate powerful kindred in Western Norway alternately in alliance and conflict with the kings. Its different relationship to Håkon and the Eirikssons corresponds to several other cases and may ultimately serve to explain the different reputation of the two regimes in the sources.

The fact that Tora is given a name and a local identity is also an argument for high status. Further, although kings no doubt had children with servant women, mistresses from prominent families were in later periods an important means of securing alliances<sup>31</sup> and are likely to have been so in Harald's age as well. As for Tora being called the king's *ambátt*, the most likely explanation is to be sought in the story of Athalstan. Both *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* make a point of the child sent to Athalstan having a mother of servile status; Athalstan's humiliation would have been less if Tora were a highborn lady. While the author of *Fagrskinna* has either chosen to omit the information about Horda-Kåre or has not known about it, Snorri has evidently found two mutually contradicting statements in his sources and harmonised them in a way that fits in with the Icelandic picture of Harald's overwhelming power, bordering on tyranny. In Snorri's mind, there was no clear distinction between obedience as a subject and as a slave, however unlikely it would seem for the term *ambátt* to be used about a lady belonging to the mightiest kindred in Western Norway. Thus, in this case it is easier to explain that the later tradition has made a highborn woman into a slave than vice versa. There are therefore good reasons for accepting the state-

<sup>29</sup> Koht 1931, p. 153.

<sup>30</sup> *Fsk* ch. 13, p. 57; *HkrHG* ch. 14. The episode is also mentioned in *Ágrip* ch. 9 where the killer is called Torkjell Klypp without mention of his kindred.

<sup>31</sup> Bagge 1991, p. 120; cf. Auður Magnúsdóttir 2001 on Iceland.

ment that Håkon's mother belonged to the kindred of Horda-Kåre, while rejecting what the same sources tell about her servile status.

The older sources are very brief regarding Håkon's government, confining themselves to stating that he was a good ruler who respected the laws and was loved by the people, *Ágrip* adding that he issued (*setti*) the law of Gulating with the advice of Torleiv the Wise. By contrast, *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* give relatively much information on such matters. As for the law of Gulating, *Fagrskinna* adds that St Olav kept most of Håkon's provisions when he re-issued the law. According to *Heimskringla*, Håkon also issued the law of Frostating. The statements about Håkon as the great legislator – as well as that of St Olav – should probably be regarded as an example of the widespread tendency to attribute the law to some mythical legislator in the past. It is difficult to believe in the existence of law as an organised body of provisions in an oral society. On the other hand, some provisions in the law of Gulating show such a great resemblance to Anglo-Saxon laws as to indicate a connection, which is an argument for Håkon's influence.<sup>32</sup> Although the district of Gulating probably existed before Håkon, he is likely to have extended it as well as to have reorganised the *thing*.<sup>33</sup> There is also some additional evidence for Håkon having established the coastal defence organisation (*leidang*). Once more, the Anglo-Saxon model is an indication. Moreover, some passages in the skaldic poetry, from Håkon's reign as well as from later in the tenth century, seem to point in the direction of a broad mobilisation of the coastal population.<sup>34</sup>

Of the three earlier works, *Historia Norwegiæ* states that Håkon was accepted as king by the whole coastal population, while the two others simply regard him as king of Norway, without going into details about any other region than Trøndelag, the centre of the opposition to his attempt to introduce Christianity. The two later works give some more details about the extent of his realm. According to *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*,<sup>35</sup> Håkon made his nephew Tryggve Olavsson king in Viken, i.e. the area around the Oslofjord, in order to protect the country from the Danes. The basis for this piece of information seems to be Gut-torm Sindre's *Hákonardrápa*, where it is said that Håkon made an anonymous warrior, returning from Ireland, the lord of some place in the east.<sup>36</sup> The saga writers' identification of this person with Tryggve Olavsson is based on the current tradition in the thirteenth century that this Tryggve was the son of Håkon's brother Olav who was settled by Harald Fairhair in the region of Viken. Tryggve in turn became the father of the great missionary king Olav Tryggvason. This genealogy is probably a construction intended to make Olav Tryggvason a de-

<sup>32</sup> Helle 2001, p. 34 f.

<sup>33</sup> Helle 2001, p. 30 ff.

<sup>34</sup> Helle 2001, p. 32 f. and below.

<sup>35</sup> *Fsk.* ch. 9; *HkrHGr* ch. 9, p. 178.

<sup>36</sup> *Skj.* B I, p. 55.

scendant of Harald Fairhair.<sup>37</sup> Further, *Heimskringla* emphasises Håkon's great friendship with Sigurd Ladejarl of Trøndelag, the son of King Harald's ally in this region. Both sagas probably accept the earlier picture of Håkon as the king of all Norway, although at least Snorri seems to have imagined his two subordinates in the north and east to have enjoyed considerable independence, an understanding that is further developed in his account of how Håkon's successors, the Eirikssons, have them murdered in order to get control over the whole kingdom. Moreover, the saga and skaldic tradition mostly mentions Håkon in connection with Western Norway and Trøndelag, the latter region as the arena of the conflict over Christianity which suggests that Snorri may be right in attributing considerable independence to its ruler. Øyvind Finnsson's *Håkonarmál* states that Håkon led men from Hålogaland as well as Ryfylke to his last battle at Fitjar,<sup>38</sup> which may indicate that he controlled the whole coast, at least south to around present-day Stavanger, but may also be explained by Håkon receiving aid from the earl of Lade. Anyway, the current opinion seems to be that Håkon, like his father, was mainly king of Western Norway.

The later sagas also give a far more explicit account of Håkon's reign from a "constitutional" point of view, showing how he differed, not only from Eirik and his sons but also from his father Harald Fairhair. According to *Fagrskinna*, Harald imposed a tax on the people throughout the country which Håkon changed into a duty for the coastal districts to man and maintain ships for the defence of the country.<sup>39</sup> *Heimskringla* takes a step further: Harald confiscated all landed property (*óðal*)<sup>40</sup> in the country, so that the whole people became his tenants who had to pay him land rent. Håkon reversed this provision, addressing the people of Frostating and promising to return the *óðal* to them.<sup>41</sup> The confiscation of the *óðal* and its return have been the cause of much discussion among Norwegian historians, mostly centred on the question of the character of Harald's regime and the consequences of his conquest of the country.<sup>42</sup> It is, however, highly unlikely that these statements in the later sagas are based on any authentic tradition from the tenth century. They only occur in the latest sources, are not attested by the skaldic poetry,<sup>43</sup> and belong to the kind of generalisations that seem unlikely to be derived from an oral tradition.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Krag 1989.

<sup>38</sup> *Skj.* B I, p. 57; cf. Koht 1931, pp. 154 f.

<sup>39</sup> *Fsk* ch. 2, p. 19, ch. 11, p. 34.

<sup>40</sup> Technically, *óðal* means land that has belonged to kindred for a certain period of time, but it can also, like here, mean landed property in general.

<sup>41</sup> *HkrHH* ch. 6; *HkrHG* ch. 1.

<sup>42</sup> Summaries of the discussion with references to earlier literature in Skram 1973 and Andersen 1977, p. 86 ff.

<sup>43</sup> The only possible reference occurs in Sigvat's *Bersögslisvisur*, where King Magnus is said to lay "sína eign / á óðal þegna" (*Skj.* B I, p. 238). Here the context indicates that Sigvat refers to confiscation of individual farms from the king's real or alleged enemies.

By contrast, they make sense in the context of thirteenth century discussions about kingship. First, at least the passage in *Heimskringla* about the confiscation of the *óðal* serves to explain the emigration to Iceland, a connection that is made more explicit in the almost identical passage in *Egils saga*.<sup>44</sup> Many Norwegian chieftains leave the country to settle in Iceland in order to escape from Harald's tyranny. Second, these statements must be understood in the context of thirteenth century – and probably earlier – ideas of kingship. The distinction between the rights of the public authority and those of private individuals is not very clear to Snorri and probably not to his contemporaries either, which means that taxation as well as the right to issue commands is easily suspected of being the expression of tyranny. Thus, the more moderate statement in *Fagrskinna*, written by a Norwegian or in any case someone in close connection with the Norwegian court,<sup>45</sup> about royal taxation, could easily be extended to *Heimskringla*'s more drastic claim that Harald became the owner of the whole country. Moreover, such a claim could also be made on behalf of the contemporary king himself. *The King's Mirror*, probably written some decades after *Heimskringla*, maintains that the king is the owner of the whole country, which then gives him the right to demand any service he wants from his subjects.<sup>46</sup> Thus, despite his insistence in other contexts on the distinction between public and private, the author here blurs it in the same way as Snorri, but with the intention of arguing for the king's greater power. To what extent the author of *The King's Mirror* knew Snorri's statement about Harald Fairhair, is an open question, but it does not seem unlikely that Harald's conquest could be used as an argument for the contemporary Norwegian king's power over his subjects. Nor would such an argument be weakened by Håkon's alleged return of the *óðal*. According to medieval legal thought, Håkon's return of the *óðal* would imply that the people owned their property as the consequence of a royal concession and would therefore make an equally good argument for the rights the king derived from his superior ownership.

### What do we know about Håkon the Good?

With a few exceptions, we have to confine ourselves to the three earliest sources, the Latin histories, and *Ágrip*, if we want to know what actually happened during Håkon's reign. As all these date from the late twelfth century, more than 200 years after Håkon's death, there is no particular reason for optimism regarding their information. If, however, some core information is derived from Sæmundr and Ari, we are on a somewhat firmer ground. This applies above all to the chronology which apparently was a concern for both. Ari's

<sup>44</sup> *Egils saga* ch. 4, p. 11 f.

<sup>45</sup> Jacobsen 1970.

<sup>46</sup> Bagge 1987, pp. 31–38.

chronology is partly known from his *Íslendingabók* and is based on a combination of the sequence of Icelandic lawspeakers and learned European chronology.<sup>47</sup> The extant sources must at least partly have based their chronology on Ari and/or Sæmundr, although they show considerable variation. The difference amounts to seventeen years over the period from Harald Fairhair to Olav Tryggvason (late ninth century to 1000) between *Historia Norwegiæ*, which has the longest sequence, and *Ágrip* which has the shortest.<sup>48</sup> Ari dates Harald Fairhair's death to 931/32.<sup>49</sup> If we accept this date, Håkon must have reigned from 933/34 to 958/960, depending on the length of Eirik Bloodaxe's reign and that of Håkon himself. As we have seen, Theodoricus and *Ágrip* have  $2+24=26$  years and *Historia Norwegiæ*  $1+27=28$  years. The most reliable source regarding this question, *Noregs konunga tal*, which is based on Sæmundr, has twenty-six years, which is followed by Snorri.<sup>50</sup> An alternative chronology has been suggested by Halvdan Koht who gives Håkon a reign of only fifteen years. Koht's chronology is based on generations, i.e. three generations per century, reckoned backwards from the year 1000 which is generally accepted as the year of Olav Tryggvason's death.<sup>51</sup> On this basis, Koht postpones Harald Fairhair's death to around 945, for which he finds support in the Anglo-Saxon chronicle which mentions Eirik Bloodaxe as king of Northumberland around 950 and his death in 954. Consequently, Håkon must have replaced Eirik as king some years after 945. Although around thirty years may be a reasonable average length of a generation, however, we have to allow for considerable variation in individual cases.<sup>52</sup> Nor can we conclude from the reference in the Anglo-Saxon chronicle that Eirik did not arrive in England until around 950 and still less that he had not left Norway well before that time.<sup>53</sup> The reliability of the traditional chronology is open to discussion, but it is probably better than Koht's alternative. I shall therefore assume that Håkon reigned for around twenty-six years and that he died around 960. As for events of his reign, we have a fairly large number of skaldic poems, quoted in *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*, which can be used to control some of the information given in the written sources.

As usual, the skaldic poems mostly deal with war. They contain several references to Håkon's battles in Denmark and against the Eirikssons. Øyvind Finnsson's *Håkonarmál* is the most important of these poems.<sup>54</sup> Øyvind mentions Håkon's last battle at Stord and gives several details which are reproduced in the

<sup>47</sup> Ólafía Einarisdóttir 1964, pp. 37–126.

<sup>48</sup> Koht 1921, pp. 36 f.; Ólafía Einarisdóttir 1968, p. 17.

<sup>49</sup> *Íslendingabók* ch. 3.

<sup>50</sup> *Skj.* B I, p. 577; cf. *HkrHG* ch. 28.

<sup>51</sup> Koht 1921, p. 34–51.

<sup>52</sup> Schreiner 1927–29, pp. 161–90; Ólafía Einarisdóttir 1968, pp. 16 ff.

<sup>53</sup> Ólafía Einarisdóttir 1968, pp. 17 f.

<sup>54</sup> *Skj.* B I, pp. 57–60.

sagas, e.g. that he wore a golden helmet, and that he took off his coat of mail. Seen as a whole, the skaldic poems indicate that there must have been more than one battle but not how many, nor do they give any information about the chronological relationship between them. The difference in the sagas between two (*Fagrskinna* and *Historia Norwegiæ*) and three battles (*Ágrip* and *Heimskringla*) may therefore be the result of their authors' different interpretation of the poems. Nor do the poems name any other place than Stord as the site of a battle. Here, however, the saga writers most probably built on oral information, as the memory of such great events is likely to have been preserved locally and it seems unlikely for an otherwise unknown place like Rastarkalf on Frøya to be a learned invention from later centuries. The same does not necessarily apply to Avaldsnes which was well known as the site of a royal residence and played a prominent part in some other events and is also mentioned only in two of the sources.<sup>55</sup> The story of Gamle Eiriksson and his men being thrown off a cliff and into the sea seems to be based on a stanza by Øyvind, which probably does not say more than that Gamle was killed and the rest thrown back. Ágrip's alternative version, that Gamle fled to Trøndelag and was killed there, may possibly be based on local tradition in this region, with which its author must have been familiar.

The only reference in the skaldic poetry to Håkon as a ruler is Øyvind's statement that his reign will always be remembered as a good period, in contrast to that of his successors, the Eirikssons. Given the universal praise for Håkon as a ruler, even by the most hostile source, *Historia Norwegiæ*, it seems likely that there must have been more evidence for this opinion than the praise of a pagan poet. Popular tradition often has a tendency to paint in black and white, and as both Håkon's predecessor and his successors got a bad reputation, his good qualities were likely to be emphasised. Moreover, there is some evidence for his popularity. He ruled for twenty-five years or more in an age when kings were easily deposed or killed, and the skaldic poetry contains no evidence of conflicts with internal enemies. A later poem, Sigvat skald's *Bersøglisvísur*, addressed to the young Magnus Olavsson in the 1030s, praises Håkon for his good laws and his popularity with the people. Sigvat here evokes Håkon as a model for the young Magnus whom he criticises for cruelty and violence towards the people. In addition to Håkon, Sigvat mentions Magnus' father St Olav as well as Olav Tryggvason but no other of his predecessors, which indicates Håkon's reputation as a good king around sixty years after his death.

The skalds make no direct reference to Håkon's Christianity, but Øyvind's *Håkonarmál* nevertheless contains important evidence. Describing Håkon's approach to Valhall after his death, he represents him as fearing Odin's anger.

<sup>55</sup> Koht 1931, p. 156 rejects the account of this battle, pointing out that Guttorm Eiriksson, who is said to have been killed at Avaldsnes, is probably identical with Gamle, killed at Rastarkalf.

Odin, however, turns out to be friendly to Håkon who, in contrast to his successors, have protected the *hóf* (pagan cult places). Further, in the second last line of the poem he refers to the gods as “pagan”,<sup>56</sup> the first use of this word in Old Norse and a clear indication of the existence of an alternative religion. This passage would be sufficient to account for *Historia Norwegiæ*’s characterisation of Håkon as an apostate as well as for the tradition that Håkon received a pagan burial, but is hardly the only evidence for what the sources have to say about his attempts to introduce Christianity. Håkon’s English background is mentioned in the *Bersöglisvísur* from the 1030s and is indirectly confirmed by Anglo-Saxon sources,<sup>57</sup> and archaeological evidence indicates the existence of Christian cult in Western Norway during Håkon’s reign (below, p. 201) Against this background, *Ágrip*’s account of Håkon’s religious conflict with the people of Trøndelag most probably has a basis in older traditions, possibly even going back to Håkon’s own age. By contrast, there is little reason to trust the more elaborate versions in *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*, which are easily explained as a further development of *Ágrip*’s account.

In addition to the skaldic poems, it seems likely that some basic information about Håkon goes back to the earliest written sources, Sæmundr, Ari, and the *Catalogus regum*. In particular, the emphasis on chronology forms evidence that we are dealing with a written source and may also point in the direction of Ari whose interest in chronology is well attested in his *Íslendingabók*. How much of *Ágrip*’s additions to the two Latin works is also based on written sources, is more difficult to tell. It is no argument against the authenticity of the details about the killing of priests, burning of churches, and Håkon being forced to take part in the *blót* and eating horse-meat that they are not to be found in the two Latin works, as these are deliberately brief regarding colourful details. The same also seems to apply to Sæmundr and Ari. Consequently, the most likely hypothesis seems to be that at least some of this material is based on oral tradition. This is the kind of stories that may well be preserved in such a way, although it is impossible to distinguish between genuine tradition and additions stemming from the author of *Ágrip* himself or some of his later sources.

If we combine the skaldic poems and the scraps of evidence in foreign sources with what the oldest sources have in common, the following picture of Håkon’s reign emerges:

1. Håkon, the son of Harald Fairhair and Tora Mostrastong of Horda-Kåre’s kindred, grew up in England at King Athalstan’s court.

<sup>56</sup> “síz Høkon / fór með heiðin goð” (*Slfj.* B I, p. 60).

<sup>57</sup> William of Malmesbury mentions diplomatic contacts between Athalstan and Harald and refers to a Sigfrid, a monk of Glastonbury who became bishop in Norway, possibly during Håkon’s reign. See Birkeli 1960; Page 1981, pp. 113–116; Jørgensen 1996, pp. 35 ff.; Eilhardt 2003, pp. 15 ff.

2. He returned to Norway after his father's death and replaced his elder brother Eirik as king.
3. He fought several battles against the Eirikssons and was killed in the last of them at Fitjar.
4. He raided Denmark, most probably in connection with his struggle against the Eirikssons.
5. He either founded or reorganised the Gulating.
6. He organised the coastal defence organisation, the *leidang*.
7. He was a popular king and remembered as such for a long time after his death.
8. He grew up as a Christian in England and tried to introduce Christianity in Norway, but met with stubborn resistance in Trøndelag. He adapted to pagan customs to the extent that it was possible for Øyvind to praise him as a pagan king after his death, and he was probably buried as a pagan.

### The Character and Importance of Håkon's Reign

After this, admittedly uncertain, conclusion about the main events of Håkon's reign, we shall discuss the more general question of Håkon's role in the development of the Norwegian monarchy and above all in the Christianisation of the country.

As for the former, the idea of Harald Fairhair's unification of Norway has faded in recent scholarship. Most of the evidence regarding Harald's reign comes from Western Norway. It has also been argued that Vestfold, on the western coast of the Oslofjord, which the later sagas regard as Harald's original kingdom, did not belong to the Hårfagre dynasty at all but was part of the Danish sphere of influence.<sup>58</sup> If this is correct, the extent of Håkon's reign largely corresponds to that of his father. Moreover, his prompt acceptance as king and his apparently uncontested control over this region for around twenty-five years form evidence of Harald's success in this part of the country. As we have seen, Håkon's popularity contrasts sharply with the picture the sources give of his immediate predecessor, Eirik Bloodaxe, and his successors, the Eirikssons. Both Eirik and his sons are blamed for harshness, the Eirikssons also for bad harvests. The truth of this picture is of course open to discussion but there can hardly be any doubt about its existence from a fairly early date. More doubtful is the contrast some of the sources, notably *Heimskringla*, draw between Håkon and his father Harald and which is expressed particularly clearly in the story of the expropriation of the *óðal* and its return. As this story is probably a late construction and as there is considerable variation in the picture of Harald Fairhair, even within *Heimskringla*, the existence of a tradition about the good King Håkon

<sup>58</sup> Krag 1990.

versus the tyrant Harald seems less likely. As for *Heimskringla*, the tyrannical picture of Harald is confined to some isolated passages. Snorri also points to Harald's generosity to his friends and describes his rule as a system of alliances with various chieftains, notably the earls of Lade. He also points to the great advantages arising from entering Harald's service.<sup>59</sup> The tyrannical picture is stronger in *Egils saga*, but even here, Harald's killing of Skallagrim's brother Torolv is partly excused by his having been misled by the intrigues of Torolv's enemies. There may be some truth in Snorri's picture of the earliest Norwegian monarchy as based on alliances with powerful chieftains, despite the fact that it is based on his imagination rather than on exact knowledge.<sup>60</sup>

A difference between Håkon and his father is possibly to be found in the relationship to other centres of power, i.e. the different "international situation". Håkon's elder – apparently much elder – brother Eirik was married to a Danish princess, which at least partly explains the Danish support for the Eirikssons. This marriage may be the expression of an alliance with Denmark, or more correctly the Jelling dynasty, probably one of several competing dynasties at the time. Moreover, *Haraldskvæði* mentions that Harald himself had a Danish wife, Ragnhild, according to *Heimskringla* the daughter of King Eirik of Jutland.<sup>61</sup> This forms the basis of Niels Lund's suggestion that Harald started his career as vassal of the Danish king.<sup>62</sup> Given the weakness of the Danish dynasty at this time, it seems equally likely that we are dealing with an alliance between two rulers at some distance from one another against powerful chieftains between them, i.e. in south-eastern Norway and eastern Denmark. The alliance with England expressed in Håkon being fostered there, might possibly be the result of Harald fearing the increasing power of the Jelling dynasty.<sup>63</sup>

In any case, the accession of Harald Bluetooth seems to have led to Denmark once more emerging as the great power of the north. In his famous inscription on the Jelling stone, Harald boasts of having conquered "all Denmark and Norway and Christianised the Danes". The degree of Harald's success is open to discussion, but he probably conquered much of the area between his original base Jutland and Håkon's core area in Western Norway, i.e. the islands, Scania and the coastal area north to Viken, and at least for a period held overlordship over Norway. Harald's reign thus introduced a period of Danish expansion, culminating in his grandson Cnut the Great's North Sea Empire (1017–1035). This may indicate that the Danish king played a more active part in the Eiriks-

<sup>59</sup> Bagge 1991, p. 128.

<sup>60</sup> For a general discussion of early medieval kingship and Snorri's understanding of it, see Bagge 2002.

<sup>61</sup> *Skj.* B I, p. 24; *HkrHH* ch. 21. Finnur Jónsson attributes the whole poem to Torbjørn Hornklove, but the sagas have various attributions. See Holtsmark 1981, pp. 225 f.

<sup>62</sup> Lund 1995, p. 213.

<sup>63</sup> Tøtlandsmo 1996.

sons' conquest than the sagas are willing to admit, although we do not know how strong Harald Bluetooth was in the first years after his accession to the throne which must have taken place in 958.<sup>64</sup> In any case, once the Eirikssons were well established in Norway, they seem to have shown themselves too independent, which in turn led to their replacement by their enemy Håkon Ladejarl – who developed in the same way. It was thus difficult for the Danish kings to gain permanent control of Norway, but they had many opportunities to make their influence felt. Moreover, they may well have controlled the Viken region. Both Håkon's battles against the Eirikssons took place in Western Norway. Admittedly, Håkon's plundering expedition to Denmark and his appointment of a subordinate in Viken suggest some attempt to make his influence felt outside this area, but we do not know how successful he was. The most precise piece of information in Guttorm's *Håkonardrápa* credits Håkon with having defeated eleven ships with only two of his own, which suggests a raid rather than a major expedition. Thus, Håkon's reign was probably a period of increasing Danish pressure northwards.

As for the latter question presented above, Fridtjov Birkeli has attempted a rehabilitation of Håkon from a Christian point of view. According to Birkeli, the saga writers have misunderstood the peaceful Anglo-Saxon missionary methods. Håkon remained a Christian his whole life and did much to convert his fellow-countrymen. Birkeli's main evidence is the stone crosses found particularly in Western Norway, probably dating from the tenth and early eleventh centuries, which he interprets as early Christian cult sites.<sup>65</sup> The main area of these crosses corresponds to the realm under Håkon's control, i.e. Western Norway, and may well date from his reign. There is also evidence of Håkon's mission in Anglo-Saxon sources (above, p. 198). Finally, it is striking that the sagas only refer to opposition against Håkon's missionary efforts in Trøndelag where his political control was probably weak. Although we shall probably never know Håkon's personal attitude to the conflicting religions, it is possible that Christianity held a stronger position in the country during his reign than the sagas directly admit.

This hypothesis seems to be confirmed by recent archaeological evidence. Remains of a Christian cemetery from the mid-tenth century have been excavated at Veøy ("the holy island") in Romsdal,<sup>66</sup> i.e. in the area where Håkon is said to have built the churches that were later destroyed by his pagan opponents. Archaeologists have also tried to trace Christian influence in changing burial practices during the tenth century. Graves become simpler, with less grave goods, and Christian objects are more often to be found in them.<sup>67</sup> However, the

<sup>64</sup> This date is based on dendrochronological dating of the wood in what is believed to be his father, King Gorm's, grave chamber at Jelling (Skovgaard-Petersen 2003, p. 174).

<sup>65</sup> Birkeli 1973; cf. Jørgensen 1996, pp. 37 ff.

<sup>66</sup> Solli 1996.

<sup>67</sup> Hernæs 1995.

interpretation of these observations is open to discussion. It is very difficult to distinguish between Christian and non-Christian graves. Lack of grave goods may be evidence of poverty as well as Christianity, or a reduction of the number of rich graves may be explained by a reduction in the number of chieftains who were the ones to be buried in this way. Christian objects may simply have been used as decoration.<sup>68</sup> And finally, Christian burial practices may have influenced the pagans without conversion having taken place. More studies of the archaeological material are therefore necessary to assess the importance of Christian impulses in tenth century Norway. Despite these objections, there seem to be good reasons to discuss Håkon's reign as a phase in the Christianisation of Norway. Let us first consider the broader background.

### Mission, Diplomacy, and Politics

The mission in the northern and eastern periphery of Europe in the post-Carolingian period had its origin in three centres: Byzantium, The German Empire, and Anglo-Saxon England. – Rome may be mentioned as a fourth centre, but in contrast to the periods before and after, the papacy hardly played an independent part in this context in the tenth and early eleventh centuries. – Although there were contacts between Scandinavia and Byzantine Christendom as well its extension to the north, Russia, the two latter are clearly the most important in Scandinavia, as all three countries were integrated in Western Christendom, apparently without Eastern Christendom being a serious alternative. The two western centres were both important but in different ways. The German Empire was the great power of Europe in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Depending somewhat on political conjunctures, gaining the friendship, or avoiding the enmity of its powerful ruler would make strong incentives to adapt Christianity. In a similar way, Christianisation of the neighbouring countries formed part of imperial policy, whether it was pursued by military or diplomatic means. By contrast, Anglo-Saxon England was a relatively weak power, united under one king in the late ninth century, largely as a reaction against the Scandinavian attacks on England, and in the early eleventh century even conquered by Denmark. In between, it had its periods of greatness as well as decline, but was never strong enough to pose a threat to the Scandinavian countries. Thus, fear of Anglo-Saxon power was unlikely to be a motive for conversion. The peaceful Anglo-Saxon missionary methods<sup>69</sup> that have often been contrasted to the more violent German ones may therefore simply be an example of making a virtue out of necessity.

This means that external pressure must have been relatively unimportant in the conversion of Norway. If there was any such pressure, Denmark is a more

<sup>68</sup> Thanks to Sæbjørg Nordeide for this information.

<sup>69</sup> Birkeli 1994, p. 71.

likely candidate than England. Actually, Snorri mentions that Harald Bluetooth converted Viken<sup>70</sup> and tried without success to convert the rest of the country (below, p. 205). As for England, converting the Norwegians and other Scandinavians would seem an attractive project, as this might give some hope of peaceful relations with them and of putting an end to their frequent raids on English territory – although we should not exaggerate the effects of Christianity in this respect. The most important aspect of this “Anglo-Saxon link” is that the main initiative did not come from the Anglo-Saxons but from Norwegian kings. In contrast to Denmark and Sweden – or at least to what we know about Denmark and Sweden – almost all Norwegian kings between the death of Harald Fairhair (c. 930) and that of Harald Hardrada (1066) came from abroad, i.e. they had spent most of their youth there, and ascended to the throne because of the wealth and followers they had gained on Viking expeditions or as mercenaries. This largely applies to the three main missionary kings, Håkon the Good and the two Olavs. All three of them had been baptised abroad and had met Christianity in England. These kings may illustrate a general point: The conversion of Norway was not the result of Christian kings or missionaries from other countries invading Norway but on the contrary of Norwegians invading other countries. It seems that conversions often and fairly easily took place among Norwegians settling abroad, possibly because of the widespread idea within ethnic religions that the gods belong to a particularly country and that other gods rule among other peoples. Frequent contacts, through Viking raids as well as more peaceful trading expeditions or as mercenaries in the service of Anglo-Saxon or other kings, must have made a number of Norwegians familiar with Christianity, and to some extent also have contributed to their conversion.

Returning to the home country may, however, have created problems. In one way or another, Håkon was probably forced to make compromises with the pagan religion. But why did he give in, while the two Olavs fought on and succeeded in imposing Christianity? It may partly have been a question of time. A larger percentage of the Norwegians had probably become Christian between Håkon's death around 960 and Olav Tryggvason's arrival (995). It may also be related to the respective kings' integration into Norwegian society, or rather, the relative importance of this integration and the resources they were bringing with them from abroad. Håkon probably brought with him riches from his foster-father on his return to Norway which he could use to gain adherents, but it is likely that his chances of success depended more on his acceptance among the leading men in Norway, such as Sigurd Ladejarl and Horda-Kåre's kindred. By contrast, the two Olavs most probably did not belong to the dynasty<sup>71</sup> although the sagas state that they did, thus depending relatively more on the wealth and followers they brought with them. In contrast to Håkon, they also had behind

<sup>70</sup> *HkrOT* ch. 53.

<sup>71</sup> Krag 1989; Bagge 2001, pp. 68 f.

them long careers as Vikings and mercenary chieftains, which had gained them wealth, followers, and military experience to be invested in political power at home. They of course also depended on their ability to win friends and gain popularity within the country – no king could rule without – but less than Håkon. As the pagan religion was apparently an important part of the foundation of the chieftains' power, Christianity might serve to weaken their adversaries and strengthen their own power. As worshippers of the old gods, they would be one of many; as promoters of the Christian God, they would be the unquestioned leaders.

Further, there is the regional aspect. Having his main basis of power in Western Norway, while the Eirikssons controlled parts of Eastern Norway and were supported by Denmark, it must have been essential to Håkon to have a good relationship to the mighty ruler of Trøndelag and Northern Norway. Otherwise, he would have to fight a two-front war. Trøndelag was the centre of paganism in the country. Snorri's statement that Håkon prepared an expedition against the people of Trøndelag after their rejection of Christianity but had to fight the Eirikssons instead, is probably a construction, but nevertheless it illustrates a political reality: Håkon could not afford to provoke the people of Trøndelag. By contrast, the two Olavs both had their power base in the south-east, and both gained the kingdom by challenging the earls of Lade. For them, Christianity could be a means of conquering the enemy province of Trøndelag. This does not mean, however, that the two Olavs and other missionary kings only regarded the new religion as a means to extend their own power, without believing themselves. Most probably they thought in much the same terms about religion as secular matters, regarding the Christian God as a mighty ally who had proved superior to his pagan rivals and who would reward his servants in this life as well as the next for their efforts in extending his realm on earth.

The sagas may therefore be correct in emphasizing the importance of the kings, but they probably exaggerate the part played by the two Olavs who are represented as the only real missionary rulers. Actually, however, all rulers after Håkon the Good except one, Håkon Ladejarl (c. 975–995) were Christian. As we have seen, Håkon the Good was regarded either as an apostate or a failed missionary but may actually have done more for Christianity than he is credited with in the narrative sources. His successors, the Eirikssons, are depicted very negatively in the sources and blamed for bad harvests, greed, and – curiously enough – for destroying the *hófs* and banning pagan cult.<sup>72</sup> Apparently, their attack on paganism is regarded as the result of greed rather than Christian zeal, which prevents them from receiving the praise extended to the two Olavs for doing the same. Whatever their motives, their attack on the pagan religion makes sense in the context of their change in policy towards the earls of Lade,

<sup>72</sup> *HkrES* ch. 2.

from alliance to enmity. This is in turn connected to their alliance with Denmark, which meant that they, in contrast to Håkon, had no reason to fear a two-front war when attacking Trøndelag.

The Eirikssons were succeeded by their enemy, Håkon Ladejarl, who managed to get the support of the Danish king Harald Bluetooth, according to the sagas in return for converting to Christianity. He soon returned to paganism, however, and later defended himself successfully against a Danish attack. There is clear evidence in the skaldic poetry that Håkon's reign meant a pagan revival,<sup>73</sup> although it is uncertain if his influence reached much further than Trøndelag. Further, the pagan revival is in itself an indication of the strength of Christianity; it is a defence of the old values and customs against the new religion, not a confident assertion of paganism. Håkon was the last pagan, even within his own dynasty. His sons Eirik and Svein, who ruled the country under Danish overlordship (1000–1015), were both Christian. Against this background, it seems likely that there was a more or less continuous pressure in the direction of Christianity from the 930s rather than a concentrated effort during the twenty years covering the reigns of the two Olavs. It is also striking how little the sagas actually have to tell about the missionary activity of St Olav, the national saint and martyr. His main achievement seems to have been to convert some distant, mountainous, and thinly populated regions of the inland and – most important – to organise the Church. The coast, where the great majority of the population lived, was apparently already Christian, according to the sagas due to the intense efforts of Olav Tryggvason, whereas in reality he probably has to share the credit with his predecessors.

### In a Great Tradition

Let us return from the historical Håkon and the period of Christianisation to his portraits in the later sources. In the vernacular tradition, Håkon actually comes forward as one of the main heroes among the Norwegian kings. Rather than declining with the passing of time and the further development of the Christian Church, his reputation steadily increases from the terse notes in the two Latin histories to the fully developed saga in Snorri's *Heimskringla*. To Snorri, Håkon seems to be the ideal king, more so than the two Olavs, the main missionary kings. Olav Tryggvason has some of Håkon's charisma but is blamed for his cruelty. St Olav is a great hero, becoming a saint towards the end of his life, but is too stubborn to placate the chieftains and is deposed by his own people. By contrast, Håkon is the incarnation of both the two contrasting royal ideals expressed in *Heimskringla*, the warrior hero and the peaceful, popular king.<sup>74</sup> He abolishes his father's tyranny, he is loved by his people, and he performs all his

<sup>73</sup> Fidjestøl 1997, pp. 139, 145; cf. also Birkeli 1994, pp. 103 ff.

<sup>74</sup> Bagge 1991, pp. 156 ff., cf. 146 ff.

heroic deeds in defence of his country and people. *Fagrskinna*, which is more reluctant about criticising the kings, gives basically the same picture. Both sources, together with *Ágrip*, admit that Hákon failed in his Christian mission and gave in to the pagan reaction and even that he was punished for this by having greater difficulties towards the end of his reign, but this does not really affect their description of him.

There is also some ambiguity in Snorri's account of Hákon's attempt at conversion. The description of the *blót* seems dignified and respectful, in contrast to some other representations of pagan cult in *Heimskringla* as well as in other sources.<sup>75</sup> The people of Trøndelag's reaction, above all as expressed in the speech attributed to their representative, Asbjørn of Medalhus, resembles the constitutional episodes in other parts of the work, where the people reacts against royal tyranny. Asbjørn points out that Hákon has been elected king in order to preserve the people's freedom, but that he now acts tyrannically in trying to take away their ancient customs by force.<sup>76</sup> It would probably be to go too far to conclude from this description that Snorri sympathised with the pagans, as there are also other examples in *Heimskringla* of speeches arguing for opinions that are not Snorri's own,<sup>77</sup> but he certainly goes out of his way to understand the pagan point of view. Moreover, his comment later in his work, that Hákon Ladejarl was killed because the time had come when paganism was to be abolished and the true faith introduced, may actually be understood as an excuse for Hákon the Good: The introduction of Christianity was God's own work which happened at the time He had decided.<sup>78</sup> Consequently, Hákon could not be blamed for his failure to convert Norway.

In this way, the portrait of Hákon becomes one of many examples of the survival of the pagan past in learned circles in Norway and Iceland in the twelfth and particularly thirteenth century. Another is the existence of a relatively large corpus of texts dealing with the pagan religion. Neither forms evidence of weak or incomplete Christianisation. There is no particular reason to believe that the people who transmitted this material to posterity – mostly Icelanders – were crypto-pagans or ambivalent about the relative merit of the two religions. Pagan Roman and to some extent Greek literature and even mythology belonged to the cultural heritage of educated Europeans in the Middle Ages, particularly from the twelfth century onwards. There are also parallels to the use of the "national" pagan heritage in Ireland, England, and Germany,<sup>79</sup> but much less among the Slavs. This difference may be the result partly of the time of conversion and

<sup>75</sup> Steinsland 2000, p. 111.

<sup>76</sup> *HkrHG* ch. 15.

<sup>77</sup> Bagge 1991, p. 108, and 1997.

<sup>78</sup> "En þat bar mest til er svá varð, at þa var su tíð komin, at fyrir dæmask skyli blótskaprinn ok blótmennir, en í stað kom heilog trúa ok réttir siðir" (*HkrOT* ch. 50).

<sup>79</sup> Brown 1997, pp. 307 ff.

partly of the way in which it happened, whether it meant submission under a superior Christian nation or the papacy or it was brought about by indigenous rulers.

As we have seen, both Iceland and Norway are examples of the latter. Moreover, the main Christian influence seems to have come from Anglo-Saxon England whose culture presents a parallel to the Scandinavian one. Another parallel may also be the result of Anglo-Saxon influence, i.e. the early and extensive use of the vernacular rather than Latin as the literary language. The connection between the language and the mythology is evident from the skaldic poetry whose metaphorical language (the *kenningar*) was intimately linked to the pagan mythology. Characteristically, Snorri presents his survey of the pagan mythology in his *Edda* as a handbook for skalds who need to know the ancient mythology in order to compose their poems. Thus, the continued existence of the local pagan mythology should not be regarded as an alternative to Christianity but to the classical mythology. In various ways, the contemporary Norwegians and Icelanders reflected on their relationship to Classical Antiquity, whose literature and mythology were also known to them. Like many other new nations of medieval Europe, they sometimes tried to trace their origin back to Troy, but more often, they regarded themselves as a kind of alternative or equivalent to the ancient peoples. Further, claims to land or other rights going back to paganism apparently held particular authority, and individual families also tried to trace their descent back to pagan times or even to the pagan gods. The genealogies of the Norwegian kings in *Historia Norwegiæ* and *Heimskringla* are prominent examples of this, the former claiming that the kings descended from Njord, the latter from Odin, both depicted as human beings rather than gods. The saga writers and their patrons kept looking back towards a great past, pagan as well as Christian, where the twilight figure of Håkon the Good gained ever more heroic dimensions.

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