

PROPAGANDA, IDEOLOGY AND POLITICAL POWER IN OLD NORSE AND EUROPEAN HISTORIOGRAPHY : A COMPARATIVE VIEW

What is the connection between historiography and those in power in the middle ages ? There are two aspects to this question : first, how did the rulers influence historiography, why did kings commission historians to write their own or their predecessors' biographies ? And second, how did historians describe and analyse political power and why ? The two aspects are closely interrelated. From a practical point of view, in most cases — at least those familiar to me — the first question can only be answered through the second. There is very little information on the way the rulers employed historians, tried to influence them and used historiography apart from the conclusions that can be drawn from the historical works themselves. From a theoretical point of view, there is a close connection between the two aspects in the sense that they both concern the role of history and, more generally, ideas of politics and political behaviour within medieval society. There is little reason to believe that medieval historians had a purely « scientific » interest in the past. Whether or not they were commissioned by a particular prince or magnate, they probably expressed some ideology or system of values or at least used such a system in their interpretation of events. Both by analysing the « commission aspect » of the question and the historians' picture of political power, we can therefore gain a clue to the fundamental values of society, or at least of those in power.

I shall try to use historiography in this way in the following. When I use Old Norse — i.e. Norwegian and particularly Icelandic — historiography (the kings' sagas) as my main example, it is not only because this is the tradition with which I am most familiar. It is also because this tradition contains some remarkable works — by modern standards some of the best, if not *the* best of the whole of medieval European historiography. These works are barely mentioned in the standard accounts of the subject and thus deserve to be better known. They also contain the appropriate combination of similarities and differences to make a comparison with the European tradition interesting, though in the present context, such a comparison evidently necessitates a bird's-eye view of the latter.

On the surface, the sagas are written in an « objective » style (1). In contrast to what is often found in European historiography, the author rarely makes explicit comments, whether in the form of analysis of causes and motives or praise or blame of the actors. For a long time, scholars believed in the real objectivity of the sagas, regarding them as neutral and more or less well-informed accounts of past events. Since the research of Halvdan Koht early in this century, the more or less accepted orthodoxy has been that the sagas are biased under their deceptively objective surface. They are the products of the violent struggles between the monarchy, the Church and the aristocracy in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries and can be grouped according to their attitude to these struggles. Consequently, it is an important task for any editor or commentator to identify the « party label » of the work in question.

My objection to this kind of project is that it implies a function of historiography in medieval society which is strikingly similar to that of the 19th and to some extent 20th century. Then, history served to give identity to social groups : classes, nations, parties, movements etc., and historical arguments were important to demonstrate that « the logic of evolution » worked in a specific direction and could not be resisted. We cannot exclude the possibility that medieval historians thought in a similar way, but they may at least be allowed the benefit of doubt. My main hypothesis is not that historiography is not « ideological » but that the contents and purpose of its ideology is of a different kind from ours.

I shall use the saga of King Sverrir (*Sverris saga*) as my main example (2). This saga deals with a remarkable man with a remarkable career (3) and is one of the relatively few examples of a saga which we know to have been directly commissioned by the king. According to the prologue, the king « was sitting by » when the first part of the saga was written and decided what was to be included. Though this part most probably only covers the first two years of Sverrir's career (1177-78), before his great victories, the rest of the work seems to have been written by the same author, the Icelandic abbot Karl Jónsson, and clearly reflects the ideas that were current in the milieu around Sverrir (4). For the present purpose, it is not necessary to distinguish very clearly between

1. Theodore ANDERSSON, « Kings' Sagas », in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature. A Critical Guide*, edited by C. CLOVER and J. LINDOW, Ithaca 1985, p. 197-238 gives an excellent account of saga scholarship, with references to editions, monographs etc.

2. Sverris saga, edited by G. INDREBØ, Kristiania (=Oslo) 1920 (repr. 1981), cf. *The Saga of King Sverrir*, translated by J. SEPHTON, London 1899.

3. Sverrir was one of the pretenders during in struggles for the Norwegian throne during the troubled years 1130-1240 (« the civil wars »). He was born in the Faroes, was told by his mother that he was the son of a king, went to Norway and became the leader of the remains of the defeated army of the previous pretender, c. seventy men (the *Birkibeinar* or Birchlegs), in 1177. He then fought his way to the throne, defeating and killing King Magnús Erlingsson in 1184. During the rest of his reign, he had to put down several rebellions, and in his last years (1196-1202), he was engaged in a prolonged struggle with the *Baglar* (or Croziers, named after the bishop's staff), who controlled most of Eastern Norway and had the support of the Church. He was gaining the upper hand, but had not finally defeated his enemies when he died.

4. As for the date, the earlier part was probably written between 1185 and 1188 and the latter between Sverrir's death in 1202 and Karl's in 1212 or 1213.

the two ; we have to do with one of the most strongly biased works of the whole Old Norse saga literature. To some extent, this bias is expressed in the author's direct comments on the events, but more frequently in indirect ways, such as the arrangement of the material, more or less detailed narrative, the speeches etc. Though the author tries to cover his steps, an analysis of the saga shows that he is constantly present, very carefully arranging his material according to his purpose.

What is then his purpose ? Evidently, he wants to give a favourable picture of Sverrir. Nevertheless, the interpretation of the saga as a piece of party propoganda creates considerable problems. First, Sverrir's adversaries are by no means always depicted negatively. In particular, his rival during his first five years, Magnús Erlingsson (d. 1184), receives considerable sympathy, and during his last years, he is depicted as something of a tragic hero. His father, Erlingr skakki, receives a more negative characterization, but also emerges as a great man. The saga is more negative in its treatment of Sverrir's enemies after he had conquered the kingdom in 1184, particularly the *Baglar*, whom he fought during his last years (1196-1202), but even here, there are sympathetic characters. Secondly, the saga is curiously vague regarding the ideological issues in which Sverrir was involved. Admittedly, in the first part, the author constantly refers to God's election of Sverrir and his protection of him in his various battles and hardships. In strictly legal terms, however, he is ambiguous even on such an important point as Sverrir's right to the throne. Sverrir was illegitimate. This was in itself no objection to claiming the throne in contemporary Norway. But he had not been formally recognized by his alleged father, and he had no other evidence for his origin than what his mother had told him. The explanation the saga offers of these matters does not appear particularly convincing, nor has it convinced the majority of modern historians. We cannot exclude the possibility that it was more convincing to Sverrir's contemporaries. However, when the author suggests that even Sverrir himself was in doubt, he hardly improves his hero's case !

Moreover, the author is both fairly vague and very brief concerning the great issue towards the end of Sverrir's reign, his conflict with the Church. A possible explanation for this may be that the saga was written after the end of this conflict, in a period when the monarchy sought support from the Church. However, the author is not particularly afraid of offending the prelates, he only seems rather inefficient as a propogandist for Sverrir's cause.

Finally, there is curiously little correlation between the description of Sverrir and his cause in the saga and what we know of his ideology and political aims. In other sources Sverrir emerges as the *rex iustus*, trying to suppress feuds, crime and illegal behaviour and promote public justice, demanding strict obedience from his subjects, as God's representative on earth etc. (5). In the saga, however, Sverrir is above all the warrior hero, the man who finds a solution to every difficulty, who attaches men to him through his success and ability but also through his irresistible charm and humour. There

5. This applies particularly to *The Speech against the Bishops*, a pamphlet in the *Libelli de lite* tradition, defending the king in his conflict with the Church. Cf. Erik GUNNES, *Kongens øre <The King's Honour>*, Oslo 1971 (French summary).

are occasional references to the obedience the people owe to the king and Sverrir's right to support from the people, but direct pressure or Sverrir's personal appeal is clearly more prominent. There is no great distance between Sverrir and his men : he impresses them through his charm and ability, not by insisting on the divine right of kings. And most important : the saga almost exclusively deals with Sverrir in war ; government and administration playing next to no part.

There thus seems to be a considerable distance between the official ideology of the monarchy and the description of political power in the sagas, even when their authors are clearly attached to the king. This difference probably has to do with genre and narrative traditions, which again depend on society. The genre can be illustrated by the great masterpiece of Old Norse historical writing, Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*, most probably written two decades or so after *Sverris saga* had been finished, i.e. c.1230 (6). This work immediately appears as more « objective » than *Sverris saga*. It deals with kings in the past, ending just before Sverrir's rise to power in 1177. Snorri was one of the greatest magnates of Iceland. He had close contacts with Norway and even promised the Norwegian government to work for the unification of Iceland with Norway, but seems mainly to have used his Norwegian connections to promote his own interests in Icelandic politics. We know little of the purpose or external circumstances around the composition of *Heimskringla*. Characteristically, the scholars who have attempted to find bias in Snorri, have not been very definite as to what particular cause he favoured.

My main claim for « objectivity » in Snorri is not that he fails to express his likes and dislikes. Despite his « neutral » and « objective » narrative, a reader who was familiar with his value system — as Snorri's readers evidently were — could easily detect praise or blame. But — apart from some special cases, where fundamental values were involved — he shows no consistent preference for any party in a conflict, nor is he using the past to fight for any particular ideology in the present. On the contrary, he belongs to a heroic-aristocratic tradition : Politics are not about conflicting ideologies, there is no right or wrong cause, the parties are not formed on the basis of social origin or sympathy for any higher principles. They are factions, based on common interests, kinship or personal friendship. The ideology — of which *Heimskringla* is full — is not party ideology, but an ideology common to all participants. It serves to apportion praise or blame to individual actors or actions, whatever their allegiance. Evidently, opposite factions may easily disagree on who deserves praise or blame or who has behaved best in a particular encounter. Personal hatred may make a narrative biased. But there is no propagandistic value in depicting one's adversary as a coward or a bad character. Moreover, with constant change in the composition of the factions, there was no reason why a particular bias should establish itself as the main tradition.

6. Edited by F. JÓNSSON, I-IV, Copenhagen 1893-1900 and Bjarni AÐALBJARNARSON, I-III, Reykjavík 1941-51. There are several English translations, among others by L.M. HOLLANDER, Austin 1967. There are also translations into other languages. For much of what follows, I refer to my *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla* (forthcoming at the University of California Press).

In Snorri's work, however, this heroic-aristocratic tradition forms the basis of a fairly refined analysis of political power. Politics are a game between rational actors. Snorri carefully arranges his narrative to show how his actors pursue their interests and to explain their success or failure. Most means that can lead to victory are acceptable — on this point Snorri is rather Machiavelian. On the other hand, there is a certain balance of power in society. The people, though clearly subordinated to the great men, are sufficiently strong to resist tyranny. No single man can gain absolute power. Success in the political game depends on winning support. Consequently, the wise, moderate and generous ruler is most likely to be successful — though a certain ruthlessness is also necessary. Technically, the road to victory goes through victory, or in more modern terms : « Nothing succeeds like success ». Most men are without strong loyalties and likely to support the one they think will win. Therefore, a conspicuous victory will normally result in the defeated joining the faction of the victor. Battles are thus fought in order to gain adherents, not to exterminate the enemy.

Snorri's picture of the game of politics seems to fit very well in with conditions in contemporary Iceland, where this system can be studied from contemporary sources at least until the end of the free-state period (1262-64, when the country submitted to the Norwegian king). It cannot without reservations be applied to twelfth century Norway (?). Nevertheless, it may serve to explain some of my observations concerning *Sverris saga* : it is not necessary to blacken the enemy. It is not necessary to convince anyone that one is right. What is important, is to demonstrate a charismatic personality and success. If *Sverris saga* is a piece of propaganda — and to some extent it is likely to be so — its chief message is : look at this man, who comes from a small island far away in the North Sea, who gathers a small band of wretched creatures, the remains of a defeated army, and then conquers the kingdom of Norway. His intelligence and luck are incredible. He defeats largely superior forces. He always has a solution in a difficult situation. He is ruthless in battle against his enemies, but mild and generous to those who seek his friendship, even if they have fought him previously. It is hopeless to resist him and much to gain by supporting him. Join him ! Thus, the chief argument the saga brings forward is Sverrir's success, not his just cause or legal claims. We do not know exactly how widely it was circulated or to what extent contemporaries thought that a work of this kind could actually serve to gain adherents. The elements of propaganda may equally well be reflections in the narrative of the way in which Sverrir and his men sought to gain adherents.

This propaganda may also have been aimed at those who were already in his camp. While the great majority who joined a faction did so to serve their own interests and were fairly loosely attached to the leader, there was also a hard core of relatives or close, personal friends. Neither the Icelandic nor the Norwegian factions of the period seems to have been based on extensive family clans. Personal friendship, established through gifts, mutual attraction and

7. On the civil wars and the political system of Norway in the period, see my « Borgerkrig og statsutvikling i Norge i middelalderen » < « Civil War and State Development in Norway in the Middle Ages » >, *Historisk tidsskrift* (Norwegian) 65 (1986) p. 145-97 (with Engl. summary).

ultimately confirmed through intermarriage, seems to have been relatively very important. In one sense, Sverrir made a new departure, linking this hard core more closely to himself than had previously been usual and building up a clientele of professional warriors, which eventually became the core of a new aristocracy of royal servants. To this clientele, Sverrir's person became extremely important. Accordingly, the vivid portrait in the saga of this exceptional man contributes to holding the faction together. This group of men is bound together by their great leader, whose charm, intelligence, humour, imagination and ability to endure all kinds of hardship and turn the most depressing circumstances into victory, impressed his adherents so much, as they continue to impress readers of *Sverris saga* 7-800 years later. Sverrir surely was a remarkable man. But there must have been other remarkable men in the middle ages. How often do such men emerge from the pages of their biographies? In this case, we also have to do with a remarkable author. In addition, however, we can point to particular circumstances which served to stimulate this kind of writing in twelfth century Norway.

Though particular kings or magnates might commission a work of history, the primary importance of the genre did not lie there, but in celebrating the warlike and heroic values of aristocratic society as a whole, which united the different men and factions who struggled for power. Admittedly, the saga literature proves equally frustrating to the modern historian who seeks information on government, administration, royal justice etc. as contemporary European historiography. Its great advantage lies in the fact that its undoubtedly ideological bias does not prevent it from giving vivid and intelligent analyses of the game of politics, which besides being excellent history and entertaining reading, even to a modern public, seems to give fairly good information on how politics was actually conducted.

The works I have considered so far belong to a secular tradition, and the comparison that immediately suggests itself is the European secular or aristocratic chronicle⁽⁸⁾. Works in this genre are « objective » in a similar way to the Old Norse sagas. Thus, Froissart may adjust his narrative to give as favourable a picture as possible of the particular patron for whom he was writing, but he is not interested in whether the French or the English were right in the Hundred Years War. His concern is the noble game of aristocratic warfare. Nor is he interested in state building or the political and governmental aspects of the war that modern historians would have wanted him to treat. Generally, historians of the European middle ages have the same problem as those of the North : the narrative sources are simply not interested in the kind of problems we find most important ! It seems a reasonable suggestion that the explanation is similar : national or other ideological interests were subordinated to the interests of the individual actors. On the other hand, the game of politics of the European feudal aristocracy seems to have differed from that of the North in a way that makes it even more strange according to our standards of political behaviour : While the game in the Old Norse saga is primarily a question of winning by whatever means, European chronicles emphasize

8. On the distinction between clerical and aristocratic historiography, see in particular William J. BRANDT, *The Shape of Medieval History*, New Haven 1966.

playing according to rules, i.e. the chivalrous code of honour. One should not attack the enemy unarmed, one should remain and fight when challenged by the enemy, though one might be in an inferior position, one should treat aristocratic prisoners honourably, exact a moderate ransom and release them against their word of honour etc. And one should maintain one's poise and dignity in all one's actions (9). The social explanation to these rules and their importance in historiography should probably be sought in two directions: first, the European feudal aristocracy was a rather closed caste, which sought to separate itself from the rest of society, among other things through strict rules of behaviour. Secondly, the actual rules had something to do with the fact that very often, fairly little was at stake in feudal warfare, so that winning honour by strictly obeying the rules might often — though evidently not always — be preferable to winning the game (10).

If we then turn to what may be rather sweepingly referred to as the clerical historiography of the European middle ages, we find a great number and variety of works. While this tradition is of fairly slight importance in Norway and Iceland, it is both quantitatively and qualitatively the most important in most of Europe and is virtually the only tradition before the thirteenth century. A natural object for comparison with *Sverris saga* is Otto of Freising's *Gesta Frederici*, which is also a royal biography, commissioned by the king. As has been pointed out by numerous scholars, it is easy to recognize the royal hand behind Otto's pen, but it has worked in another way than in *Sverris saga*. Otto's biography is more of an official biography and may even, with some exaggeration, be termed a biography of a head of state. Historians of the rise of the state may find more to their interest in it than in the other historiographical genres I have considered so far. Though its information on the normal working of government and administration is scanty, it gives a good picture of official imperial ideology and contains documents from the chancery.

As a personal portrait and as political history, however, Otto's *Gesta* makes disappointing reading. While Sverrir in *Sverris saga* emerges as a fascinating individual, whom we feel we know personally, Frederick is a personification of an official ideology. The difference is not coincidental, as numerous other portraits of individuals in the Old Norse saga literature are equally vivid, whether or not they are historically true. Secondly, while the saga literature often gives excellent analyses of strategy and tactics in war and politics, it is very difficult to detect from Otto's account what actually went on. We are not informed of Frederick's plans or aims, and the different events are rarely brought together to form a consistent narrative. Thus Otto tells us that Frederick married a Burgundian princess instead of a Byzantine one, as

9. For analyses of aristocratic chronicles from this point of view, see BRANDT, *ibid.* p.110 ff. and Georges DUBY, *Guillaume le Maréchal*, Paris 1984.

10. The general point in this explanation is not to state that people only act according to norms if it serves their own interests, but that there is some connection between the self-imposed norms of a given group and the interests of its members. For a more detailed comparison between Old Norse and European rules of behaviour in war and politics, see my *Society and Politics*.

originally planned, and that he rejected his original plan of attacking Hungary in favour of an expedition to Italy, without giving the reasons for these decisions.

This lack of political analysis is evidently not the result of Otto's incompetence as a historian, nor is it solely to be explained by his royalist ideology. As has been pointed out in several distinguished analyses of Otto's philosophy of history, 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⁽¹¹⁾. Analysis of political power and activity in this world of shadows is no real object to Otto; his main principles are derived from the eternal truths of philosophy and theology.

This has important consequences for his description of human action. In his prologue, Otto states as the purpose of historiography to praise the actions of brave men as an example for others to follow and either omit those of cowards or describe them as a warning. These are common phrases in medieval prologues. Nevertheless, I think they should be taken seriously. They serve as an intellectual justification for the art of historiography and they seem to determine the contents of historiographical works to a considerable degree⁽¹²⁾. This is at least certainly the case in Otto's *Gesta*. Rather than describing Frederick's political career, his successes and failures, Otto describes his virtues. Seen *sub specie aeternitatis* human actions and events matter little in themselves. What is important for man, is his attitude to God's will. Consequently, virtues are more important than success. Though the virtues themselves differ to some extent from those extolled by aristocratic historians, the attitude is similar: to obey the rules is more important than to win, the individual action is more important than the chain of actions leading to the accomplishment of an aim.

This also means that the ideology of Otto's *Gesta Frederici* is not only, or not primarily the result of its function as propaganda for the emperor. Otto also expresses a general, ecclesiastical ideology, which is « above the parties » and is very similar in the *Gesta* and the more « independent » *Chronica*. The primary aim of historiography is to express and propagate this ideology. Thus, there is a certain element of « objectivity » which may result in fairly balanced evaluations of men from both parties in a conflict. Historiography may be biased in the sense that one particular person is depicted as the embodiment of these common values, whatever his actual merits. But these fundamental values were rarely involved in actual political conflicts. There is therefore a certain distance between the fundamental pattern of thought in ecclesiastical historians and their descriptions of actual events.

11. For Otto's philosophy of history, see most recently Hans-Werner GOETZ, *Das Geschichtsbild Ottos von Freising*, Cologne 1984.

12. Recently, Richard VAUGHAN has attempted to show that the references to God or morality in medieval historians are mainly pious phrases (« The Past in the Middle Ages », *Journal of Medieval History* 12 (1986) p. 1 ff.). Though he can point to numerous examples of medieval historians' interest in the past for its own sake, this does not alter the fact that God and morality were of crucial importance to historians who wanted to give an intellectually satisfying picture of the past and that such considerations accordingly very much influenced their selection and arrangement of material.

This picture of ecclesiastical historiography is obviously rather one-sided. The ecclesiastical chroniclers do not always regard things *sub specie aeternitatis*, and some of them, such as William of Malmesbury, occasionally show an acute sense of human selfishness and political maneuvering. Generally, however, this tradition was less favourable to the development of a historiography dealing with the analysis of politics. On the other hand, it proved useful to the development of the state, by providing the king with an ideology. There may be some connection here. Though much may be said in favour of the growth of the medieval state, it does not seem to have been very advantageous to the development of historiography. In addition to the increasing emphasis on abstract thought and eternal truth in the universities, the subordination of historiography to the official royal ideology may have contributed to its decline in the thirteenth century, in the rest of Europe as well as in the North⁽¹³⁾.

The emphasis on shared values is common to the three historiographical traditions I have depicted so far. This aspect of historiography has been neglected, at least in saga research. While « internal »⁽¹⁴⁾ conflicts were generally more violent in the middle ages than in modern society, they were less ideological. On the other hand, the common ideology, the shared values, that united the opposite parties was as strong, if not stronger, than nowadays. Though historiography evidently could be used as propaganda for particular kings, dynasties or parties, the genre as a whole is probably better explained as the expression of the shared values of the elite of a fairly conservative society. This is above all the case with secular historiography, where the values are often implicit in the narrative. The audience knew how to judge and had their fundamental values confirmed. The more explicit moralizing of the clerical tradition indicates that these values were less generally recognized and had to be propagated to the real actors in the game.

The exact contents of the shared values differ in the three traditions. From a modern point of view, the clearest difference is between the two European traditions on the one hand and the Old Norse on the other. The former are

13. Richard W. SOUTHERN, « Aspects of the European Tradition of Historical Writing 2 », *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 21 (1971) p. 173f. ; Beryl SMALLEY, *Historians in the Middle Ages*, London 1974, p. 180f. ; Bernard GUENÉE, *Histoire et culture historique dans l'Occident médiéval*, Paris 1980, p.32f. More recently, it has been pointed out that although history was removed from the *artes* curriculum, it was still important in the higher faculties of law and above all theology (Franz J. SCHMALE, *Funktion und Formen mittelalterlicher Geschichtsschreibung*, Darmstadt 1985, p. 76 f. ; GOETZ, *ibid.*, p. 165ff. ; Karl F. WERNER, « Les structures de l'histoire à l'âge du christianisme », *Storia della storiografia*, 10 (1986) p. 39f.), and further, that the prestige of historiography depended less on its position within the universities than nowadays (WERNER, *ibid.*). Nevertheless, historical studies at the higher faculties do not seem to have stimulated the numerous chronicles of the thirteenth century. Despite their possible prestige and political importance, these works were hardly superior to those of e.g. Ordericus Vitalis, Otto of Freising or William of Malmesbury, in literary achievement, interpretation of history or description of character. As for the North, the kings' sagas became drier and less vivid and eventually stopped to be written during the period of strong monarchy and stability 1240-1319.

14. Evidently, it is not easy to distinguish between « internal » and « external » conflicts in medieval society. In one sense, only the common war of Western Christendom against people of other religions was truly « external ». Apart from that, one can distinguish more or less clearly between wars between or within kingdoms, larger principalities etc.

primarily concerned with single virtues and actions. The latter emphasizes success in the game of politics, thereby attaching higher value to consistent planning and political cunning. Historians in this tradition therefore give a clearer picture of society and politics, or of what to modern men seems to be the things that « were actually going on ». The explanation to this difference must be sought in different intellectual traditions, which in turn are determined or at least influenced by society. The more « democratic » and less rigid character of Norwegian and Icelandic society made popular support essential for a successful politician and consequently stressed diplomatic ability, eloquence, clever manipulation and — in Sverrir's case — strategic competence more than the traditional chivalric or Christian virtues. This in turn influenced historiography, both in the sense that it became an extremely important genre within the intellectual milieu and in the sense that the analysis of political action became its most important subject (15).

Traditional, political historiography has often been chiefly concerned with the rise of the state. Deriving their information from piles of documents in the royal chanceries and official propaganda depicting the king as God's representative on earth or the embodiment of the state, modern historians have given an impressive description of how a state in the real sense was gradually formed from rather inauspicious beginnings. More or less inadvertently, however, they have often created a picture of the medieval king as a sort of spider, patiently weaving his net to catch any aristocratic rival in it, in order to contribute as much as possible to the ever growing power of the state. Medieval chronicles depict another kind of king: the chivalrous hero, conversing with the great and noble men and women of his kingdom, tall, handsome, generous, brave in battle, courteous towards women, seeking honour and glory etc. — or in the Old Norse variety: the charismatic faction leader and tactician, attracting men through his charm and generosity and outmaneuvering his enemies by political and military skill. We have learnt from Ranke and other protagonists of scientific history to trust the documents rather than the narrative, and we are easily tempted to dismiss such descriptions of kings. Admittedly, they may be biased or exaggerated and their factual information may be scanty. But taken as a whole, as an ideology or « mentality », they must surely say something on the life and attitudes of medieval court. The actual king cannot only be the king of the documents and the impersonal bureaucracy, he must equally much be the aristocratic hero of the chronicles. To understand medieval monarchy, we have to take both worlds into account and try to place the various individuals, the kings and their surroundings, between them.

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15. For a more detailed discussion of these matters, see my *Society and Politics* and « The Formation of the State and Concepts of Society in 13th Century Norway », in *Continuity and Change (Proceedings of the Tenth International Symposium, organized by the Centre for the Study of Vernacular Literature, Odense 1985)*, edited by Elisabeth VESTERGAARD, Odense 1986, p. 43-60.