

CHAPTER 5

Political Subtexts in *Morkinskinna*, *Heimskringla III*, and *Egils saga*

To extract an underlying political attitude from the *Óláfs saga helga* that forms the second part of *Heimskringla* is problematical because we do not have the original version from which the author worked. It is therefore not possible to extrapolate a point of view by comparison. When it comes to the third part of *Heimskringla*, however, we are in a much better position because we have the immediate source for most of the narrative after 1030 in the compilation known as *Morkinskinna*. Internal criteria suggest that *Morkinskinna* was written around 1220, and we may begin by reviewing the situation in Iceland at that time.¹

The period 1215–1220 was in fact characterized by considerable hostility between Iceland and Norway, a degree of tension that amounted to not much less than a trade war.² In 1215 Sæmundr Jónsson at Oddi and Þorvaldr Gizurarson at Hruni had set prices on the goods of some Norwegian merchants. In 1216 Sæmundr's son Páll went to Bergen and was treated to such retaliatory abuse that he left Bergen and was drowned on the way to Trondheim. In 1217 Sæmundr gave vent to his wrath by exacting fines from Bergen and Greenland merchants. In 1218 the Greenland traders killed Sæmundr's brother Ormr in reprisal. In 1219 Norway appears to have imposed an embargo on shipping to Iceland, and in 1220 Jarl Skúli actually contemplated a naval expedition against Iceland.³ These events have been seen in the context of the long-standing designs on Iceland by the Norwegian kings, a view that is, as we will see, borne out by the underlying suspicion of Norwegian motives in *Morkinskinna*.⁴

The trade war originated in southern Iceland, but there is evidence of a traditional opposition to foreign intrusion in northern Iceland as well, specifically in Eyjafjörður. A plan by King Haraldr Gormsson to attack Iceland was firmly resisted in a stanza by Eyjólfur Valgerðarson at Møðruvellir, and Eyjólfur's son Einarr þveræingr is alleged to have composed a like-minded stanza as well as being credited with a famous speech in *Óláfs saga helga* in opposition to Óláfr Haraldsson's request for the surrender of Grímsey in Eyjafjörður.⁵ Political resistance therefore had strong precedents in Eyjafjörður, and this is precisely the area in which *Morkinskinna* seems most likely to have been written.⁶ It is consequently understandable if we detect in *Morkinskinna* a deep-seated apprehension about Norwegian foreign policy.

It can be argued that *Morkinskinna* constructs its version of Norwegian history between 1030 and 1130 on two contrastive sets of kings, to whom I will refer as the “foreign adventurer” type and the “builder and lawmaker type.”⁷ These kings may be paired and contrasted as follows (“foreign adventurers” in the first column, “builders and lawmakers” in the second):

Haraldr harðráði	Magnús góði
Magnús berfœttr	Óláfr kyrri
Sigurðr Jórsalafari	Eysteinn Magnússon

The contrast emerges with special clarity in *Morkinskinna* because the careers of the first and last pairs are contemporary and intertwined. The characters of these kings are therefore constantly set off against each other. In *Heimskringla* some of the comparative effect is lost because the author works more in terms of single biographies and thus disentangles the careers of Haraldr harðráði and Magnús góði. He nonetheless retains the two distinct types, which Sverre Bagge refers to as the “warrior hero” and the “peaceful ruler,” or the “warrior, strong-willed and aggressive” and the “mild lover of peace.”⁸

In *Morkinskinna* there is a clear preference for the kings dedicated to domestic welfare and a corresponding negative view of the foreign adventurers. The bias is so clear that it suggests a condemnation of Norwegian expansionism on the part of an Icelandic writer and a forceful recommendation that Norwegian kings should devote themselves to social progress within Norway. In political terms this outlook

might well be construed as a reflection of the tensions between Iceland and Norway in the period 1215–1220. When we turn to *Heimskringla*, however, we find the bias considerably moderated. The author seems to have been at pains to remove the Icelandic perspective on Norwegian affairs and rebalance in some measure the contrast between warrior kings and commonweal kings. I will therefore argue that in the period 1030–1130 *Heimskringla* represents a royalist readjustment by comparison to its immediate source in *Morkinskinna*.

Haraldr harðráði and Magnús góði

The author of *Morkinskinna* takes a decidedly mixed view of Haraldr harðráði, who is described as being valiant and resourceful but also untrustworthy and deceitful.⁹ His portrait is further complicated by a series of *Íslendinga þættir*, most of which show off the wit and wisdom of individual Icelanders somewhat to the detriment of King Haraldr. We can only remind ourselves of the gist here, but the general tendentiousness of the *þættir* hardly requires detailed demonstration.¹⁰ The first, “Halldórs þátr Snorrasonar,” is perhaps the most indicative of all. In it the Icelander both confronts and confounds the king, concluding his dealings with the aging monarch with a dismissive “eldisk árgalinn nú” [the old cock is drooping now].¹¹ The well-known “Auðunar þátr” is wittier, but also presents an Icelander who is stout enough to stand up to Haraldr and canny enough to subdue him with words and a superior display of tact.¹² In addition, “Auðunar þátr” formulates a comparison between Haraldr and Sveinn Úlfsson that tends to favor the Danish king. In “Brands þátr ǫrva” the Icelander manages to give the king a silent lesson in the rules of generosity. In “Þorvarðar þátr krákunefs” another Icelander takes the king’s gruff reception in stride and fares much better with his kinsman Eysteinn orri. “Sneglu-Halla þátr” is characterized by a series of farcical episodes at the Norwegian court, in which the king plays the autocrat and Halli consistently has the best of it. In “Odds þátr Ófeigssonar” the Icelandic trader Oddr outwits an ill-disposed Haraldr with the aid of a Norwegian accomplice.

The focus of these *þættir* is a portrayal of Haraldr harðráði as the moral and intellectual loser in his dealings with Icelandic visitors. That depiction runs exactly counter to the drift of Haraldr’s adventures in

the Mediterranean and, for the most part, his fortunes in Norway and Denmark. In these latter contexts he emerges regularly as the superior intellect, though hardly a model of scrupulous conduct. It is as if his powers were more than adequate to deal with any race other than the Icelanders, a reading that would no doubt have been as gratifying to the author's countrymen as it would have been objectionable to loyal Norwegians. We can perhaps surmise that the suppression of the *þættir* in *Heimskringla* may have been intended in some part to remove the sting for a Norwegian readership.

Indeed, the author seems to have been intent on limiting the Icelandic presence in general, for example by eliminating a reference to Gizurr Ísleifsson, or the consecration of the Icelandic bishop Magnús Einarsson in Norway, or the mention of Sigurður slembidják'n's stay with Þorgils Oddason at Saurbær in Iceland.¹³ We can observe that with the disappearance of an intrusive Icelandic presence in *Heimskringla* went the intrusive view of Norwegian kingship that we found in *Morkinskinna*. Icelanders are no longer admitted for political coloring but only for the sake of their stanzas.¹⁴

At one point the author even seems to offer an explanation for his suppression of the Icelandic *þættir*. He acknowledges that he knows more of King Haraldr than he has written (ÍF 28:118): “En þó er miklu fleira óritat hans frægðarverka. Kómr til þess ófrœði vár ok þat annat, at vér viljum eigi setja á bœkr vitnislausar sǫgur” [But still many of his famous deeds are not written down. The cause of that is our ignorance and, for another thing, that we do not want to record unattested stories]. The phrase “vitnislausar sǫgur” suggests a certain distaste, which could be inspired not only by the problem of attestation but also by the antimonarchism that lies just below the surface in the *þættir*. That impression can only be strengthened when the paragraph continues with a digression on Haraldr's special friendship for Iceland. The author seems to dedicate himself here to a normalization of relations between Iceland and Norway.

That tendency is carried one step further in the following paragraph, in which the author discredits Haraldr's greatest detractor, Halldórr Snorrason. There is no mention of Haraldr's provocations, duly noted in *Morkinskinna*. Instead, the author explains why Halldórr was an impossible presence at the Norwegian court (ÍF 28:120): “Halldórr var maðr fámæltr ok stirðorðr, bermæltr ok stríðlundaðr ok ómjúkr,

en þat kom illa þá við konung, er hann hafði gnóga aðra með sér gøfga menn ok þjónostufulla” [Halldórr was a taciturn man, laconic, direct and antagonistic and unrelenting, and that did not suit the king well since he had plenty of other distinguished and devoted men with him]. Far from being a hero of self-assertiveness, as in *Morkinskinna*, Halldórr simply becomes an unserviceable courtier in the reincarnation of *Heimskringla*.

The point is driven home by contrast in yet a third paragraph, which describes the ideal Icelandic courtier, Úlfr Óspaksson (ÍF 28:120): “Hann var inn vitrasti maðr, snjallr í máli, skörungr mikill, tryggur ok einfaldr” [He was a very wise man, ready with words, a very stalwart man, loyal, and straightforward]. When Úlfr stallari dies many pages later, King Haraldr stands over his grave and delivers a handsome eulogy (ÍF 28:175): “Þar liggur sá nú, er dyggvastr var ok dróttinhollastr” [Here lies a man who was most loyal and most faithful to his lord]. The eulogy is taken over from *Morkinskinna*, but not the deliberate juxtaposition of Halldórr Snorrason and Úlfr stallari.¹⁵ That juxtaposition seems quite calculated; an Icelander who is not *þjónostufullr* stands next to another Icelander who is *dróttinhollastr*. Service to the crown was not on the *Morkinskinna* agenda, but it was clearly in the mind of the author of *Heimskringla*, who exposed the flaws of King Haraldr’s antagonists and applauded his friends.

Another clue to the author’s outlook lies in the use he made of *Hákonar saga Ívarssonar*. As Gustav Storm noted in 1873, this is the only saga in the whole corpus dedicated to a Norwegian chieftain unconnected to a royal house.¹⁶ That in itself raises interesting questions about the genesis of such a text. Why would an Icelandic writer have turned to the career of such a marginal figure? The answer must lie not only in Hákon’s heroic dimensions but also in the perception that he was an opposition figure in Norway and thus appealed to the Icelanders in a period of frictions with Norway. This is certainly the way he is portrayed by the author of *Morkinskinna*, who contrasts him to King Haraldr much as he sets up a series of Icelandic opposition figures.

Morkinskinna tells the story of how Hákon parts company with Finnur Árnason, who allies himself with the Danish king Sveinn Úlfsson while Hákon offers his service to King Haraldr in Norway. He then distinguishes himself in the Norwegian victory at the Battle of Niz,

but also secretly secures the escape of King Haraldr's antagonist Sveinn Úlfsson. Hákon subsequently visits Haraldr at court, and the king offers him the hand of Magnús góði's daughter Ragnhildr. She hesitates to marry a man of lesser status, but the marriage takes place on the supposition that Haraldr will appoint Hákon as a jarl. Haraldr fails to do so, and Hákon avenges himself by killing a number of the king's men and destroying their property.¹⁷ He then sails off on a viking expedition while Ragnhildr takes asylum in Denmark.

When Hákon reaches Denmark, Sveinn Úlfsson offers him the province of Halland in return for capturing his marauding kinsman Ásmundr Bjarnason. Instead, Hákon delivers Ásmundr's head. Though angered by the death of his kinsman, King Sveinn is as good as his word and grants Hákon his jarldom in Halland, where he settles with his wife Ragnhildr. The story concludes with a pitched battle between King Haraldr and Hákon in Sweden. Haraldr wins the battle, but Hákon boldly recaptures his banner and ambushes some of Haraldr's men, thus forcing the king to concede that their triumphs are equal.

This is the tale of a distinguished man who volunteers his assistance to King Haraldr and renders valuable service. Haraldr rewards him with a marriage, presumably in a bid to retain his service, but fails to observe the terms of the contract and obliges him to transfer his loyalty to his Danish rival Sveinn Úlfsson. Despite some provocation Sveinn is scrupulous in discharging his commitment to Hákon, and this contrasts favorably with King Haraldr. Hákon eventually loses the contest but wins the moral victory. That victory is reminiscent of what we find in the *þættir*, for example "Auðunar þáttur," which also pits Sveinn Úlfsson against Haraldr harðráði in a moral contest.

The story told in *Heimskringla* is quite different. In this version King Haraldr needs Hákon's help in coming to terms with the Þrændir after the killing of Einarr þambarskelfir and his son Eindriði. It is no longer the king who offers Ragnhildr's hand in marriage, but Hákon who stipulates it. In contrast to *Morkinskinna*, Haraldr declines to grant the jarldom in advance and thus does not allow the marriage to go forward. Hákon then retaliates by taking service with Sveinn Úlfsson, but he kills the king's nephew Ásmundr and is banished. At this point Hákon returns to Norway makes peace with Haraldr, receives his jarldom, and marries Ragnhildr. He later distinguishes himself in the Battle of Niz but secretly helps Sveinn Úlfsson escape.

Apprised of the secret, Haraldr sets out to take revenge, but Hákon is able to escape to Sweden. Here the pitched battle is described as in *Morkinskinna*, but Haraldr's comment about equal triumphs and Hákon's reprisals are omitted.

This latter version of the story is clearly exculpatory with respect to Haraldr harðráði. The king no longer lures Hákon into an agreement that he fails to honor. Hákon makes his own terms, and Haraldr is candid about what he will and will not do. The marriage does not take place under false auspices. At the same time Sveinn Úlfsson is reduced in stature. Rather than rewarding Hákon, he banishes him. Back in Norway the marriage and jarldom are arranged without deception and precede the Battle of Niz, so that Hákon's betrayal in facilitating the escape of Sveinn Úlfsson is more palpable. Finally, Hákon's flamboyant moral victory in Sweden is somewhat curtailed. Perhaps most significant is the omission of the brilliant marriage portrait provided in *Morkinskinna*, in which the anguished tug of war between status considerations and personal affection engages the reader's special sympathy for Hákon and Ragnhildr. These alterations rebalance the scales in favor of King Haraldr just as the suppression of the *þættir* did. *Heimskringla* thus offers a more royalist reading than we can find in *Morkinskinna*. Because the remnants of *Hákonar saga* are so fragmentary, we cannot know how either version compares with the original, but a clear contrast between the biases in *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla* seems quite manifest.

It remains to ask whether the author of *Heimskringla* III reduces the contrast between King Haraldr and King Magnús in the same way he readjusts Haraldr's relations with such antagonists as Hall-dórr Snorrason and Hákon Ívarsson. A palpable difference is that *Morkinskinna* neglects Magnús's early reign and picks up the story only after Haraldr's return to Norway (ca. 1046). From the outset the focus in *Morkinskinna* is on Magnús's moral rather than his political stature. His clash with Haraldr over the royal mooring is calculated to demonstrate hereditary firmness of character. His visit with his steward Porkell dyðrill illustrates how he insists on but also acknowledges faithful service. There follows an episode in which he rewards good advice given him before the Battle of Hlýrskógsheiðr, and another in which he rewards a certain Ormr with a jarldom even though Ormr spared the life of his enemy. That act draws the author's

explicit approval because it shows that Magnús judges the quality of the man to be more important than a personal difference.¹⁸

The story line then turns once more to the direct relations between the coregents Magnús and Haraldr. In one encounter Magnús is able to help a relative of Kálfr Árnason's to escape Haraldr's clutches. In a second Haraldr proves to be grasping in his collection of taxes and provokes the opposition of Einarr þambarskelfir. At the Eyrarþing an old man rises to enunciate the view that the greater allegiance is owed to King Magnús.¹⁹ In yet a third encounter Haraldr composes some offensive stanzas at the expense of Magnús's taciturn brother Þórir. Magnús retaliates by instructing Þórir to recite an even deadlier reply. All three passages suggest that Magnús is capable of defending his turf against his more aggressive uncle. The interaction culminates in a visit by Arnórr jarlaskáld, who recites poems in honor of both kings, but Haraldr comments that his *drápa* is ephemeral, while Magnús's will be recited "as long as the northern lands are peopled."²⁰

Two other episodes are less obviously tendentious. In the first both Haraldr and Magnús try their hand at healing a boy who has lost the capacity to dream, but it is finally Haraldr who succeeds. In the second Saint Óláfr signals to Magnús that he should refrain from sleeping with a certain Margréta. That may of course suggest that Magnús is to be seen as Óláfr's special charge and true heir, but the comparison of kings becomes even more explicit in the only *þáttr* attached specifically to Magnús, "Hreiðars þáttr heimiska." The gist of the story is again that Magnús is able to defend his interests; in this case he takes the part of a man commended to his keeping against Haraldr.

All of the incidents thus far are designed to establish Magnús as a model of probity and competence, and to shed a correspondingly unfavorable light on Haraldr. No space is devoted to what might be considered Magnús's political career. Only at the very end of his saga does he go off to harry in Denmark with his uncle, but even this episode serves to illustrate his wisdom and farsightedness. Foreseeing his own death, Magnús contrives to have his mother free the Danish captive Þorgils, a kinsman of Sveinn Úlfsson's, so that she will be welcome to take refuge in Denmark when she is no longer under Magnús's protection. A final comparison between Magnús and Haraldr is attributed to Sveinn Úlfsson, who caracoles on horseback

before the Norwegian host and comments that there is a significant difference between his Norwegian opponents—he himself was guilty of betraying Magnús, whereas Haraldr betrayed him. Sveinn thus adds his voice to the poetic voice of Arnórr jarlaskáld, whose panegyrics seem to imply a preference for Magnús, and to the legal voice of the old man at Eyrarþing. The comparisons are plentiful and invidious, and they clearly resonate in favor of Magnús. The political difference is summed up by Magnús himself on his deathbed: “It may be that some people will think that my kinsman King Haraldr’s counsels are colder and darker than my own.”²¹

Whereas the author of *Morkinskinna* is interested almost exclusively in Magnús the moral man, the author of *Heimskringla* is interested primarily in Magnús the political man. In this latter capacity Magnús is far from unblemished. He is moved to take reprisals against those who fought against his father at Stiklarstaðir, and he must be recalled to a more scrupulous observance of Hákon góði’s laws, especially by Sigvatr’s “Bersöglisvísur.” In the foreign arena Magnús pursues his goals aggressively. He secures the Danish succession, then loses it to Sveinn Úlfsson and regains it in three successive victories, though only after destroying the fortress of the Jomsvikings and subduing the Wends with the aid of Saint Óláfr. Finally he extends his ambition to England, but wisely refrains from pressing his good fortune.

In these chapters Magnús appears as a daring but prudent military leader, an image not hinted at in *Morkinskinna*. On the other hand, the author of *Heimskringla* III drops the morally paradigmatic incidents of *Morkinskinna* almost without exception. Of the implied comparisons between Haraldr and Magnús there remains only the contested mooring site. But, as in the case of Haraldr, this writer gives us to understand that he knows more than he writes. He knows that there were more disagreements, though he tries to dismiss them as the work of malicious men: “There were soon differences in the understanding of the kings, and there were many who were of sufficient ill will that there was dissension between them.” And again: “In the face of such differences word soon spread among foolish men to the effect that there was disagreement between the kings. There were a number of issues causing the kings to have their own opinions, even if not much is written about it here.”²² It is as if the author does not want to hear

of the dissension between the kings; he certainly does not want to use Magnús to cast a shadow on Haraldr.

To be sure, Magnús emerges as an extraordinarily popular king, but the invidious comparisons with Haraldr that operate so clearly in *Morkinskinna* are completely abandoned.²³ The judgments of Arnórr jarlaskáld, the old man at the Eyrarþing, and Sveinn Úlfsson on the battlefield are not repeated. On the contrary, *Heimskringla* shows every indication that Haraldr and Magnús cooperated in reasonable amity. That tendency emerges in such small matters as a revised treatment of the attempt on Sveinn Úlfsson's part to win Haraldr over for an alliance against Magnús. Haraldr's response in *Morkinskinna* is simply noncommittal, but in *Heimskringla* he responds angrily to the idea of betraying his kinsman (ÍF 28:96). It might even appear that the author of *Heimskringla* works against the idea of an implied contrast by comparing King Haraldr at the end of his saga not with Magnús but rather with Saint Óláfr. The comparison, though attributed to Halldórr Snorrason, is surely intended to favor Haraldr's memory. By further implication it counteracts the view promoted in *Morkinskinna* that Magnús is under Saint Óláfr's special protection.

In sum, *Morkinskinna* creates a sharp contrast between Magnús and Haraldr. Magnús is portrayed as in every way exemplary, much beloved by the people and almost saintly in his final days. Haraldr, on the other hand, is autocratic, ambitious, and unreliable. In *Heimskringla* there is a distinct effort to reduce the gap by retouching both portraits. Magnús is still popular but by no means saintly. He makes political mistakes at the beginning of his career, and though he has no adventures to match Haraldr's Varangian romance, he is much involved in military expeditions in the Baltic and Denmark. It is only at the end of his career that he sees the wisdom of withdrawing from foreign entanglements. Haraldr, on the other hand, is much softened. His dealings with Magnús are troubled to be sure, but they remain within the bounds dictated by kinship and treaty obligations. His penchant for trickery, especially in dealing with Halldórr Snorrason and Hákon Ívarsson, is greatly moderated, and reemerges only after Magnús's death in his machinations against Einarr þambarskelfir and Kálfr Árnason. The author of *Heimskringla* III goes a long way toward neutralizing the morality tale inherited from *Morkinskinna*.

Óláfr kyrri and Magnús berfœttr

The sagas of Magnús and Haraldr occupy half or more of the extant *Morkinskinna*, 120 of 237 pages in Unger's edition, including the supplements from *Flateyjarbók*, 285 of 462 pages in Finnur Jónsson's edition, and 325 of the 664 pages in the new ÍF edition by Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson. By contrast the story of Óláfr kyrri is notoriously brief, seven pages in Unger's edition, eleven in Finnur Jónsson's edition, fourteen in the ÍF edition, and only seven in Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson's *Heimskringla*. We would hardly expect to find many clues to a political reading of so short a text, but there are nonetheless at least two instances of tendentiousness. *Morkinskinna* includes a very enthusiastic review of Óláfr explicitly at the expense of Haraldr harðráði. It reads in part: "King Óláfr was lenient in many matters that his father King Haraldr had promoted and maintained aggressively."²⁴

This authorial comment is followed up by a speech in which Óláfr specifies the difference between his reign and Haraldr's: "I will be joyful now that I see both happiness and liberty in my people. . . . But in the days of my father these people were subject to great intimidation and fear, and most people hid their gold and precious objects, but now I see you wearing what is yours brightly. And your freedom is my joy."²⁵

The comparison is not quite so glowing in *Heimskringla*. Here Óláfr is asked to explain why he has a larger retinue than the law prescribes when he makes his rounds in Norway, and he must reply a little defensively: "I cannot govern the realm better than my father, nor do I inspire more fear though I have twice as large a retinue as he had, but it does not represent any threat to you nor does it mean that I wish to oppress you."²⁶ In other words, the author of *Morkinskinna* continues to use Haraldr harðráði as the negative pole of royal authority, while the author of *Heimskringla III* depolarizes the two kings. He even converts Óláfr's words from the invidious original into an expression of modesty. Óláfr merely suggests that despite the increased size of his retinue he is neither as powerful nor as intimidating as his father.

The passages in *Morkinskinna* align the peaceable Óláfr against an aggressive Haraldr and keep the contrastive strategy in place. On

the peaceful side of the balance Óláfr is in the company of Magnús góði. It was one of Magnús's characteristics that he put domestic security ahead of foreign conquest, with the result that he refrained from intervening in England and eventually judged it best to leave Denmark to Sveinn Úlfsson. Óláfr inherits his restraint. When he is urged by King Knútr of Denmark to join an expedition against England, he declines, citing the fate of his far more accomplished father at Stamford Bridge. He is therefore content to give Knútr sixty ships for his enterprise while he remains behind in Norway. Óláfr is thus, according to *Morkinskinna*, the polar opposite of Haraldr and the natural heir of Magnús, but the author of *Heimskringla* moderates the contrast to Haraldr and eliminates altogether Óláfr's refusal, in emulation of Magnús góði, to join the attack on England, despite the fact that these subtractions leave him with a mini-saga of no more than seven pages. In *Morkinskinna* Óláfr has paradigmatic value, in *Heimskringla* very little.

Magnús berfœttr clearly reverts to the behavioral model established by Haraldr harðráði, though again more overtly in *Morkinskinna* than in *Heimskringla*. Magnús's autocratic streak is illuminated by *Morkinskinna's* account of his dealings with the east Norwegian chieftain Sveinki Steinarsson, who fails to submit. Magnús dispatches his officials to recall the chieftain to his duty, but they are treated first to ironical riddles and finally to an obscene dismissal.²⁷ Magnús follows up in person, but is headed off by the regional chieftains, who conduct exquisitely delicate negotiations leading to a minimal three-year exile for Sveinki. As it turns out, Magnús is obliged to recall him even before that term is up in order to contain the depredations of robbers and bandits. The whole episode is clearly seen as a credit to Sveinki and a humiliation for Magnús. Particularly telling is the need for Sveinki to deal with local banditry, traditionally a preeminent duty of kings. The whole episode is dropped in *Heimskringla*, perhaps to spare Magnús the embarrassment. According to this version Magnús alone suppresses the robbers and vikings. That leads to a direct comparison with his father Óláfr and his grandfather Haraldr: "He was a stalwart, warriorlike, and persistent man, in all respects more like his grandfather in disposition than like his father."²⁸ This comparison is not found in *Morkinskinna*, where it would clearly have had a negative valence.

In *Heimskringla* it is placed in the context of Magnús's achievements and has no negative connotations.

Although Magnús is not compared to Haraldr harðráði at this juncture in *Morkinskinna*, such a comparison is made later during his expedition to Ireland. Here Magnús harangues his men, urging the expedition "for the greater glory of Norway" and for the sake of plentiful booty.²⁹ But his men are not so certain, and their spokesman replies:³⁰

Lord, everyone is ready to strive for your honor, but we are doubtful about what can be done to achieve honor in this country. The country is populous and the people treacherous, and we harbor doubts about how well we can guard against it. It fell to the lot of your kinsman King Haraldr that initially everything was surrendered to him in England wherever he went. But at the end he himself died. It would seem far better to all your friends if you had stayed peacefully in your realm considering how well off you are.

Magnús is naturally not inclined to accept such advice and dies abroad in circumstances not unlike those that brought about the downfall of Haraldr harðráði. The advice pinpoints the issue of foolhardy foreign adventurism and prudent domestic policy once again. Significantly the author of *Heimskringla* eliminates the exchange of speeches and thus continues to blur the distinction between risky and safe foreign policy. His concluding summation on Magnús formulates a temporizing balance between Magnús's successes at home and his risk-taking abroad. Magnús is fully cognizant of the risks and relativizes them with the maxim "Til frægðar skal konung hafa, en ekki til langlífis" [A king is for the purpose of fame, not longevity].³¹ The author of *Morkinskinna* took no such balanced view of Magnús's reign.

Sigurðr Jórsalafari and Eysteinn Magnússon

Turning to Magnús's sons, we find that *Morkinskinna* carries through the same contrastive pattern in the most explicit terms yet. Sigurðr Jórsalafari, like Haraldr harðráði before him, is famed for his adventures in the Mediterranean and Constantinople, while Eysteinn,

even more obviously than Magnús góði, is a peaceful and constructive stay-at-home. The two kings ultimately work out the contrast in the words of their famous flyting. Their confrontation is by no means neutral because the author makes it abundantly clear that Sigurðr is a flawed personality. At the height of his trajectory in Constantinople a sage prophesies that his honor will be shaped like the lion, massive in the forequarters but tapering off further on.³² That inauspicious prophecy is later confirmed by Eysteinn, who predicts that his brother will succumb to “some dire calamity.”³³

The calamity in question is a madness that haunts Sigurðr at unpredictable intervals through the last chapters of his saga. In the first episode he casts his most valuable book into the fire and slaps his queen. In another episode he almost drowns a certain Jón for no apparent reason. In yet a third he is barely restrained from a wanton consumption of meat on a Friday, and in a fourth he craves meat and a woman on Christmas. Finally, at an advanced age, he abandons his wife and takes a new one, who in turn abandons him before he dies. Several of these episodes turn into tests of retainers with enough courage to oppose his irrational behavior. There is no doubt in *Morkinskinna* that Sigurðr ends his days as a capricious madman.

The author of *Heimskringla*, on the other hand, curtails his symptoms drastically. In the first place, he eliminates the invidious prophecies voiced by the sage in Constantinople and by Eysteinn, but he also reduces the suggestion of madness. In the cameo chapter 22 he merely notes that Sigurðr was subject to uncontrollable fits of mirth, though in chapter 28 he does retain the episode in which Sigurðr nearly drowns a man (here an anonymous Icelander). All the other indications of madness disappear. Particularly telling is the deletion of the moments that run counter to Church prohibitions (fasting rules and divorce) in an apparent attempt to make Sigurðr a better Christian. That tendency is perhaps borne out by a new chapter (24) in which Sigurðr is credited with a crusade to Sweden.

The author of *Heimskringla* succeeds in closing the gap between Sigurðr and Eysteinn to such an extent that Sverre Bagge judged his kingship ideal to be a composite of both types.³⁴ I believe that there is enough residue from the bias in *Morkinskinna* to vindicate a preference for Eysteinn, but the contrast between the two kings is toned down greatly. This is surely a conscious operation because

the author seems to be cognizant of the divergence in *Morkinskinna*. His comparison of Magnús berfœttr with Haraldr harðráði shows that he recognized this aspect of the continuity in *Morkinskinna*, but *Morkinskinna* also aligned Eysteinn with Magnús góði.³⁵ *Heimskringla* retains that comparison, but the parallelisms are otherwise so blurred that the overall contrast of types is no longer so obvious.

In *Morkinskinna* the contrast culminated in the flyting between Sigurðr and Eysteinn, which subsumes the two personality strains dating back to Magnús góði and Haraldr harðráði. In an interesting speculation on the appearance of Snorri Sturluson, who is more often than not assumed to be the author of *Heimskringla*, Helgi Þorláksson studied the flyting on the supposition that Snorri's changes in *Heimskringla* hint that he is recasting Eysteinn in his own image. In the course of his discussion Helgi arrives at the same general conclusions reached here, namely that Snorri favors Eysteinn and that he minimizes the opposition between the two brothers.³⁶ I do not propose another detailed analysis of the flyting, but I believe that there are several indications that the author of *Heimskringla* moderates the contrasts. Eysteinn is the manifest winner in *Morkinskinna*, and perhaps in *Heimskringla* as well, but in the latter the author makes a number of changes in order to balance the score.

On the evening in question *Morkinskinna* notes that Sigurðr is taciturn, a mood which, in the context of this saga, could be construed as a sign of his approaching madness. In *Heimskringla* the onus is removed by the statement that everyone, not just Sigurðr, was taciturn. In *Morkinskinna* the host of the feast appeals to Eysteinn because Sigurðr and his men are given to arrogant behavior. *Heimskringla* drops that charge. In *Morkinskinna* Eysteinn shows signs of being irritated by his brother's responses, so that he appears to be more challenging. In *Heimskringla* he merely tries to lighten the atmosphere in the hope of making the situation less charged and antagonistic. Finally, the author of *Heimskringla* reduces Eysteinn's concluding speech by about two thirds, from thirty-three lines in Unger's edition, forty-four lines in Finnur Jónsson's edition, or thirty-six lines in ÍF 24 to a mere nine lines in *Heimskringla*.³⁷ The effect in *Morkinskinna* is that Eysteinn delivers an overwhelming and crushing final statement that makes his case incontrovertible. In *Heimskringla* the debate spends

itself in a more stichomythic and inconclusive exchange, in which the winner is not quite so predetermined.

A comparison such as the one presented here is contingent on the accuracy of the transmitted texts. In the case of *Heimskringla* we probably have something approximating the original text, though not in every detail.³⁸ In the case of *Morkinskinna* the latitude for doubt is considerable, and there are strong suspicions that the extant text is an interpolated version of the original, although the extent of the interpolations cannot be ascertained. Thus each individual comparison offered above is subject to doubt. On the other hand, the overall tendency is so consistent that the total comparison can hardly be disqualified on the basis of individual questions. It seems apparent that *Morkinskinna* gives a politicized version of the period 1030–1130, in which a set of peaceful monarchs dedicated to sound domestic policy is opposed to a set of warrior kings of more questionable character who engage themselves rashly in foreign exploits. It seems equally clear that in *Heimskringla* the author set about neutralizing the opposition between the peaceable kings and the foreign adventurers. We may suspect further that the politicized version in *Morkinskinna* is inspired by an Icelandic distrust of Norwegian foreign policy, and that the adjustments in *Heimskringla* may reflect a desire to remove the signs of Icelandic distrust in order to promote better relations with the mother country. To test that hypothesis we will look at a contemporary book that is specifically about Icelandic-Norwegian relations and may offer further hints about prevalent attitudes at the time.

The Politics of *Egils saga*

In 1985 Melissa Berman published a paper in which she classed *Jómsvíkinga saga*, *Orkneyinga saga*, and *Færeyinga saga* as “political sagas” because they center on the political dealings of provincial chieftains with the kings of Norway and Denmark.³⁹ At the conclusion of her paper she notes that they share their political features with *Egils saga*, in which the Mýramenn of Iceland clash with a series of Norwegian monarchs over a period of some seventy-five years. She points out that *Jómsvíkinga saga* is distinctly anti-royalist and that *Orkneyinga saga* is royalist, while *Færeyinga saga* mediates between

these two extremes. Berman judges that *Egils saga* is closest to the mediating position.

There is no doubt that the tension between provincial chieftains, broadly construed to include Icelanders, and the Norwegian crown is thematic in *Egils saga*. The saga begins with the story of Haraldr hárfagri's suppression of the petty kings of Norway, a story told with obvious sympathy for the cause of the losers. Haraldr's policy is referred to (ÍF 2:8 and 12) as "enslavement" (*áþján*), and his crushing of the resistance is ruthless. It leads to extensive emigration and the settling of Iceland, which may thus be regarded as a product of royal aggression. The question posed in the early chapters is how local chieftains will respond to the new threat, and the more honorable alternative appears to be resistance. Sólvi klofi is politically clear-sighted, chooses to resist, is forced into exile, but continues to assail the king from abroad. Kveld-Úlfr is similarly perspicuous and has no difficulty in resisting King Haraldr's blandishments. When his son Þórólfr is swayed by the prospect of royal service, Kveld-Úlfr foresees the dire consequences for the family (ÍF 2:15).

Þórólfr's experience with Haraldr bears out his father's worst fears. Despite a predilection for high living, Þórólfr is a model retainer and serves the king faithfully. When he is slandered by his enemies, he cannot believe that the king will credit such malice (ÍF 2:37), but his confidence is misplaced, with the result that he is removed from his lucrative position and kept at court under the king's watchful eye. It is of course a major criticism of the king that he is unable to distinguish between faithful service and palpable malice. Kveld-Úlfr can only repeat his dire predictions and advise his son to take service with the English, Danish, or Swedish king, a recommendation that does not speak well for their Norwegian brother. Haraldr's wrongful suspicion goes so far that he has one of Þórólfr's ships seized, thus provoking retaliation and open hostility. Kveld-Úlfr harks back to his refrain, reminding Þórólfr once again of his advice that service with the king would bring him and his family no luck. Þórólfr remains principled to the end, and in the final confrontation he refuses to accept a forced settlement. He falls in a gallant last assault three feet from the king (ÍF 2:54).

The question of whether it is advisable to serve the king is now raised again, this time with reference to Kveld-Úlfr's other son Skalla-Grímr. Skalla-Grímr declines point-blank, noting that he is unlikely

to have more luck than his more distinguished brother. Kveld-Úlfr approves and they take revenge for Þórólfr's death by killing the two royal agents who had seized his ship. The break between Kveld-Úlfr's family and King Haraldr is thus complete, and the author concludes this section of the saga by stating that after Kveld-Úlfr's emigration the king not only seizes all their property but nurses a special hatred against the whole clan and continues to retaliate. This intransigence is reminiscent of his earlier ruthlessness against the petty kings.

The tone and tenor of this story are clearly weighted in favor of Kveld-Úlfr's family. He and Skalla-Grímr form an intelligent and effective opposition to an expansionist king. The idyllic description of their newly settled home in Iceland (ÍF 2:77) is calculated not only as a favorable contrast to a Norway that has passed under the king's iron grip but also as a just reward for their political acumen. Þórólfr, for all his brilliance, does not share their wisdom and dies at the hands of a king who is morally blind. There can be no doubt that Kveld-Úlfr and his kin group hold the high ground in this confrontation.

The second stage in the conflict between the Mýramenn and the Norwegian monarchy is not only more drawn out but also more complex and difficult to interpret. It pits Skalla-Grímr's sons Þórólfr and Egill against King Haraldr's son Eiríkr blóðøx. Þórólfr courts the favor of Prince Eiríkr with some success, but King Haraldr, now advanced in years, warns his son that the Mýramenn are very arrogant and that Eiríkr will live to regret his new friendship (ÍF 2:93). Eiríkr persists nonetheless and sends an ax to Iceland as a gift for Skalla-Grímr, who receives it in meditative silence. When Þórólfr prepares to set sail once more, his father warns that he is not likely to return and sends the ax back with a dismissive stanza. Þórólfr conceals the hostile gesture by throwing the ax overboard and giving Eiríkr a sail, ostensibly as a reciprocal gift from Skalla-Grímr. This system of silence speaks louder than words about the deep rift between the two families.

As it turns out, Þórólfr does not fall victim to the feud, but succumbs in battle in the service of King Æthelstan of England. It is left to his younger brother Egill to take up the family cudgel. Egill responds to a magic attempt on his life by killing Eiríkr's steward Bárðr in a scene of drunken confusion (ÍF 2:106-11). Þórir Hróaldsson notes Egill's hereditary propensity to underestimate the king's wrath, and Eiríkr bursts out in a belated recognition of the truth in his father's words

and the realization that the Mýramenn are not to be trusted. His wife Gunnhildr later specifies the threat by predicting that Skalla-Grímr's progeny will ultimately kill some of his close kin (ÍF 2:123).

It is at this juncture that the lead passes into the hands of Gunnhildr, who becomes the most implacable enemy of the Mýramenn. She instructs her brothers Eyvindr skreyja and Álfr askmaðr to waylay one or both of Skalla-Grímr's sons, but they succeed only in killing two of Þórólfr's men. In retaliation Egill seizes Eyvindr's ships, though Eyvindr himself is able to escape. At this point there is no hope of reconciliation. King Æthelstan suggests that it would be best for Egill to stay in England, and Arinbjörn warns him not to settle in Norway as long as Gunnhildr holds sway.

Prudence is not part of Egill's nature, and he exacerbates the quarrel by going to law with a certain Berg-Önundr in order to recover an inheritance to which he feels entitled. Unabashed, he appeals to King Eiríkr to give him the benefit of the law, and surprisingly Eiríkr does so (ÍF 2:152). Egill cites the case to the Gulapíng, where Berg-Önundr feels confident in the protection of king and queen, and where Gunnhildr in fact breaks up the court when it seems about to find in favor of Egill. With the peaceful remedies exhausted, Egill challenges Berg-Önundr to a duel but is overborne by Eiríkr. Egill then departs with a thunderous denunciation of the legal breaches. Eiríkr is determined to kill him at the first opportunity, but Egill turns the tables and kills one of the king's men before escaping. The king must be content to outlaw Egill in the whole length of Norway.

That seems only to inspire Egill to greater outrages. He kills Berg-Önundr in an ingeniously designed nocturnal ambush, then kills the king's foster son Fróði to boot. These killings are followed up by twelve more, which include the king's own son Rognvaldr, and Egill concludes his campaign by planting a scorn pole to spite and curse Eiríkr and Gunnhildr. Ostensibly as a result they lose their foothold in Norway and go to York, where Gunnhildr exercises her magic in order to lure Egill from Iceland. He is now at the mercy of his archenemies, who, though it taxes the reader's credulity, allow him to return to Iceland.

The story of Egill and Eiríkr is balanced on a sword's edge. It is no longer possible to conclude simply that the Norwegian king has wronged an Icelander. At several junctures Eiríkr seems almost implausibly patient. At others Egill seems wantonly overreactive and

litigious. There is always some reason for his action, but often no necessity. He does not *need* to kill the steward Bárðr. He does not *need* to prosecute Berg-Qnundr in the teeth of such obvious, and not unjustified, royal disfavor. He certainly does not need to kill the king's foster son and plant a scorn pole. At some point Egill simply goes too far and vindicates the royal opinion that his family is congenitally dangerous and not to be trusted.

On the other hand, Eiríkr is remarkably restrained in allowing Egill access to the courts, and spectacularly so in letting Egill out of his clutches in York. There are also signs of a conscious authorial strategy to shift royal aggressiveness from Eiríkr to his notorious wife Gunnhildr. To be sure, Haraldr hárfagri was also subjected to malicious advice in his dealing with Þórólfr Kveldúlfsson, but the reader feels that he should have penetrated the deception easily. In Eiríkr's case there appears to be no malice but rather a genuine instinct for leniency.

How, then, are we to understand the clash between Egill and Eiríkr? Who bears the primary responsibility? Surely it is Egill. We are left with the impression that a more moderate and circumspect Egill could have gotten most of what he wanted. It is only his uncompromising and unreflective nature that stands in the way of his wishes. But how does that recognition accord with the anti-royal rhetoric aimed at Haraldr hárfagri earlier in the saga? Is the author moderating his view of the Norwegian crown as he progresses, or is he illustrating the idea from *Morkinskinna* that some kings are good and others bad? Or is he perhaps serving notice that the circumstances of the original alienation of the nobles in the days of Haraldr hárfagri are not duplicated in every generation, and that the aggression can sometimes be laid at the doorstep of the provincials?

Perhaps we must conclude that the saga does no more than state that there has been (or once was) a long-standing feud between the Mýramenn and the house of Haraldr hárfagri. Perhaps the thrust is purely historical, and not political in the sense that it suggests an ongoing disaffection between Icelanders (represented by one clan) and the Norwegian throne (represented by Haraldr and his sons). The idea that history is variable and that circumstances change may be supported by Egill's experience with King Hákon Aðalsteinsfóstri. Egill brings his inheritance case before Hákon, who, though mindful of the injury done his kin, allows him access to the law, just as Eiríkr

had done. Not content with that, Egill presses for another inheritance, which King Hákon has already seized. Arinbjörn once more intercedes for his friend, but Hákon's patience is exhausted and nothing comes of his efforts. Once more Egill seems to have pressed his claims beyond reason.

Egill's final contact with the Norwegian king comes about indirectly. Hákon decides to send a certain Þorsteinn Eiríksson to Värmland on a perilous mission to collect overdue taxes. Egill assumes the task on his behalf and carries it out with legendary prowess. Hákon is reconciled with Þorsteinn, and Egill returns to Iceland. The author makes the significant comment that there is no mention of further duels or slayings after Egill settled down in Iceland (ÍF 2:257). It is as if trouble is confined to the Norwegian scene and vanishes in a more orderly and less autocratic Icelandic environment.

There is, however, one final indication that autocracy is not restricted to Norway. In advanced old age Egill reappears one more time in all his chieftainly authority to settle a quarrel between his son Þorsteinn and a certain Steinarr Önundarson. He settles it dictatorially, invoking historical privilege on the basis that all the land in the district was distributed in the form of gifts from his father Skalla-Grímr. In other words, the Mýramenn retain a kind of moral title to the land and the right to retract what they once bestowed. This is a final, highly questionable, example of Egill's propensity to give himself every possible benefit of the law in support of his own claims. His claim is comparable to the earlier ones in Norway, to the extent that both are historical in nature. Egill severs his ties with Norway but is not deterred from pursuing his interests there. He will forego no right because his rights are grounded in history. The Mýramenn are a historical entity, coeval with the centralized monarchy in Norway and therefore coentitled. In historical terms at least, the conflict between the Mýramenn and the Norwegian crown is a confrontation of equals.

It is difficult to determine which side the author favors in this conflict. Haraldr hárfagri is, at the very least, flawed in his judgment, but Eiríkr and Hákon are by no means portrayed negatively. It is therefore not possible to align *Egils saga* with *Jómsvíkinga saga* as anti-royalist, or with *Orkneyinga saga* as royalist. It must be sufficient to say that *Egils saga*, along with the other "political sagas," deals with the issue of relations between kings and provincial chieftains.

Conclusion

How does the thrust of *Egils saga* conform to the tone of the kings' sagas in the period 1220–1230? *Morkinskinna* distinguished dramatically between kings in pursuit of foreign glory (Haraldr harðráði, Magnús berfœttr, and Sigurðr Jórsalafari) and those devoted to domestic prosperity (Magnús góði, Óláfr kyrri, and Eysteinn Magnússon). At the same time the prototype of the foreign adventurer type, Haraldr harðráði, is burdened with a series of episodes in which he does not quite measure up to individual Icelanders. The Icelandic bias in *Morkinskinna* thus seems quite palpable. It patronizes with political advice and invidious comparisons. It suggests that good kings attend to the welfare of their countrymen and that bad kings covet foreign lands.

That message does not coincide with *Egils saga*, in which the Norwegian kings are not embroiled in foreign adventures. On the other hand, Haraldr hárfagri is critically portrayed, and Eiríkr is embarrassed by Egill to an even greater degree than Haraldr harðráði is embarrassed by his Icelandic visitors. The collision between royal authority and Icelandic assertiveness is about equally pronounced in both texts. *Heimskringla*, as we have seen, takes a different view of the Norwegian monarchy. Haraldr hárfagri is toned down in comparison with *Egils saga* and is no longer quite so inexorable in his campaign against the petty kings.⁴⁰ In those portions of *Heimskringla* dependent on *Morkinskinna* there is also a programmatic moderation of the aggressive qualities proper to the foreign adventurer type in *Morkinskinna*, as well as an elimination of the subversive *þættir* that were so calculatedly compromising for Haraldr harðráði in the earlier work. The practical question that confronts us here is whether *Egils saga* is more nearly associated with the stage of Icelandic literature represented by *Morkinskinna* around 1220 or with the stage that evolved a decade later in *Heimskringla*.⁴¹

Although the political sensibility in *Egils saga* by no means matches the contrastive paradigm in *Morkinskinna*, it nonetheless betrays the same preoccupation with heavily charged relations between Norwegian kings and notable Icelanders. The author of *Egils saga* has the same general perspective as the author of *Morkinskinna*, one that subsumes Norway and Iceland and is focused on the interaction between the two. *Heimskringla* simplifies that perspective and no longer implicates

Iceland in Norwegian affairs. It therefore seems more likely that *Egils saga* belongs to the earlier literary stage around 1220 rather than the later one around 1230.

This chronology remains no more than a plausibility among others. There is no reason why two somewhat contradictory books like *Egils saga* and *Heimskringla* could not have been written at the same time around 1230, even if they were written by the same author (for example, Snorri). One could have been written primarily for an Icelandic readership, the other primarily for a Norwegian readership. Nor is it impossible that the author could have abandoned the political neutrality of *Heimskringla* in order to write a more problematical book on the Icelandic experience of Norway some years later, perhaps as late as 1240. But the best guess might be that *Egils saga* was written in the heat generated by the Icelandic-Norwegian trade war of 1215–1220 and that it embodies a new sense of Icelandic identity and assertiveness engendered by recent history.

