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ORKNEYINGA SAGA - PATRONAGE AND AUTHORSHIP

I

This paper offers a re-assessment of certain aspects of Orkneyinga Saga in its original form - the element of patronage, if any, that was involved in its preparation, the character of the author, and his identity¹.

Scholars have so far agreed that this saga can be divided into six main parts, of which three form what survives of the "original". The contents of these six parts are as follows:

I A pseudo-mythological prologue.

II The first eighteen earls, the last and greatest being Thorfinn; c.900-1065.

III The next six earls, notably Earl Magnús the Saint and Hákon Pálsson who had him put to death; 1065-1130.

IV The Miracle-book of Saint Magnús.

V Earls Rognvald Kali, Páll, Erlend, and Harald Maddaðarson; c.1103-1192.

VI Earl Maddaðarson and his sons; c.1190-1214.

Parts II, III and V can be dated from internal evidence as having been completed c.1192-1206. Parts I, IV and VI were added, probably at different times, in the first

half of the thirteenth century. Parts II, III and V taken together, therefore, are what we now have of the "original" saga, and in this paper will be referred to as "the Saga".

The sources of the Saga are many and various. They include lost written sagas of the kings of Norway, several family genealogies, a Latin life of Saint Magnús, over eighty skaldic verses and a great deal of oral testimony.

From internal evidence it is clear that the author was an Icelander, and his work purports to be a history in literary form.

The early date of the Saga and its ambitious conception render it a fascinating subject for study. My translation and commentary of 1938 have long been out of print, and I have in preparation a new translation and a greatly revised study of its historical and literary characteristics. The present paper gives the result of some studies of patronage and authorship by myself and others.

II

Any Icelander writing this long and detailed history of the distant Orkney earldom must have found it a time-consuming, arduous and expensive task. The anonymous

author may have been actuated by a simple urge to write a history on a subject of his own choice. But it is more likely that he was commissioned, or encouraged, to do so by a patron.

A historian in medieval Europe commonly had a noble patron unless he lived in a monastery or had his own ecclesiastical income.

If we are to look for a noble patron, we must first consider Harald Maddaðarson, a sole earl from 1158 to 1206. Between 1185 and 1190, King Sverrir commissioned a saga about himself from Abbot Karl Jónsson of Þingeyrar while Karl was on a visit to Norway. Independently, or possibly in imitation of Sverrir, Harald could have commissioned a visiting Icelander to write a saga to illustrate the dignity of the long line of earls who had preceded him and the independence of the earldom. Bishop Bjarni of Orkney, who assisted him in diplomatic matters, might have so advised him, for Harald and Sverrir were very far from being on good terms, as ch. 112 of the Saga shows.

This general argument is supported by some evidence of a slightly pro-Harald attitude in two passages of the Saga. The first consists of the final sentences in chs. 52 and 53 where the author rehabilitates the

character of Earl Hákon Pálsson, who has appeared in the preceding death-story of Earl Magnús as a traitor and murderer. It is all rather forced, and may have been written so as not to offend Harald, who was Hákon's grandson. The second passage is in the latter half of ch. 103 where Harald himself, caught unawares by the killing of his co-earl Rognvald Kali is shown skilfully steering a difficult course between the pressures of rival groups of chieftains.

These passages, however, might also be attributed to the Icelandic saga-writer's habit of presenting more than one side of a situation involving moral issues. It will also be observed that, except in this last passage, Harald nowhere holds the centre of the narrative stage; and indeed after he became sole earl this place is held in chs. 105-8 by Svein Ásleifarson of Gairsay.

Although possible, therefore, Harald's patronage is not proved. Still less probable is that of Bishop Bjarni who, if he had commissioned the Saga, would surely have required more ecclesiastical matter than it in fact contains. Both, however, cannot but have been aware of its preparation, and probably helped with information and perhaps hospitality on a visit by the author. The author's accurate knowledge of the Earl's Hall at Orphir in ch. 66 could have been acquired only by a stay there.

The Saga shows no particular leaning towards a Norwegian point of view, and we therefore turn to Iceland to look for a patron. There were three centres of scholarship in the south of Iceland, Haukadalur, Skálaholt and Oddi. Oddi claims attention because it had been a school for historical, legal and other studies since at least the time of Sæmund the Learned (d.1133)². There were family connections between the family of Oddi - the Oddaverjar - and the Orkney earls, and there were comings and goings between the two families round about 1200. Einar Ól. Sveinsson has described these connections and the following account leans largely upon him³.

In the 1190s Oddi was in the hands of Jón Loftsson, grandson of Sæmund the Learned; and Jón was succeeded on his death in 1197 by his son Sæmund (d.1222). In his time, Jón was one of the leading men in Iceland, and at Oddi he was a patron of letters. His family connection with the Orkney line was of long standing. According to ch. 6 and a corresponding passage in Landnámabók, Hrollaug, brother of Earl Turf-Einar, migrated from Norway to Iceland and founded an honourable family there. Hrollaug, according to Landnámabók, was also the progenitor of the Oddaverjar.

The many voyages between Iceland and the islands mentioned in other sagas include several about the time when this Saga was being composed. Bishop Páll, another son of Jón Loftsson, stayed with Harald Maddaðarson on his way to study in England in the 1180s. Loft, son of Bishop Páll, visited Bishop Bjarni in Orkney while on a voyage abroad, about 1209-10. Before 1206, some Orkney merchants stayed a winter with Snorri Sturluson at Borg and later with Sæmund at Oddi. Their leader was Thorkel Walrus, son of Kolbein Hrúga and brother of Bishop Bjarni. Soon afterwards there were negotiations between Harald and Sæmund with a view to Harald's giving him his daughter Langlíf in marriage; but the matter fell through because Sæmund would not go to Orkney and Harald would not send his daughter to Iceland.⁴

Here at Oddi, therefore, one would expect to find some of the author's sources, such as a saga of Turf-Einar, an early collection of Lives of the Kings of Norway, one or two skalds with repertories of court poetry, and perhaps Master Roðbert's Vita Sancti Magni. Here he might have been encouraged by Jón Loftsson, or someone else in the household, to start and to carry through his long work. Here he might also have received suitable messages of introduction to descendants of Kol Kalason

in Norway and to Earl Harald and Bishop Bjarni in Orkney.

If this theory of sponsorship in Iceland and local investigation in the earldom is correct, it would explain among other things how the Saga seems to be directed primarily to an Icelandic audience and only secondarily to an audience in the islands.

At this point we may digress to see whether any other informants can be reasonably identified. For the adventures of Svein, the most likely informant is his son Andrew, married to Friða, daughter of Kolbein Hróga, and probably resident in Svein's hall in Gairsay (chs. 92, 108). Svein's father Ólaf had held an estate at Duncansby; and the author very probably gained his considerable knowledge of places, events and persons in Caithness on a stay with a descendant of Olaf at the farm there. From Duncansby it would be easy for him to ride to Thurso, trace out the fatal journey made by Rognvald Kali to his death at Forsie (ch. 103), and explore the fortress and cliffs at Freswick from which Svein and Margað climbed down to the sea (ch. 83).

There is another family whose members, as Finnbogi Guðmundsson brings out, are especially mentioned as actually present at a number of important episodes⁵. This family consists of Hávarð Gunnason and his sons

Magnús, Thorstein, Dufnjal and Hákon Claw. Hávarð is chief peacemaker between Hákon Pálsson and the sons of Earl Erlend (ch. 35), and leaps overboard dramatically from Hákon's ship on the way to Egilsay when he discovers that Hákon is about to play the traitor to Magnús (ch. 48). His sons Thorstein and Magnús are given posts as wardens in the North Isles by Earl Páll when Rognvald Kali's invasion is imminent (ch. 66). Thorstein is named as one of the two mediators in the truce between the earls (ch. 73). Rognvald Kali appoints Dufnjal as captain of a ship given to Svein (ch. 82). Magnús is captain of one of the ships on the pilgrimage (ch. 85). Magnús, Thorstein and Hákon Claw play a very important part in turning Earl Maddaðarson against the killers of Rognvald Kali (ch. 103). All of this leads to the conclusion that one of these four sons was an important informant - or more than one of them.

It is more difficult to put a name to the author than to some of his informants. Some of the attempts to do so will be discussed. But the first step is to find out what the Saga itself tells us about the kind of man he was.

First and foremost, he must have been a man of sufficient social status and personality to move at ease

among noble families in Norway and the west to collect his material. In his last chapter (ch. 108) he reveals a significant respect for rank; Svein, he says, was the greatest "among men not above his own rank". He was a bookish person, and must have learned his letters in a monastery or from a family priest. He was a skilled genealogist and probably something of a skald. His preoccupation with political intrigue suggests that he was himself involved in such conflict in his own country; historical research has been a not uncommon avocation of men of affairs at all period of history.

It is not clear whether he was a cleric or a layman. If we take the original Saga, Parts II, III and V only, and exclude two or three "pious" interpolations, we find evidence in it of both pagan and Christian elements but of a neutral sort of attitude towards them.

The pagan elements include the ceremonial killing by blood-eagle (ch. 8), magic raven-banners (chs. 11, 12), a magic shirt (ch. 55), soothsaying (chs. 9, 36), Svein's second sight (chs. 77, 93), Svein Breast-rope's "outsittings" (ch. 66); some bad omens such as Rognvald Brúsason's slip of the tongue (ch. 29) and the wave that broke over Magnús's boat (ch. 47); and the concept of innate luck : "Hávarð was a good ruler, lucky in his

härvests" (ch. 9), "Thorkel was a lucky man and fated to live longer" (ch. 16), and Svein Breast-rope who was "rather unlucky-looking" (ch. 65), like Skarpheðin in Brennu-Njáls Saga.

Apart from the story of St Magnús, the church and churchmen do not play a central part. Bishop William appears briefly at intervals. Bishop John of Atholl visits the islands and the author describes the episode with scant reverence (ch. 77). Other episodes are the enforced baptism of Sigurð the Stout, the pilgrimages of Thorfinn and Hákon Pálsson to Rome, and the visits of Rognvald Kali to holy places in Palestine. There are occasional references to the various services of the church.

These episodes and topics do not seem to be important to the author as matters involving belief. They have the appearance of being merely part of his thematic material, requiring no comment. It is true that he gives a hint of disapproval of Svein Breast-rope's "out-sittings" when he quotes the Bishop's remark that his death was "a good riddance". He also seems to have his tongue in his cheek when he tells the story of the Swedish soothsayer (ch. 36). Generally, however, his attitude is one of detachment.

Allied to his detached attitude is his avoidance of explicit moral judgments. For the most part he takes conflict and killing as inescapable elements in human life. One can sense through his reticence, however, a clear disapproval of treacherous killings, and he lifts this reticence once in an expression of unease about the fate of Earl Páll (ch. 75).

It would be reading too much into the evidence to call him a sceptic or a twelfth-century humanist. He could be described more safely as a worldly man. If he was a cleric, he must have had a strongly secular side to his personality. A man like this could have lived at Oddi or within easy reach of it. Sæmund, son of the great Jón, could himself have been the author, or even his brother Bishop Páll; both are known to have travelled abroad and might have visited the Orkney earldom in the 1190s or earlier. In 1938, I suggested Sighvat Sturluson (1170-1238), Snorri's brother. He might have made the usual young man's voyages abroad in the 1190s, and would have had access to historical writings at Snorri's house at Reykjaholt or even at Oddi; but he seems less probable than a man more closely connected with the Oddi family.

Finnbogi Guðmundsson makes a detailed case for a northerner, in the person of Ingimund the Priest, son

of Thorgeir Hallason of Hvassafell in Eyjafjörður⁶. Space permits only a summary of his fascinating array of evidence, most of it drawn from the Saga itself and from Sturlunga Saga. Like the Oddaverjar, Ingimund's family was descended from Hrollaug. There was another, more recent, family connection with Orkney, suggested by the marriage of Ingimund's niece Guðný to Eric Hákonarson of Orkney. Ingimund was a scholarly man; he rescued and dried out a chest of books after a shipwreck in 1180, and left them with a foster-son when going abroad a few years later. He was in Norway in 1165; in Nidaros with Abbot Karl in 1185; and in Bergen and England in 1188. He could thus have made at least one visit to Orkney. He died after a shipwreck in Greenland in 1189.

The identification of Ingimund as the author, however, presents certain difficulties. He has no apparent connection with Oddi. The period 1165-1189 is rather early for the composition of the Saga. It requires us to assume that the reference in ch. 104 to Rognvald Kali's canonisation in 1192 is a later interpolation, and this is possible, although not textually probable. Many of the sources, including Eric Oddsson, would be available at this period, but it is not certain that the main collection of Kings' Lives that the author used could have been written by then. The style of the Saga is also more mature than seems likely at this period;

although this may be arguable.

In a review of Finnbogi Guðmundsson's edition, Hermann Pálsson presents a case for another northerner, Snorri Grímsson, who was brought up at Hof in Skagafjörður and whose story is told in Sturlunga Saga and Biskupa Sögur⁷. Snorri's mother was of good family. She was sister of Ingimund the Priest and aunt of the learned Bishop Guðmund Arason, and also aunt of the Guðný already mentioned as making an Orkney marriage. Snorri had a clerical education and was ordained as a deacon, but had to leave home in 1192 as the result of involvement in a local lawsuit. He went south to Oddi, presumably at the invitation of Jón Loptsson. He was killed in another struggle between rival leaders in 1208. The notice of his death in Sturlunga Saga describes him as "an intelligent man and a popular one". He was thus resident at or connected with Oddi throughout the time when the Saga was written. He could also have visited the Orkney earldom during this period, perhaps as an envoy of Jón for the purpose of furthering the Sæmund-Langlíf marriage. Snorri Sturluson was being brought up at Oddi as a foster-son while Snorri Grímsson was there; and as Snorri Sturluson afterwards made use of the Saga in his Heimskringla, this strengthens further the connection between the Saga and Oddi at this particular period.

The canonisation of Rognvald Kali in 1192 took place about the time of Snorri Grímsson's arrival at Oddi and may have prompted a start to a saga of the Orkney earls.

This is a very plausible case. It might be added that the author's premature death in 1208 would explain why the original Saga did not include a full-length sub-saga of Harald Maddaðarson. But other scholars may still suggest other plausible solutions.

I prefer, therefore, to rest content with the general picture of the author that we obtain from reading his work - a scholarly Icelander who belonged to the school of Oddi which provided him with intellectual stimulus, much source material, and possibly financial and other assistance for journeying abroad, and who - almost a generation before Snorri - composed a long and detailed historical saga in literary form.

NOTES

1. Text: Finnbogi Guðmundsson, Orkneyinga Saga (Íslensk Fornrit XXXIV, Reykjavík 1965).
Translation: A.B.Taylor, The Orkneyinga Saga: a new translation with introduction and notes (Edinburgh 1938).
2. G.Turville-Petre, Origins of Icelandic Literature (Oxford 1953).
3. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Sagnaritun Oddaverja (Reykjavík 1937), 16-39; "Orkney-Shetland-Iceland", The Viking Congress, proceedings ed. D.Simpson (Edinburgh 1954), 271-83.
4. Biskupa Sögur (Copenhagen 1858-78), I, 127, 143.
Sturlunga Saga (Reykjavík 1946), I, 240-242.
5. Orkneyinga Saga (1965), cvii-xcx.
6. Op.cit., xc-cvi
7. Hermann Pálsson, Tímarit Máls og Menningar XXVI (1965), 98-100; also in Tólfta Úldin (Reykjavík 1970), 21-31.