

VISIONS OF SOVEREIGNTY IN SNORRI STURLUSON'S *HEIMSKRINGLA*

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Preliminary Visions

Lurking off the Atlantic coast of Gibraltar, fresh from winning his fourteenth battle and contemplating a voyage to Jerusalem, Ólafur Haraldsson awakens to recount a remarkable dream:

að til hans kom merkilegur maður og þektilegur og þó égurlegur og mælti við hann, það hann hættu ætlan þeirri að fara út í lönd. “Far aftur til óðala þinna því að þú munt vera konungur yfir Noregi að eilífu.” (OH 18)

Ólafur was already called “konungur” by his crew, a custom started in his twelfth year, as he began his viking career. Snorri tells us that this was the practice for warriors “er þeir voru konungbornir”; and while someone else actually held the oar, “en hann var þó konungur yfir liðinu.” (OH 4)

Snorri follows the same convention, referring in his narrative to “Ólafur konungur” prior to his taking regal possession of Norway. An even more exalted status awaits this warrior who eventually becomes Ólafur helgi. But let us stay longer with the dream, this vision that Snorri dutifully reports. It reminds us of two equally remarkable visions surrounding Ólafur’s predecessors. Haraldur hárfagri’s birth was preceded by his mother’s vision of a great tree:

er hinn neðsti hlutur trésins var rauður sem blóð en þá var leggurinn upp frá fagur og grænn, að það jartegndi blóma ríkis hans. En að ofanverðu var hvítt tréið. Þar sýndist það að hann mundi fá elli og hæru. Kvistir og límar trésins boðuðu afkvæmi hans er um allt land draifðist og af hans ætt hafa verið jafnan síðan konungar í Noregi. (HHár 44)

Dreams did not come quite so easily to Hálfdan svartí; but after professional advice sends him to the pigsty, he produces another regal dream for Snorri’s narrative:

Honum sýndist sem hann væri allra manna best hærður og var hár hans allt í lokkum, sumir síðir svo að tók til jarðar, sumir í miðjan legg, sumir á kné, sumir í mjöðm eða miðja síðu, sumir eigi lengra en á háls en sumir ekki meir en spröttmír upp úr hausi sem knýflar. En á lokkum hans var hvers kyns litur. En einn lokkur sigraði alla við fegurð og með ljósleik og mikilleik.

Þenna draum sagði hann Þorleifi spaka en Þorleifur þýddi svo að mikill afspringur mundi koma af honum og mundu hans ættmenn löndum ráða með miklum vig og þó eigi allir með jafri frægð, en einn mundi sá af hans ætt koma er öllum mundi meiri og frægari. Og hyggja menn það að sá lokkur jarteini hinn helga Ólaf konung. (HS 7)

What are these visions about?

These literal visions of sovereign kings blend easily into Snorri’s sagas, but they also raise intriguing questions that point beyond the letter of the text. Behind his sweeping account of Norwegian rulers, what was Snorri’s implicit understanding of *sovereignty*? This is a question we should like to ask, reflecting our contemporary preoccupations with a complex political

term: one with a colorful history. Snorri's contribution must be carefully solicited, because the modern concept of sovereignty did not appear in theoretical dress until the sixteenth (Bodin) and seventeenth (Hobbes) centuries. Moreover, our own century has uncovered quite new complications surrounding sovereignty, in a world where nation-states suddenly appear to be losing their dominant position of power. We cannot pretend that Snorri is a full participant in today's topical debates, but there can still be much to learn from his account of rulership in *Heimskringla*.

Snorri's work provides an opportunity to examine certain prototype notions of supreme authority, prior to the historical achievements in state-building that motivated Bodin and Hobbes to formalize the theory of sovereignty. Indeed we may profit from the fact that Snorri's angle of vision is quite different from ours, originating from a period before the rise of the modern nation-state, and in that part of Europe where political development came later than anywhere else. Snorri's historical remove allows us to separate the basic idea of sovereignty—some notion of the highest legal and political authority within a given territory—from the state institutions that eventually came to dominate that sovereign role. What can we learn about such authority, absent its inherence in a formal state, and how did it appear to thoughtful men like Snorri?

There is no reason to disguise our contemporary stake in such questions, based on the rapidly shifting international social order. Our challenge today is to start dissociating sovereignty and the nation-states that have represented it for centuries. In Snorri we may find useful presumptions or premonitions of how sovereign authority can be realized in alternative forms.

The problem of sovereignty

There are no settled definitions of sovereignty applicable to all times, places, and conceptual frameworks. For purposes of this paper, the essential concept is that of a highest or supreme authority, rooted in the secular world. (Hinsley 1986, 22-26) Sovereignty is thus to be distinguished from the divine power exercised by a single god or pantheon of gods, whatever the problematic relationship between these separate orders. It is also to be distinguished from the more impersonal authority of destiny or fate, to which Snorri likewise sets firm boundaries. The sovereignty we are looking for is something separate from these divine or mythical orders: put in positive terms, it is supreme authority vested in human agency. It is not, however, to be identified simply with the actions of any recognized king or ruler, or even a ruling oligarchy. Despite the strong arguments advanced by Hobbes in favor of monarchy as the wisest mode of sovereignty, theorists from Rousseau, to Madison, to Hegel have identified sovereignty more generally with normative structures (consisting of laws, moral rules, or constitutions), to which the particular will of kings or other rulers is clearly subordinated.

We will never know how many of these conceptual possibilities inhabited the remote corners of Snorri's imagination. By turning to his work, we need to put intervening notions aside, thinking our way back to a time before "sovereignty" became a theoretical topic. (Bartelson 1995, 88-107) In this paper I seek concrete examples—call them *anticipations* or *visions*—of supreme authority in action: the highest secular "court of appeal," as it were, beyond which human beings cannot turn in regulating the social order. Fully developed theories underlying this modern secular order had to wait until the 16th century, although early formulations already appeared in the 13th-century writings of Marsilius of Padua, among others. (Black 1992) In Snorri, however, I am searching for something pre-theoretical: images, analogies,

dramatic episodes that point in the direction of later concepts. To pose such questions at all, quite clearly, I must acknowledge the broad presumption that certain conceptual continuities tie Snorri's age to our own; that we are not trapped in utterly separate mentalités, as Steblin-Kamenskij so forcefully maintained. At the same time, the whole reason for starting down this road is to rediscover sovereignty from an entirely new perspective, one that predates the rise of modern nation-states.

Snorri's account of sovereign functions

My examples can be grouped around five recurring functions that Snorri associates with the distinctive role of kings, functions that set his rulers apart from other powerful saga figures. All five enter into conceptual debates of later centuries, and they also figure prominently in recent historical analyses of state-building activities. (see generally Tilly 1975)

(1) *Promoting socio-economic prosperity.* While far from asserting strict causal connections, Snorri often associates the ruler's conduct with cycles of socio-economic advance or decline. The precise nature of this link is important to Snorri, who recognizes both cosmic and practical forces binding the ruler to the economic health of the larger society. While not rejecting the possible evidence of divine judgments, however, Snorri also finds secular reasons for a particular regime's success or failure. Where prevailing traditions may speak in terms of fate, Snorri generally comments on linear consequences of the ruler's concrete policies: harsh methods of tax collection, failure to protect coastal populations from foreign raids, ill-advised agricultural ventures, over-extended foreign campaigns.

The pattern is first noted in *Ynglinga saga*, concerning Önundur Yngvarsson, who was "allra konunga vinsæstur." "Um hans daga var ár mikið í Svíþjóðu," and it seems that Önundur's ambitious program of timber management and road-building was as much the cause as the effect of his success. (Yngl 33) Later in this saga, Snorri digs deeper into the connection between rulers and prosperity. While acknowledging that the ruler's function is both symbolic and practical, Snorri differentiates clearly between these two modes of explanation in his story about the Swedish ruler, Ólafur trételgja, another leader who made his mark through shrewd forest management.

Það ver mikill mannföldi er... spurðu að Ólafur trételgja hafði landskosti góða á Vermalandi og dreif þannug til hans svo mikill mannföldi að landið fékk eigi borið. Gerðist þar hallæri mikið og sultur. Kenndu þeir það konungi sínum, svo sem Svíar eru vanir að kenna konungi bæði ár og hallæri.... Þeir er vitrari voru af Svíum fundu þá að það olli hallærinu að mannfólkið var meira en landið mætti bera en konunger hafði engu um valdið. (Yngl 43)

On the other side of the balance sheet are the harsh conditions that are properly attributed to bad ruling. In *Haralds saga gráfeldar*, Snorri passes judgment on the contentious era when Norway was in the hands of the sons of Eiríkr blóðöx. "Þá er Gunnhildarsynir réðu fyrir Noregi gerðist hallæri mikið og var því meira að sem þeir höfðu lengur verið yfir landi. En búendur kenndu það konungum og því með að konungar voru fégjarnir og varð harður réttur bónda. (Hgrá 16)

There is no reason to treat Snorri as a philosopher who formally rejects all cosmic judgments on earthly rulers, as manifested in the fate of crops and livestock. His vision, however, points clearly toward more secular judgments, in which socio-economic conditions are traced back

through a causal chain to the wisdom or moral character of the ruler. To the extent these stories point toward sovereignty, they suggest a perspective on supreme authority that includes both independent power and moral accountability. Historians of state-building could discover in Snorri's secular approach a foreshadowing of Weberian rationality—that seemingly inexorable force that produced modern administrative science, and that now threatens to engulf inefficient nation-states in the process of global transformation. (see Held 1995, 59-66)

(2) *Declaring the law and abiding by it.* In *Hálfðanar saga svarta*, Snorri records the judgment that “Hálfðan konungur var viskumaður mikill og sanninda og jafnaður og setti lög og gætti sjálfur og þrýsti öllum til að gæta og að eigi mætti ofsi steypa lögnum. Gerði han sjálfur saktal og skipaði hann bótum hverjum eftir sínum burð og metnaði.” (HS 8) The authoring of laws was the key to political authority in classical political theory, and it became the touchstone of sovereignty in modern thinkers like Bodin. Other prominent law-givers include Hákon góði, who sponsored the Gulapingslög and Frostapingslög (HG 11); while Ólafur helgi's legal prowess earned the praise of the Icelandic skald Sighvatur Þórðarson:

Lofþyggir, máttu leggja
landsrét þann er skal standast,
unnar, allra manna,
eykja, liðs á miðli. (OH 58)

The most interesting issue here is the ruler's reciprocal duty to abide by law, which distinguishes the legitimacy of sovereign power from the mere exercise of will or force. (Hinsley 1986, 107) Thus the Swedish king Ólafur sænski Eiríksson is condemned by “hina vitrustu menn” in East Gautland for his dealings with Emundur af Skörum, law-speaker and spokesman for Norwegian settlers from points west: “og kom það allt ásamt með þeim og þótti mönnum það siðlausu og löglausu er konungur gerði við þá.” This hapless king eventually asks for advice about how to retain his royal office, and is sternly advised to gather the populace to a meeting, and “farið nú ekki með stírlæti, bjóðið mönnum lög og landsrét, drepið miður herórinni.” (OH 94)

Such obligations of rulership are sometimes eloquently put forward by representatives of popular assemblies, speaking on behalf of customary rights of fair treatment. As the participants in the Frostaping tell Hákon góði, “Viljum vér allir þér fylgja og þig til konungs halda meðan einhver er lífs bóndanna, þeirra er hér eru nú á þinginu, ef þú konungur vilt nokkuð hóf við hafa að beiða oss þess eins er vér megum veita þér og oss sé eigi ógeranda.” (HG 15) The bold legal innovations of Haraldur hárfagri were seen as oppression by the farmers who were forced to surrender ancestral lands—events recalled as ignominious by numerous saga descriptions of the exodus from Norway and subsequent settlement in Iceland. Haraldur was not a mere law-breaker, but the creator of a new legal order, based on administrative reforms that anticipate later state-building activities. (HHár 6)

Confrontations over unpopular royal commands figure heavily throughout Snorri's work, especially in clashes between a traditional legal order tied to heathen practices, and the efforts by both Ólafurs to impose Christianity. Ólafur Tryggvason is told bluntly by the Trondheim chieftains, “að konungur bryti ekki lög á þeim. ‘Viljum vér konungur... að þú blótir sem hér hafa gert aðrir konungar fyrir þér.’” (OT 68) In these disputes, which echo the property battles instigated by Haraldur hárfagri, the king deliberately imposes what he sees as a superior system of law, higher than the mere customs of an earlier social order. Complaints of

lawlessness thus arise in strategic opposition to the king's higher jurisdiction, and are generally answered by the sort of idol-smashing Ólafur unleashes on the Trondheim chiefs. Even greater intolerance gets turned against sorcery and other supernatural powers. Snorri's narrative presents the full tension between competing standards of lawfulness. For my purposes, the sheer novelty of the royal legal standard is more important here than the king's rhetorical appeal to divine authority; it speaks to the king's aspirations to exercise supreme authority, which nonetheless obeys its own legal standards. (Hinsley 1986, 107) At the same time, sheer wilfulness and cruelty in christianization overstep the line of lawful supremacy, as Ólafur Tryggvason seems to acknowledge in hearing Icelanders' accounts of Þangbrandur prestur's heavy-handed conversion efforts in their country. (OT 84)

(3) *Resolving disputes and combatting factions.* Pervasive disputes provide the central drama for displaying nearly everything we know about the culture that produced medieval sagas. All the kings in Snorri's work play familiar saga roles in protracted feuds, exploit rifts in the population, harry the coastlines far and wide, and basically find their place in the common matrix of social strife. But there are also some distinctive features of their role, superimposed on the crafted tensions of saga narrative. The capacity to broker disputes and put an end to escalating strife is a rare and prized quality in the sagas, and such gifts enter into the inchoate version of sovereignty found in *Heimskringla*. Ólafur helgi, for example, brokers one such dispute between two claimants to a northerly island, basing his decision on competent evidence supplied by reliable witnesses. The loser, although receiving no compensation, declares "að honum var skammlaust að hlíta konungs dómi hvernug er það mál skipaðist síðan." (OH 140)

The capacity to transcend self-interest is a rare quality, even for Snorri's all-too-human kings, who generally appear as partisans rather than wise arbiters. My emphasis here is less on human personalities than on the recurring function of dispute-solving; these distinctive actions of proto-sovereignty become visible precisely because they are different from the usual strategic behavior of most kings, as Snorri describes them. They are equally evident in the breach, as in the judgment Snorri attributes to one Halldór Brynjólfsson about Ólafur helgi whose zeal on behalf of christianization turned to cruelty: "Þoldu landshöfðingjar honum eigi réttðæmi og jafndæmi og reistu her í móti honum og felldu hann á eigu sinni sjálfs." (HSig 100)

The vision of sovereignty becomes clearest in instances where the fundamental social order is threatened or defined: for it is here that supreme secular power must rise to the challenge. Sverre Bagge notes the episode in *Magnúss saga Erlingssonar*, in which Erlingur skakki persuades the assembly at Víkin to condemn to the devil his earthly adversaries, Sigurður jarl and his followers. As Bagge notes, "Snorri is evidently shocked at such unprecedented harshness and calls it an abominable act. The reason for this reaction is probably a fundamental distinction between conflicts 'within' society, such as conflict between pretenders and the—very rare—conflict when society as a whole must defend its fundamental values." Although Bagge argues cogently that Snorri's kings are essentially strategic actors within prevailing social norms, he properly notes that, apart from examples like the one just cited, "the unity of society is not often focused in Snorri's narrative, probably because it is taken for granted." (Bagge 1991, 122)

What is taken for granted in the texture of saga events may well be of overriding concern to the saga author. Snorri's acute sensitivities to narrative balance and unusual restraint in imposing self-interested judgments on events—representative of other, anonymous, saga

authors—can itself be taken as a model for supreme secular authority: a demonstration, as it were, of the qualities occasionally depicted in kingly behavior. This narrative equilibrium of competing forces, faithful to the impersonal norms of Snorri's craft, supports his premonitions of national unity, along with his abhorrence of disunity and fragmentation in human affairs. *Heimskringla* ends with a disturbing vision of lawlessness: that roving body of Birkibeinar, who "höfðu saman safnast með fjölmenni miklu. Var það fólk hart og menn hinir vopndjörfustu og lið heldur óspakt, fóru mjög geystir og rasandi síðan þeir þóttust hafa styrk mikinn. Þeir höfðu í flokkinum fátt þeirra manna er ráðagerðarmenn væru eða vanir væru stjórn lands eða laga eða her að stýra en þótt sumir kynnu betur þá vildi þó flokkurinn allur hafa það er sjálfum sýndist." (ME 43) Anticipations of supreme authority occur too in such negative examples.

(4) *Protecting Norway against foreign incursions.* The aesthetic reach of authorship may aspire to universality, but in human affairs unity is usually secured by observing boundaries. National unity thus requires its external counterparts, and *Heimskringla* is filled with the transnational disputes of ambitious rulers. The basic point appears in *Ynglinga saga*, when Swedish King Óttar Egilsson breaks his father's compact with King Fróði frækni, on the grounds that "Sviar hefðu aldrei skatt goldið Dönun, segir að hann mundi og svo gera." (Yngl 27)

Ólafur helgi is able to recruit supporters among the English for overthrowing Danish rule in England, "og var landsmönnum betur viljað að hafa samlenda konunga yfir sér." (OH 27) Upon his return to Norway, Ólafur informs his stepfather, Sigurður sýr Hálfðanarson (whose support for restoring family power Ólafur questions), that "veit eg skaplyndi alþýðunnar að til þess væri öllum títt að komast undan þrælkan útlendra höfðingja þegar er traust yrði til." Sigurður responds by challenging Ólafur's overbearing ambition, which he likens to the "siðvenju útlendra höfðingja." Ólafur's mother sees it differently, however, and stresses the special distinction of becoming "yfirkonungur í Noregi," even if it means a rule as short-lived as that of Ólafur Tryggvason. (OH 35) Ólafur's long struggle against the Danish King Knútur ríki, which ultimately cost him his power and his life, is presented as a struggle for protecting Norwegian independence from foreign domination, and from the "ánauð og ófrelsi" of Danish tyranny. (OH 247) The importance of protection from foreign invasion was felt just as keenly by the Danes, according to Snorri, who recounts the Danish nobility's worries about Ólafur's threatened depredations while Knútur is away in England. Following Knútur's own suggestion, their solution is to designate his son king. As Úlfar jarl Sprakaleggsson declares,

Hefi eg.. og margir aðrir hérlandsmenn og höfðingjar kært oflega það fyrir Knúti konungi að mönnum þykir það hér í landi vandi mikill að sitja hér konunglaust.... En þó gerist nú það miklu meira vandmáli en fyrr hefir verið því að vér höfum hér til náð í friði að sitja af útlendum höfðingjum en nú spyrjum vér hitt, að Noregskonungur sæli að herja á hendur oss og er mönnum þó grunur á að Sviakonungur muni og til þeirrar ferðar ráðast. (OH 148)

In recent scholarship on medieval state-building, historians emphasize the importance of geopolitical threats in accelerating the development of regal administrative structures, aimed at solving both military and financial demands of warfare. (Ertman 1997) It seems distinctly probable that an Icelander like Snorri could anticipate this connection, from his geographic perspective of north Atlantic isolation. If the supreme authority of sovereignty depends on permitting each society to be its own legal master (see OH 141), the apparatus of kingship may in fact not be essential for maintaining that authority, absent the threat of foreign invasion. Snorri has already presented some negative examples of Norwegian overlordship in the case of

the Orkneys and Faroe Islands. The ambiguous loyalties of the skald Sighvatur Þórðarson—caught between Ólafur helgi and Knútur ríki—seem appropriate to describe Snorri's own posture. Snorri captures the likely conclusion in a powerful speech by the Icelander Einar Eyólfsson, who “kunna flest glöggst að sjá.”

En ef skal segja mína ætlan þá hygg eg að sú muni til vera hérlands mönnum að ganga eigi undir skattgjafir við Ólaf konung og allar álogur hér, því líkar sem hann hefir við meun í Noregi. Og munum vér eigi það ófrelsi gera einum oss til handa heldur bæði oss og sonum vorum og allri ætt vorri þeirri er þetta land byggir og mun ánað sú aldregi ganga eða hverfa af þessu landi. En þótt konungur sjá sé góður maður, sem eg trúi vel að sé, þá mun það fara héðan frá sem hingað til þá er konungaskipti verður að þeir eru ójafnir, sumir góðir en sumir illir. En ef landsmenn vilja halda frelsi sínu því er þeir hafa haft síðan er land þetta byggðist þá mun sá til vera að ljá konungi einskis fangstaðar á, hvorki um landaæign hér né um það að gjalda héðan ákveðnar skuldir þær er til lýðskyldu megi metast. (OH 125)

(5) *Providing leadership and representing exemplary behavior.* Deprived of leadership, Snorri notes, men “verða eigi góðir tilræðis,” and military defeat becomes inevitable. (OH 176) The marks of exemplary leadership are spread throughout Snorri's descriptions of extraordinary prowess and singular qualities. There was little doubt that Ólafur Tryggvason “var þá frægur orðinn af því um öll lönd, að hann var fríðari og göfuglegri og meiri en allir menn aðrir,” alongside many other superlatives catalogued by Snorri. (OT 31) The other Ólafur was “kappsamur í leikum og vildi fyrir vera öllum öðrum sem vera átti fyrir tignar sakir hans og burða.” (OH 3) Such distinctions follow conventions familiar to readers of other sagas, conventions that Snorri would appear to parody in his famous *mannjafnaður* scene in *Magnússona saga*. (MS 21)

Across the whole of *Heimskringla*, the cumulative effect of such descriptions may prompt us to speculate on Snorri's implicit judgments: kings come and go, none can sustain their personal eminence forever. The exception who proves the rule is Ólafur helgi, who became a saint, according to one source, as the only way to retain preeminence, after being personally rejected in his own land. On the eve of his final battle, Ólafur has a vision that transcends his own kingdom: “sá eg æ því víðara allt þar til er eg sá um alla veröld, bæði lönd og sæ. Eg kenndi gerla þá staði er eg hafði fyrr komið og séð. Jafngreinilega sá eg þá staði er eg hefi eigi fyrr séð, suma þá er eg hefi haft spurn af en jafnvel hina er eg hefi eigi fyrr heyrt getið, bæði byggða og óbyggða, svo vítt sem veröldin er.” (OH 202) Despite the religious interpretation immediately bestowed on this vision by the bishop, one might also read it as a secular glimpse of universal authority—that elusive standard within sovereignty that transcends any finite earthly ruler. Moving still closer toward his military defeat, Ólafur reports the further dream of climbing a ladder, “og ganga þar eftir í loft upp so langt að himininn opnaði og þangað var stiginn til. Var eg þá,” segir hann, “kominn í efsta stig er þú vaktir mig.” (OH 214) As he stands one human step short of universal insight, Ólafur's earthly ambitions collapse on the field at Stiklastaðir.

Should the reader nevertheless insist on taking that last step, it would possibly carry him or her on to that elusive term “hamingja” (luck), which describes an ambiguous normative companion in the lives of Snorri's kings. I cannot attempt here to disentangle this slippery term from its religious connotations, or from deterministic notions of fate or destiny. But we know that Ólafur helgi is both propelled and defeated by the presence or absence of luck. At one of the many turning points in his turbulent career, in strategic retreat in Russia and contemplating a bold return to power in Norway, he reflects on his own rise and fall. “Það taldist lengstum í

huginn að hugsa ef nokkur fœng mundu til verða að hann næði ríki sínu í Noregi. En er hann hafði þar á huginn þá minntist hann þess að hina fyrstu tíu vetur konungdóms hans voru honum allir hlutir hagfelldir og farsælegir en síðan voru honum öll ráð sín þunghræð og torsótt en gagnstaðlegar allar hamingjuraunirnar. Nú efaði hann um, fyrir þá sök, hvort það mundi vera viturlegt ráð að treysta svo mjög hamingjuna að fara með lítinn styrk í hendur fjandómnum sínum. . . ” (OH 187) Despite some theological complications at this juncture, Ólafur must place his personal fate into the hands of an unknown court of highest appeal. No one knows what to call it, or how to influence it; but through it the course of Norwegian history is decisively shaped. Was it perhaps a reminder that politics and society transcend the will or interest of a single human being, even the king? Was it one more fleeting vision of authority, previewing an eventual ingredient in modern notions of sovereignty?

The divergence of power and authority

Current interpretations of *Heimskringla* owe a substantial debt to Sverre Bagge, whose recent comprehensive study sets the highest standards for addressing social and political implications of the entire work. My approach in this short paper assumes a great many interpretive points that he develops at length, including his approach to textual problems and to Snorri's style of authorship. My interest in sovereignty, however, shifts the discussion in a different direction from that chosen by Bagge, who focuses on strategic interpersonal action and downgrades “constitutional” questions.

Bagge presents sound reasons for rejecting two possible routes of political analysis. He argues persuasively against interpreting *Heimskringla* as an extended conflict between the respective class interests of kings and magnates, as an earlier generation of historians wanted to do. As Bagge shows, the conflicts in Snorri's narrative are structurally similar to interpersonal feuding portrayed in other sagas, and they do not fit comfortably into the rhetoric of class struggle. Bagge also distinguishes Snorri's method and point of view from that of contemporary royalist ideologies, which were influenced jointly by clerical doctrines and by the neo-Roman, post-Carolingian school of legists. Having disposed of these alternatives, Bagge concludes that *Heimskringla* is essentially about personal power relationships, and he uses the interpretive model of “rational action” to focus on conflicts between “long-term political interests” attached to powerful individuals and families. (Bagge 1991, 75-90) One senses the whole atmosphere of *Sturlunga saga* in these power struggles projected by Bagge, leading us to the plausible conclusion that Snorri's portrayal of earlier Norwegian kings was deeply rooted in his contemporary Icelandic environment.

But does Snorri not also see the critical distinction between power and *authority*, which would become central to the sovereignty debate in later centuries? Bagge's careful analysis leaves room for further exploration: perhaps we can get something more from Snorri's magisterial history than the circular maxim, “Nothing succeeds like success.” (Bagge 1991, 96) The rational actor model goes surprisingly far, but it tends to reduce complex action to a single dimension. Separate from the ideologies of class struggle and neo-royalism, Snorri seems to grasp the importance of authority and legitimacy in power relationships, even though he cannot describe authority through modern concepts of state-sanctioned power. His kingly role models are indeed the human actors Bagge correctly identifies, but they may also represent broader normative concerns, at least at key narrative moments. When Ólafur helgi is awakened one step short of his infinite vision, he clearly knows where that next step would have taken him, albeit from *this* side of the line. If we make the same extrapolation from the many tedious

power struggles Snorri inherits from his sources, where do they all point? Bagge is careful to emphasize that power is regulated by *long-term* interests; why not extend that “long term” to its natural limit—to that infinite horizon where parallel lines run together?

It does not tax our own imaginations too far to sense this element of normative projection elsewhere in Icelandic sagas, beyond the *konungasögur*. (Vilhjálmur 1991) But it is here, and especially in texts like *Heimskringla*, that emblems of earthly authority appear on full display. W.P. Ker praises Snorri for his subtle mastery of “the Icelandic art, that device which never grows old, of letting things make their own impression before the explanation comes.” (Ker 1925, 145)

What can we learn?

Pursuing the topic of how modern state systems were built, historical sociologists are now pushing the search for social antecedents of the state farther back into the centuries covered by Snorri’s history. (Ertman 1997) They are discovering the sheer variety of social and cultural conditions, going back to the period after the fall of Rome, that seem to explain intriguing divergences among state structures in the early modern period. Medieval Scandinavia presents an exceptional experience in state-building, coming from the periphery of Europe and resisting the faster pace of political development nearer the center. Elements of that exceptionalism include the late arrival of Christianity, the absence of decayed Roman political institutions, the distance from neo-imperial state building of the Carolingian type, a tradition of decentralized community governance, the spread of literacy and vernacular culture beyond the elite control of court and church, and relatively mild geopolitical military tensions, at least by comparison with southern and central Europe.

Snorri’s history thus connects with a vast sociological project, provided one can retrieve the data from the distinctive narrative style of Icelandic saga writing. It makes no difference here whether Snorri himself was a deeply original historian, or mainly a “fitter and trimmer” of prior written sources, many now lost. (Andersson 1985, 221) *Heimskringla* captures a vanished era in which the administrative apparatus of governing was still taking shape, in which power conflicts were starting to exert pressure to centralize military and financial practices, and in which conflicts were emerging between traditional authority and new moral and legal initiatives.

More important than the sociological connection is the *normative* contribution of *konungasögur* to the developmental history of modern concepts like sovereignty and legitimacy. With whatever ruthlessness self-interested actors play their eternal political games, one cannot escape the conclusion, as Bagge acknowledges, that some “sort of basic legitimacy seems to be a necessary condition for playing the game at all.” (Bagge 1991, 86) Snorri provides no formal ethical system, but the orientation of all action toward legitimate authority is never absent from his narrative. Bagge properly distinguishes between notions of legitimacy that inhere within a given social structure, and the broader legitimacy of the structure itself. If Snorri says little about the former, he says practically nothing about the broader concept. And yet images and visions of highest authority are spread throughout his 800 pages of narrative; saga writing predates modern conceptual analysis but nonetheless participates in the timeless discussion of limits to power. Without the state to represent these anticipations of sovereignty, Snorri permits them to appear within his narrative of ordinary conflict—as assumptions, aspirations, and visions.

Normative debate in modern democracies needs more historical and comparative depth, especially as it tries to look behind the surface of state authority. As one recent commentator suggests, this debate needs to focus on “the centrality of an ‘impersonal’ structure of public power... of a diversity of power centres within and outside the state, including institutional fora to promote open discussion and deliberation among alternative political viewpoints... The idea of a community which rightly governs itself and determines its own future—an idea at the very heart of the democratic polity itself—is... today deeply problematic.” (Held 1995, 15-17)

The brittleness of modern authority can be detected as well in Snorri’s sagas, as Ólafur Trygvasson learned in the course of his fateful sea battle with Eiríkur jarl Hákonarson, when an arrow from an enemy ship strikes and cracks the bow of Ólafur’s comrade, Einar þambarskelfir. “Hvað brast þar svo hátt?” asks Ólafur. “Noregur úr hendi þér konungur,” comes the reply. (OT 108) Ólafur thought the situation was nowhere near that desperate, although soon he would disappear beneath the sea, never to resurface. Ólafur helgi could also see beyond the long-term consequences of strategic action, after his well-meaning retainer impetuously kills a potential ally, Erlingur Skjálgsson. “Högg þú allra manna armastur,” says Ólafur, “Nú hjóstu Noreg úr hendi mér. (OH 176)

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Yngl	Ynglinga saga	OT	Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar
HS	Hálfðanar saga svarta	OH	Ólafs saga helga
HHár	Haralds saga hárfagra	HSig	Haraldar saga Sigurðarsonar
HG	Haralds saga góða	MS	Magnússona saga
HGrá	Haralds saga gráfeldar	ME	Magnúss saga Erlingssonar

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