

Sverrir's Dreams

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The dreams in *Sverris saga* are remarkable for at least two reasons. They are unusually fascinating from a literary point of view but they are also different from other dreams in Old Norse literature. Most dreams in the sagas and in Eddic poetry warn of coming disasters, and they typically contain deadly beasts, ogres, fetches, and other horrifying creatures, which are also likely to appear in folklore and pagan myths (Kelchner 1935; Lönroth 2002). The dreams in *Sverris saga*, on the other hand, contain nothing of the sort but instead present symbolic and somewhat mystifying messages that seem to anticipate Sverrir's coming triumphs as king of Norway. Most of them are attributed to Sverrir himself, who is said in the prologue to have been present when his saga was written, determining what should be in it. The king's voice is in fact often heard in the text, not only in his speeches and in various dialogue passages but also in the actual narration of his saga (Lönroth 2005).

Several scholars have interpreted the dreams as part of Sverrir's own political rhetoric and as an expression of Christian ideology concerning divine kingship and the rightful king (see esp. Holm-Olsen 1953). Sverre Bagge, however, has found it difficult to accept this interpretation without serious modifications. In his opinion, Sverrir does not represent the medieval Christian ideal of *rex iustus* but a more indigenous ideal: the Old Norse 'gang leader' who leads his men to victory because of his inherent strength, skill and good fortune (Bagge 1995). Nor does Bagge accept the idea that *Sverris saga* is a work of political propaganda like so many other medieval biographies of Christian kings. In spite of its Christian elements, *Sverris saga* is read by Bagge as essentially an 'objective' saga narrative of traditional type, very different in style and rhetoric from European historiography (Bagge 1991, 1993).

I shall not go deeply into this discussion, which is the subject of Fredrik Charpentier Ljungqvist's paper at this conference. I intend, however, to take a closer look at each of the dreams in order to determine how they are constructed, what symbols and images they contain and what analogues may be found in other stories about prominent rulers.

The first dream, told in the first chapter, is not attributed to Sverrir himself but to his mother, Gunnhild, shortly before his birth. After reporting that Gunnhild had a son called Sverrir, who 'was said to be the son of Unas', a comb-maker, the saga continues as follows:

His coming into the world was heralded by remarkable dreams, such as ever precede remarkable events. His mother Gunnhild told of a dream that came to her before he was born. She dreamt that she was in a goodly upper room (*í einu ágættligu lofthúsi*), and about to give birth to her child and her maid was seated at her knees ready to receive that child at its birth. After the birth a great terror seized the maid and she cried aloud saying 'Gunnhild, my Gunnhild! You have brought forth a wonderful and awful birth.' Three times she cried out, using the same words. And when Gunnhild heard the maid utter the same cry with so often a trembling voice, she inquired what it was that was born; and it seemed in her dream to be a stone, very large, white as snow

to the sight; and it glowed fiercely, so that it emitted sparks in all directions like iron white-hot in the fierce blast of a forge:

Henni sýndist sem þat væri einn stein vel mikill ok snjóhvítr at lit, en hann glóaði svá mjök, at alla vega gneistaði af honom sem af glóandi járni, því er ákafliga er blásit í afli.

And she said to her maid, 'We must have a watchful care of this birth and let no one know aught of it, for all who see it will think it is a strange sight.' So, in her dream, they took the stone and set it in a large chair and hid under a fair covering. But cover it as they would, sparks continued to issue from it which flew in all directions through the covering to every part of the room, and they were greatly in affrighted at the awful issue from the stone. Then Gunnhild awoke.¹

Here as elsewhere in saga literature the dream may be divided into three parts: first an introduction in which the circumstances of the dream are presented, secondly the dream itself and thirdly a conclusion, which may or may not contain an interpretation of the dream. In this case, the introduction presents Sverrir's birth as a 'remarkable event' heralded by 'remarkable dreams' (*stórar draumar*), a statement tending to cast doubt on the popular belief that he was merely the son of a humble comb-maker. The reader is thus prepared for a dream indicating that Sverrir is not after all the son of Unas but of a much greater man.

This expectation is fulfilled in the dramatic presentation of the dream itself. It begins innocently enough: a child is about to be born to the dreaming woman in a beautiful *lofthús* where her maid serves as her midwife. The harmony of this scene is quickly dispelled, however, when the maid cries out in terror, and the dream culminates in the graphic description of the glowing white stone emitting sparks like hot iron in a forge. When Gunnhild then suggests that they keep the birth secret, and then places the white stone in a chair 'under a fair covering' (*með klæði föggru*), her words and action suggest that Sverrir may be the son of some superior being and may himself become a great ruler. The placing of the stone on a chair probably indicates that he will be elevated to the throne of Norway, although this is not made explicit in the conclusion, which ends abruptly with the information that Gunnhild woke up.

What parallels can be found that may help us to understand this symbolic dream? In the Edda (*Guðrúnarkviða III:3*) solemn oaths are sworn by a 'holy white stone' (*at inom hvíta helga steini*), and archaeologists have found large white stones in Norway believed to have had some cultic function during the Iron Age,² but such stones have not in Norse texts been associated with kingship or dreams. In Christian literature of the Middle Ages, on the other hand, sparkling white stones and gems have often symbolized divinity and spirituality (Meier 1977: 131, 165). An interesting Latin analogue to Gunnhild's dream may be found in William of Malmesbury's *Chronicle of the Kings of England*, where King Athelstan's mother, a simple peasant girl, dreams that a moon shines forth from her body illuminating all of England

¹ *Sverris saga*, ch. 1. For convenience I am using Guðni Jónsson's normalised edition in *Konungasögur*, vol. I (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnútgáfan, 1957) and as English text - with some minor corrections and modifications - J. Sephton's translation (London, 1899), which is now available on the internet, <http://www.northvegr.org/lore/sverri/>

² Information about these stones (with pictures) may be found on the net, <http://www.arild-hauge.com/hvitestener.htm>

(Schach 1971:53). An even more striking analogue is the story told by Plutarch about the mother of Alexander the Great, who before her wedding:

dreamed that there was a peal of thunder and that a thunder-bolt fell upon her womb, and that thereby much fire was kindled, which broke into flames that travelled all about, and then was extinguished (Plutarch: 227, quoted by Klaniczay 2002: 31).

It thus appears most likely that Gunnhild's dream, as told in *Sverris saga*, should be interpreted along the same lines as the stories about Athelstan and Alexander in medieval tradition: Sverrir is not only the son of a king but he will himself one day become a great ruler. His light will shine over Norway, however others may try to hide it, and his fire will, like Alexander's, spread awe and terror among his enemies.

The next dream is reported in Chapter 2, after the reader has learned about Sverrir's childhood in the Faeroes, his education as a priest, and his aggressive temper, which gets him into trouble with other people, thus indicating that he is at heart more of a warrior than is fitting for a priest:

Sverrir had remarkable dreams, which some men regarded as nonsense and made sport of. He told of one in which he dreamt that he was in Norway, and had become a bird, so large that its beak reached the boundaries of the land in the east, and the feathers of its tail as far north as the dwellings of the Finns, while its wings covered the whole country:

Hann þóttist vera í Noregi ok vera at fugli svá miklum, at nef hans tók austr til landsenda, en véliþaðrar hans tóku norðr í Finnabú, en með vængjunum hulði hann landit allt.

He told this dream to a wise man named Einar, and inquired what he thought it might portend. Einar answered that the dream was dark to him but that it probably pointed to power of some kind. 'Possibly', said he, 'you may become Archbishop' (*Vera kann, at þú verðir erkibiskup*). 'It seems to me very unlikely that I shall become Archbishop,' replied Sverrir, 'when I am not well suited to be a priest.'

The introduction in this case makes it clear that the young man's dreams, or rather his presentation of them, made him ridiculous and controversial in the eyes of certain people. This motif is not, as far as I know, found in other Old Norse sagas, but it does appear in the Bible, where Joseph tells his dreams to his brothers who, as a result, become greatly provoked and irritated (Genesis 37:5-11). In both cases the dreams appear to suggest that the dreamer will rise to great power and rule over others. Joseph dreams that the sun and the moon and eleven stars are bowing down to him. Sverrir, on the other hand, dreams that he is a large bird whose wings cover the whole country of Norway. It may seem tempting to compare this Big Bird with ominous dream birds in the Edda, usually eagles, hawks or ravens, prefiguring a coming disaster (for example *Atlamá!* 19), but as Paul Schach has rightly pointed out (Schach 1971: 58) Sverrir's bird does not prefigure disaster at all, but on the contrary, fame and fortune for the dreamer, even though the imagery is awe-inspiring, just like the dream of the white stone. It would in this context seem most natural to interpret the bird as a royal eagle, a well-known symbol of kingship in medieval iconography. One may also compare this dream to one that William the Conqueror's mother is said to have had just before his birth, according to *Roman de Rou* and other Norman sources: she

dreamed that a tree grew out of her heart and became so large that it overshadowed the whole of Normandy (Holm-Olsen 1953: 97).

The fact that the bird dream means that Sverrir will become the king of Norway is not explicitly said but hinted in the concluding dialogue between the 'wise man', Einar, and Sverrir. Einar correctly interprets the bird as a symbol of great power but he cannot imagine that a young cleric such as Sverrir, who is thought to be of humble origin, could ever gain access to the throne, so instead he suggests that he may become Archbishop. Sverrir's reply suggests that he is not himself happy with the clerical career that has been chosen for him, but he cannot yet imagine that he will one day become a king.

Soon after this dream, we are told that Sverrir's mother made a pilgrimage to Rome and made a confession to the Pope, that her son was actually the son of King Sigurd munn. She is then told that she must inform Sverrir about his father, and she does so after her return to the Faeroes. Sverrir's reaction is reported in an almost modern psychologising way that is not at all typical of 'objective' saga style but appears to reflect his own *monologue intérieure*:

This information caused him much anxiety, and his mind wavered greatly. To contend for the kingdom against King Magnus and Earl Erling seemed difficult; and yet, supposing he were a king's son, it seemed contemptible that he should do nothing more than a plain farmer's son (*búandason óbreytir*) would do. But when he called to mind the interpretation put upon his dreams by wise men, those very dreams quickened his courage to avenge his kinsmen. (ch. 4)

Here it is made clear that Sverrir has now finally understood the meaning of the previous dreams and interpreted them as an encouragement to go after the crown himself, thereby avenging his father on the present rulers of Norway. His next dream is then reported as follows:

Sverrir related in these words a dream which appeared to him. He dreamt that he had come to Norway over the sea from the west, and attained some position of honour, chosen to be bishop most likely. And there was much unrest in the land, because of the contention of kings. He dreamt that King Olaf the Saint was contending against King Magnus and Earl Erling, and he was pondering in his mind which side he should join. He chose rather to go to King Olaf, and on his arrival the King welcomed him with great joy. He had not been long with him when this event happened. One morning, as it seemed to him in his dream, there were few men with the King, not more than fifteen or sixteen, and the king was washing himself at a table in an upper room (*þóst konungrinn við trapizu í einni lofstofu*). When he had finished, another man wished to go to the table and wash in the same water, but the King pushed him aside with the hand and bade him desist (*skaut við honum hendi sinni ok bað hann hætta*). He then called Sverrir Magnus by name, and bade him wash in the same water (*Síðan nefndi hann Sverri Magnús ok bað hann þvá sér í því sama vatni*); and Sverrir did as he was bid. When he had washed, a man rushed into the room with the sudden tidings that the King's foes were at the door, and he bade them seize their weapons as quickly as they could. But the King spoke, and said there was no danger, and bade the men take their axes and swords and march out, while he himself would take his shield and protect them all. And they did as the King commanded. Then he took his sword and offered it to the young man Sverrir, and placed his standard (*merki sitt*) in Sverrir's

hand saying, 'Take my standard, Lord, and know of a surety that henceforth you shall be its bearer always.' And Sverrir in his dream received that standard though with a feeling of dread. Afterwards the king took his shield, and they all walked out together somewhat hastily. The vestibule seemed long as they marched through, not less than sixty ells in length, and while they were in the building, Sverrir was unable to carry the standard upright. But when they reached the door through which they had to pass, seven men came against them with weapons, intending to cut down the standard bearer. But the King moved forward in front of him, and with his shield protected him and all the others, so that they were unharmed. Afterwards they came in his dream to an open country and a fair field, where he carried the standard upright, and bore it against the array of King Magnus and Earl Erling. And as soon as the attack was made, that host fell away. Then Sverrir awoke, and pondering his dream, considered it better than no dream, though it seemed a strange one. He told it afterwards to his friends, that is a few, and succeeding events agreed fairly with their interpretation. And when such things came into his mind he was greatly strengthened. (ch. 5)

Here we are told from the beginning that the dream is related in Sverrir's own words, a statement that has the appearance of truth and is born out by the way the story is narrated, even though 'I' has been replaced by 'he' or 'Sverrir'. The dreamer's initial uncertainty about his own status ('chosen to be bishop most likely') gives an impression of authenticity and also refers back to the previous dream, which had, as we know, been interpreted as meaning that Sverrir would one day become an Archbishop. His real role becomes clear, however, when Olaf the Saint appears in the dream, and Sverrir chooses to follow him in war against King Magnus and Earl Erling. Needless to say this means that Sverrir, from now on, will be a warrior fighting for a divine cause, that of the great eternal king of Norway, *rex perpetuus Norvegiae*, against his adversaries, who must be understood as people who have usurped the throne of Norway and are God's enemies.

The next scene, where King Olaf washes himself and then invites Sverrir to wash in the same water, must be understood as a symbolic baptism, whereby Sverrir is inaugurated in his new sacred role as the saint's successor and as the true king of Norway. The man who is turned away from the water is evidently King Magnus, who does not deserve to be king. When Olaf calls Sverrir 'Magnus' the meaning must be that he, rather than Magnus Erlingsson, deserves to be called 'great' (*magnus* in Latin). And when Sverrir is later given the saint's sword and banner, we are given to understand that he is entrusted with the responsibility of ridding the country from King Magnus Erlingsson and Earl Erling. At the end of the dream the fight begins and Sverrir wins against Olaf's enemies. He is thus going to be victorious also in real life.

When Sverrir wakes up we are told in conclusion that he considers this dream 'better than no dream', an obvious understatement. No interpretation of the dream is forthcoming, but it is not very difficult for the reader to figure it out, when we learn that Sverrir's friends interpreted the dream in a way that 'agreed fairly' with later events, or, in other words, with his victory over Magnus Erlingsson and succession to the throne.

The next dream is even easier to understand, at least for anybody acquainted with the Bible. It appears a few chapters later, after Sverrir has left the Faeroes for Norway and collected his band of followers, the Birkibeinar:

The next night Sverrir had a dream. He dreamt that he was at Borg, where the Raum-Elf falls into the sea, and King Magnus, Earl Erling, and their force were in the town. There was somewhat of a stir (*nokkurr kurr*), because a King's son (*nokkurr konungsson*) was supposed to be in the town, and all the people were busy seeking where he might be. And it seemed to Sverrir that this stir was about himself. He dreamt that he was making his way secretly out of the town, and came up to Mariukirk, which he entered for the service.

As he was at prayers in the church, there appeared to him a man who came and took him by the hand, and leading him into a chapel that lay north of the choir-door, thus spoke to him, 'Come with me, brother, I have something to tell you in secret.' Sverrir went in his dream with the man, carefully observing his appearance. The man seemed to him to be aged; his hair was of a snowy whiteness, his beard was long, and his garments trailed upon the ground; His face was ruddy, with short hair around it, and he inspired great awe. Sverrir's mind was full of concern, wondering what the man might want. The old man perceived his anxiety and said to him, 'Fear not, brother, for God has sent me.' Then Sverrir, in his dream, sank to the ground before him, and asked, 'Who are you, Lord, that I may be assured God has sent you.' The old man answered a second time, bidding Sverrir fear not, and saying that God had sent him to him. But Sverrir's fear became rather greater than less. Then the old man took him by the hand and raised him up, saying the third time, 'Fear not, brother, peace be with you. I am Samuel the prophet of God, and I have a message from God to deliver to you.' After this, the old man took a horn from a scrip (*horn ór skreppu*) which he carried about his neck, and the horn appeared to Sverrir to contain holy oil (*krismi*). And the old man said, 'Let me see your hands.' And Sverrir stretched out both his hands towards him. And the man anointed them, saying, 'May these hands be sanctified and made strong to hate foes and opponents, and to govern much people.' Then he kissed Sverrir and taking his right hand in his own, said, 'Be strong and valiant, for God will give you help.'

Sverrir then awoke and related his dream to the twelve men, two priests and ten others, who slept in the same room with him. They all considered the dream remarkable and of great import, and all of them were somewhat gladdened by it. But when he asked them to interpret the dream, no one had the confidence to explain it, though all thought the dream better than no dream. When Sverrir perceived that there was no interpretation of the dream forthcoming, he bade his men avoid speaking of the vision, though it had appeared to him.

After this dream his disposition seemed to all who were about him to undergo a great change. It was altogether a trying experience for him to live in a strange land and among a people altogether strange. And at the very same time that he took on himself the charge of his company he had to bear the burdens of those who served him; for in the troop that he had accepted, and whose lot he had bound to his own, there was not a man besides himself able to form a plan. (ch. 10)

Here again the dreamer at first gives an impression of being uncertain of his own role and status. We may wonder why he finds himself in the town of Borg in Østfold, later called Sarpsborg, but the reason for this is probably that this town had been founded by Saint Olaf and was the capital of Norway in early days. It is thus the proper stage for the saint's spiritual successor, Sverrir, as he is now going to be

inaugurated in his new role. The presence of King Magnus and Earl Erling, on the other hand, creates a strong sense of suspense. Their search for the mysterious prince, who may be Sverrir, means that he will have to hide, just as the child Jesus had to hide from Herod during the search for the newborn 'King of the Jews.' Sverrir's calling is still not openly revealed, and it is not explicitly said that he is persecuted, but it is strongly suggested as we learn that he leaves the town in secret. The reader is thus prepared for the scene in the church, Mariukirk, where Sverrir is seen praying, a proper activity for somebody who is soon going to receive a Divine Calling.

The old white-haired man who now appears in the church is no less a person than the Prophet Samuel, who is described, in the tradition of medieval art, as a venerable and wise old man with white hair, a long beard and some kind of priestly garments. In the Bible Samuel anoints young David with holy oil at the Lord's command, thus initiating the boy in his new role as the King of Israel. After being dissatisfied with the present king, Saul, who is therefore destined to fall from power, God had sent Samuel to the town of Bethlehem to seek out David in the house of Jesse. When the prophet arrived there, Jesse wanted him to anoint one of his older sons, but Samuel asked him to send for the youngest boy, David, who was tending the sheep. So Jesse sent for David and had him brought into the house:

Then the LORD said, 'Rise and anoint him; he is the one.'

So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the LORD came upon David in power.

(1 Samuel 16:11-13)

The scene between Sverrir and Samuel in the dream of *Sverris saga* can thus be understood as a repetition or figural fulfilment of David's anointment. Sverrir appears to be the new David, appointed by God, and he will, as Samuel assures him, be helped by the Lord to defeat his enemies, who may then be seen as a new version of Saul. If that is indeed the meaning, it is easy to understand why Sverrir and his twelve followers (the number may indicate that they are his apostles) feel strengthened by this dream. Yet nobody wants to offer a straight interpretation, probably because it might seem presumptuous and dangerous at this stage of Sverrir's uprising against King Magnus.

After his conclusive victory over Magnus Erlingsson, however, Sverrir makes a speech in which he finally makes explicit how the biblical symbols of his dream should be understood:

'We will quote words uttered by the Psalmist, *Miserere mei, Deus, quoniam conculcavit me homo, tota die expugnans tribulavit me;*' which means, 'Be merciful to me, O God, for man trod me under foot; all day he fought against me and tormented me.' This prophecy, uttered many ages ago, is now fulfilled in our days; for Magnus, my kinsman, fought against me, prepared to destroy my life; but God delivered me, now as aforetime, and transferred his kingdom to me. At all times none have been so hated by God as the proud, and most sternly has He punished them. [---]So, too, after King Saul raged against God'

(ch. 99)

The 'Psalmist' here is of course David, and Sverrir, quoting Psalm 56, is the new David, while his defeated enemy, Magnus, is identified as a new Saul. After this speech there can hardly be any doubt that Sverrir sees himself as a *rex iustus*, chosen

by God. This must also be the meaning of all the previous dreams, although their interpretation is only gradually revealed in the saga text, partly for reasons of suspense, partly because it would not be wise of Sverrir to demonstrate his divine calling too early in his career, before he has gathered enough strength to seize power over Norway.

Sverrir's fifth dream is even stranger than the others and rather different in structure, tone and imagery. It is presented as follows:

Before the fall of Earl Erling, King Sverrir had a dream from which he learnt beforehand, as he supposed, to the issue of the action between him and the Earl. He dreamt that he was sleeping in an upper room (*i einu lofti*) of the town, on a bright night, and that a man entered the room and came up to the bed in which he lay. 'Rise up, Sverrir,' he said, 'and come with me.' The man inspired him with awe, and he felt that he dared not do otherwise than he was bid. The man walked out of the town and he followed until they came to a fire, on which a man lay roasted (*þeir kómu þar, er eldr var fyrir þeim ok maðr steikðr lá á eldinum*). Then the man in the dream (*draummaðrinn*) asked Sverrir to sit down and eat, placing the man before him. But Sverrir thought in his dream, and so answered, that he had never eaten any unclean thing (*rækindi*), and would not then eat. And the man in the dream said, 'Thou wilt and shalt eat, for so wills He who governs all things (*svá vill sá er öllu ræðr*).' Sverrir dreamt that he now began to eat the flesh from the bones, and every mouthful seemed difficult to swallow. But the longer he ate, the less disgust he seemed to feel at eating the remainder. Coming to the head, he was about to eat it also; but the man who had led him there told him to cease eating, and took the head himself. Sverrir's unwillingness to leave off now seemed to him little less than his former unwillingness to begin, but the stronger man had his way. Then they went back into the town and to the same house; and when Sverrir in his dream had returned to the same bed, he saw his guide leave the room, and then he awoke.

It was this dream that caused the King to urge his men forward so eagerly on their march to the town. He so interpreted it that the man lying on the fire (*er á eldinum lá*) was Earl Erling, then beginning to grow old (*eldast*), and that king Magnus and his men were senile (*mjök eldir*) in counsel and feeble in resource. His eating the man foretold that he and his troop would destroy the greater part of the vassals and the *hirð*; the uneaten head, that King Magnus would escape. (ch. 42)

In this case the function of the dream is not so much to confirm Sverrir's right to the throne but rather to give him strategic advice and outline his further course of action. This is announced from the start and is made even clearer when the content of the dream is interpreted by Sverrir himself. The dream begins, like Gunnhild's dream about Sverrir's birth, in a *lofthús* where the dreamer is resting. We are told that the night is bright which suggests that it is one of those serene Nordic summer nights where everything is peaceful and clearly visible. The awe-inspiring man who now appears is not described or named but he is evidently a guardian angel and a messenger from God ('He who governs all things'). His first words ('Rise up and come with me') suggest some kind of divine calling, typical of dreams in hagiographic literature. (Cf. also Kolskeggr's dream in *Njáls saga*, ch. 81)

Yet the rest of the dream, where Sverrir is forced to become a corpse-eater, is not at all serene or saintly but cruel, grotesque and revolting in a fascinating way

reminiscent of modern horror movies. The cannibalistic images appear to be neither Christian nor heathen but products of Sverrir's own feverish imagination. I have not been able to find anything similar in either Old Norse or Latin literature of the Middle Ages, although one could probably find quite a few medieval texts where society is allegorized as a human body with the king as its head. Here, on the other hand, the fried body eaten by Sverrir is not society as a whole but Earl Erling and, by extension, the royal *hirð* and other aristocratic servants of the monarchy, while the head is clearly identified as King Magnus. What is most remarkable in this dream, however, is not its symbolic interpretation – which is made more explicit than any of the previous dreams – but its rather frivolous play on words. To grow old (*eldast*) and become senile or feeble (*eldr*) is thus made equal with being placed, like Earl Erling, on a fire (*eldr*). The meaning of this wordplay is evidently that the Earl's time is up, and this in turn encourages Sverrir to go after him even more forcefully. In a speech to his followers right before his final victory over Earl Erling (ch. 35), he triumphantly refers to his cannibal dream as evidence that 'luck has now abandoned' his enemies (*þeir sé nú hamingjulausir*)

After this nothing more is reported about Sverrir's dreams until the very end of the saga, long after Sverrir has defeated his enemies and become the King of Norway. His very last dream appears immediately before his death:

On Tuesday morning of the second week in Lent, King Sverrir fell into a perspiration, and then seemed free from pain. Many came to visit him, though generally there were but few near him. And when they had nearly all gone away, the King spoke to Petr Svarti, and said he would tell him his dream. 'A man came to me,' he said, 'the same that has appeared often before, and has never showed me what was false. In my dream I seemed to be conscious that I was sick and feeble, and I asked him how the sickness would end; and I thought he turned away quickly from me as he thus answered, 'Prepare thee, Sverrir, for a rising again. (*Búst þú við upprisunni einni*)' Now this dream appears to me very ambiguous (*tvíslægr*), but, after it, I think that one change or other will occur quickly.' (ch. 180)

This dream is similar to the previous one in more ways than one. First of all it is evidently the same guardian angel that appears in both dreams. Secondly we find here the same basic idea: the ruler's time is up when he gets feeble and loses his fortune (*hamingja*). Finally there is also in this case a play on words: *upprisa* can mean both a 'rising up', i.e. from the bed (which would indicate that Sverrir will get well), but the word can also mean 'resurrection', in which case Sverrir should prepare himself for Judgment Day. And it is clearly the last meaning that turns out to be correct, since Sverrir dies later that same day, after having prepared himself to meet his Maker.

What can then be said, in conclusion, about the literary character and function of the dreams within *Sverris saga*? Their purpose is obviously and primarily to establish Sverrir as a Christian *rex iustus* and as the only legitimate king of Norway. Nothing in these dreams supports the notion that Sverrir is merely a 'gang-leader', who gains power just because he is stronger and more skilful than his adversaries. On the contrary, the dreams are intended to dispel any such notion. The idea of royal luck or *hamingja*, which appears to be implied in the two last dreams, or at least in Sverrir's own explanation of his 'cannibal dream', may perhaps be interpreted by some as an

obscure remnant of some pagan idea about 'sacral kingship', but there is really not much evidence for such an interpretation. *Hamingja* was a concept that was well integrated in Christian ideology by the end of the twelfth century and used in a way similar to Latin *fortuna* or *felicitas* (Ejerfeldt 1971: 160 f.). And although the two last dreams of *Sverris saga* differ in some respects from the earlier ones, they are clearly presented as divine messages from the God of Christianity. Ideologically they are all within the mainstream of medieval tradition (See esp. Klaniczay 2002).

Most of Sverrir's dreams are, nevertheless, highly original in Western literature because of their fascinating blend of grotesque and sublime elements. And they are extremely well told - mystifying, scary and wonderful in a way that is unusual even in the best Icelandic sagas. Their author, Sverrir, contested king and renegade priest, may in real life have been more of a gang-leader than a *rex iustus*, but he was certainly a superb poet, who knew how to use the Bible, Latin historiography, Norse saga tradition and his own imagination to his best advantage.

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