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# Ideology and Power in Norway and Iceland, 1150-1250

- ABSTRACT -

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## CONTENTS

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### CONTENTS

#### List of Tables and Maps

#### Introduction

#### 1 THEORETICAL PREMISES

##### 1.1 Methodology, Medieval studies

##### 1.2 Historiographical Observations on the Subject

##### 1.3 Remarks on Political Theory and its Historiography

##### 1.4 Ideology

##### 1.5 Political Power

##### 1.6 Ideology and Power

#### 2 KINGSHIP IN NORWAY

##### 2.1 Introduction

##### 2.2 Ideal Royalty in *Sverris Saga*

###### 2.2.1 King Sverrir and *den borgerkrigstiden*

###### 2.2.2 Sverrir and Saint Óláfr

###### 2.2.3 Sverrir – dux militum

###### 2.2.4 A King's Luck

###### 2.2.5 Sverrir the Orator

###### 2.2.6 Sverrir the Upholder of Tradition

##### 2.3 *Konungs skuggsjá* – The King's Mirror

###### 2.3.1 Context: The consolidated Norwegian monarchy

###### 2.3.2 The Pious King

###### 2.3.3 Royal vs. Episcopal Power

###### 2.3.4 *Rex Justus* – The Ideal of Monarchy

###### 2.3.5 Wisdom makes Justice

##### 2.4 Hakón Hakónarson – King and Knight?

###### 2.4.1 Introducing the Source

###### 2.4.2 King Hákon Hakónarson

###### 2.4.3 Patron of the Letters

2.4.4	Monarch and Knight-Erudite
2.5	Networks of Power in High Medieval Norway
2.6	Conclusion: The Norwegian Model
3	AVATARS OF POWER IN HIGH MEDIEVAL ICELAND
3.1	Introduction
3.2	A Survey of <i>Þjóðveldið Ísland</i> : the Icelandic Commonwealth (c. 930-1262)
3.3	<i>Íslendingabók</i>
3.3.1	Overview
3.3.2	Bishops and Chieftains
3.3.3	Lineage(s) of Power
3.4	<i>Egils saga Skallagrímssonar</i>
3.4.1	Preliminaries
3.4.2	Comparative view of <i>forn siðr</i> – the Old Way in Kingship
3.4.3	The King as Outsider
3.5	<i>Laxdæla saga</i>
3.5.1	Peculiarities
3.5.2	Icons of Kings
3.5.3	Icons of Icelanders
3.6	<i>Þórðar saga kakala</i>
3.6.1	A New Context
3.6.2	Chieftains as Kings in nuce
3.6.3	Deconstructing Kingship
3.7	Conclusion: the Icelandic Models
4	CONCLUSIONS
	BIBLIOGRAPHY
	List of Appendices

**Key words:** High Middle Ages, Norway, Iceland, Old Norse, Kings, Ideology, Power, chieftains (*goði*), *Birkibeinar*, *Baglar*, *Sverris saga*, St. Olaf, *Konungs skuggsjá*, *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, kings' sagas, family sagas, knights' sagas, Networks of Power, *Íslendingabók*, *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, *Laxdæla saga*, *Pórðar saga kakala*, mixed ideology, *rex justus*, Viking warrior king, the Stranger/Outsider, representation(s) of power.

**Abstract:** The purpose of this dissertation is to analyse the ideology of power in the High Middle Ages through the lenses of political power theory by utilizing a contrastive approach between Norway and Iceland. The starting point is that the transformation, maintenance and organization of power in the society are owed to the existence of an ideology, in the encompassing meaning of this term. Political power and ideology are elements that are central in the social, cultural, religious and historical evolution of the Nordic world from the late 8<sup>th</sup> century to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, of which special representatives are Iceland and Norway, through the multitude of historical and literary sources written there. For the Old Norse, the holders of political power were the Kings, the jarls and the chieftains (*goði*), so the purpose of this research is to explore the political history, but also sources from their literature and culture, the Old Norse sagas, in order to offer an overview of the ideology of political power in Norway and Iceland in the period from roughly 1150 to 1250.

This time frame, which spans from the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> century to the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, is limited by two important events in the development of political ideology in Norway and Iceland. First, in 1152 the Archdiocese of Niðaros was created through the efforts of Pope Eugene III, who delegated this task to Cardinal Nicholas of Albano, (Nicholas Breakspear, who in 1154 became Pope Adrian IV, the only English Pope). Jón Birgerson, the Bishop of Stavanger, was installed as Archbishop. This event represents an important moment in the development of political ideology in Norway because it marks the officialisation of the Church's effort to implement the Christian ideology of rulership over the local traditions of the Norse, in a period when the country was facing instability and turmoil as two rival parties, the *Birkibeinar* and the *Baglar* were struggling to take control of the throne. The second limit is 1262, when following the *Gamli sáttmáli* (*Old Covenant*), Iceland became part of the Kingdom

of Norway and its independent existence ceased, which resulted in a shift in its political ideology towards the model of monarchy and the diminuation of the role of its local *goði* (chieftains) as models of rulership in its literature. The originality of my project consists in the fact that I will be the first to comparatively analyse the ideology of power in Iceland, looking specifically at representations of the king during the Civil Wars period, and compare the findings to those in Norway.

Regarding the organisation of this dissertation, it shall be divided in the following parts: Chapter 1. *Theoretical Premises*, Chapter 2. *Kingship in Norway*, Chapter 3. *Avatars of Power in High Medieval Iceland* and Chapter 4. *Conclusions*.

### Chapter 1. *Theoretical Premises*

The methodology proposed is that of historical research, which is understood as the formulation or identification of a research topic, followed by literature review and sources' collection, assessment of the sources in an order that is logical and/or chronological, information and findings' synthesis, and finally the narrative exposition of the research results and the finding of a general conclusion that draws on the findings of each segment of the research.

Since the main purpose of the current thesis is to provide an overview of how the ideology of power was understood in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Norway and Iceland, it should be self-evident that the main method of research shall be *historical method*, complemented by *critical text analysis* through *philological methods* that are commonly employed in the analysis of medieval sources.

The *historical method* accredited to Leopold von Ranke (the “father of modern history”) and the Göttingen School of History involves the study and commentary of primary sources as the foundation of the historian’s work. Supposedly, the purpose of this research, that of identifying elements of the ideology of power over the period of a century, perhaps requires some of the elements of the *Annales School*, which emphasized enduring patterns of culture and civilisation (or their change), laid emphasis on the concept of *mentalité* and promoted interdisciplinarity. Nevertheless, the intention is not to provide explanations on this school of thought as more details shall be provided in the following sections together with clarifications on the notions of the ideology of power.

The three main steps of the *historical method* that will be used are:

➤ *the heuristic (investigative) stage* – the process of obtaining and selecting the source materials for the research project. This is done with the help of many professionals and institutions whose help is mentioned in the Acknowledgements section of this thesis.

➤ *the (historical) criticism stage* – the evaluation and judgement of the material under scrutiny from the viewpoint of the theory, in the present case, the ideology of power. For this research, this step of the historical method is the most important because the purpose is not to reveal new sources (sagas, runic inscriptions or archaeological evidence) relating to the ideology of power in Medieval Scandinavia, but to carry out an analysis from an innovative perspective on different primary as well as secondary sources.

➤ *the stage of synthesis and exposition* – the findings of the investigation and critical analysis shall be coherently stated in the conclusions of the thesis, thus bringing into the foreground the scientific contribution.

Other research methods that shall be used as auxiliary in fulfilling the objective of the present thesis encompass *critical text analysis* through *philological study*.

## Chapter 2. *Kingship in Norway*

The second chapter of our research, titled *Kingship in Norway*, aimed to provide an overview of the ideology of power characteristic to important historical and literary sources from 12<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> century. In each of the subchapters we have provided the context in which our sources have been written and also general historical observations that are pertinent to our research aim. Each of the subchapters have followed a hypothesis in the analysis of the ideology of power:

First, we have begun by analysing *Sverris saga*, the first of the kings' sagas (dedicated entirely to the rule of one king), which is one of the most important sources for 12<sup>th</sup> century Norway. In *Sverris saga*, we have attempted to identify the capital features of the rulers in order to understand how the model of King Sverrir influenced the political ideology of the time. We have begun from the assumptions of Sverre Bage and other scholars that from roughly the 10<sup>th</sup> century to the 14<sup>th</sup> century in Norway there existed an effort of Europeanization which brought changes on many levels (but most importantly of all, in religion).

By analysing the effort of King Sverrir to portrait himself as the heir and vassal of Saint Óláfr, and by other references to saints and the Holy Virgin, an effort appears to portray the King as devout Christian monarch, in the purpose of legitimizing his claim to the throne of Norway. The claim of Sverrir, the leader of the “rebel” faction of the *Birkibeinar*, is given legitimacy through sacred visions of Saint Óláfr, who allegedly received the king's service as

vassal and interceded for him in battle. Historians know that King Sverri's victory in the Civil War was owed to his military victories against his rivals and King Magnús, so next I have looked at whether the representations of King Sverrir evince the features of the traditional model of Viking-warrior leader. Indeed, it could be said the monarch possessed extraordinary military abilities, both personal fighting skills (in the fashion of a hero from the older Viking sagas) as well as strategic ones.

Connected to the model of the hero of old, according to the saga, King Sverrir also appears to possess the favour of Luck. By taking into consideration interpretations of the significance of luck and fortune in Nordic and Germanic societies, it became evident that, in the saga, many of King Sverrir's victories were owed either to his extraordinary luck or to the mishaps of his enemies, who often appear stronger in number, with better odds to win victory, but ultimately are defeated. The King is also skilled in the fine art of speech. Wherever he holds *thing* he manages to charm the auditorium and to convince people to join his cause, to dissuade his enemies, to encourage his soldiers. King Sverrir even has a few good words to say at the death of his rival, Magnús, honourable acknowledging the late king's merits. Honour compelled the king to follow various traditions, pagan ones – such as celebrating the Yule or recognising judgement through ordeals – or Christian ones. By taking all these factors into our view we can presume we have provided a detailed overview of some of the means through which King Sverrir was depicted as a warrior king in *Sverris saga*. Plentiful examples have been found in which the same source presents us a pious Christian monarch, but not enough to tilt the balance towards the European model of *rex justus*.

Second, we have provided an assessment of *Konungs skuggsjá*, including the context in which it was written. This time, the features of the *rex justus* model of kingship were predominant, even with some connections to Sverris saga. Namely, the role of battle-luck and friends-luck has been taken by God's favour in the second source. God's elect on earth enjoys the protection of the Lord through the piety and humility showed towards the Divinity, but his rewards are less immediate. If King Sverrir could pray and immediately obtain that – for example – the fog would be lifted from over his ships in a naval battle, in *Konungs skuggsjá* piety and humility to God is rewarded with God's grace and wisdom, which in turn favour the monarch by promoting the peace and prosperity of the kingdom. The ideal Christian King described by the Father in *Konungs skuggsjá* is a rightful judge, his rightfulness derives from his wisdom, which means that the monarch must be able to balance mercy and intransigence, but he must also be extremely knowledgeable in regards to the entire Nordic world. Wisdom

is the most important quality of the *rex justus* but is difficult to attain because it is not granted automatically through the holy unction. Wisdom means prudence and knowledge (see appendix 14).

Third, remaining in the same temporal frame, I have analysed King Hákon's rule, the saga that bears his name and I have tried to see how the *riddarasögur* translated during his reign were connected to the King's intention to transform the country after the model of the *res publica Christiana* in Western Europe. Using the research results of philological analyses on these translation I have arrived at the result that in this case as well the model of mixed ideology is apparent, only that this time the model of *rex justus* bore greater importance. The King's education, the support he offered to cultural work and his dedication to renewing the law are all hallmarks of the responsible *Rex Christianus* who rules people according to God's model, who keeps the order and metes reward and punishment to the whole world.

Fourth, in the last and shortest subchapters I have tried to find a link between this model of mixed ideology and the representations of networks of power, social classes and social relations in the mentioned sources, in order to establish a connection at the level of ideological disparities between power relations in society/ideologies of kingship in Norwegian sources and European ones.

### Chapter 3. *Avatars of Power in High Medieval Iceland*

The analysis in this chapter has included four important sources for the period 1150-1250 in the literature and history of Iceland: *Íslendingabók*, *Egils Saga*, *Laxdæla saga* and *Þórðar saga kakala*. A central point of discussion in all of these four source has been the authors' political intentions. Detailed clarifications have also been made regarding the usefulness of these sources as depositaries of elements of political ideology for the said period. Constant care has been taken to assure a critical approach, namely by always keeping in view the fact that the sagas were literary creations, which means that they cannot be expected to attempt to present historical reality. The stories they depict are all modelled after an oral historical tradition, originary Norwegian, which evolved within Iceland in the first few centuries after the country's colonisation. Still, when operating with concepts of political ideology, the sagas are excellent sources due to their conservation of the main elements of Icelandic culture from that period, including the principal political conceptions of the Icelanders.

One central point in the Icelandic tradition of saga writing was the conservation of the lineages of chieftains, which are taken back to the times when the families left Norway for Iceland. In many cases, the ancestor(s) who lived in Norway and decided to sail to Iceland did

so owing to the tyrannical policies of King Óláfr Tryggvason, but further relations with the Norwegian Kings in the sagas are described as highly beneficial. The saga heroes or their ancestors become involved with the Norwegian monarchs and are often rewarded and treated with friendship. This served the function of legitimization for the descendants, who in this manner were strengthening the territorial dimension(s) of their power through such genealogies of power. This is most evident in *Íslendingabók*, where the author, Ari (h)inn froði, claims direct lineage from the King of Norway, and through these Kings, from the ancient King-god of the Norse people, Yngvi Tyrkjakonungr. In the other three sagas, no such highly pretentious claims are made. *Íslendingabók* also represents instances where the attributes of bishops are so highly praised that they appear as powerful as chieftains.

Arguments have been brought throughout this chapter to support most scholars' view that the writing of such accounts that praised and legitimized the power of Icelandic bishops and chieftains had been possible owing to the unique political situation in Iceland, a country which had not been under the authority of any monarch from its colonisation in the 9<sup>th</sup> century until 1262. Given this nominal freedom, the Icelanders were free to describe the kings of Norway according to the historical tradition they had brought with them as former Norwegian but also in the manner that suited their political interests.

With my analysis of *Egils saga* an overview has been offered of the description(s) of Norwegian Kings in the sagas that describe similar events from the past. King Haraldr hárfagri generally appeared as a negative character in most saga, which represents a perpetuation of the founding myth of Iceland. A "myth" because depicting the power of the King as a feudal lord who exerted a strict, tyrannical control over his dominion was anachronical for 9<sup>th</sup> century Norway, when the power of the King had a pronounced personal character, not a highly territorialized one, as most of the sagas imply.

Keeping in mind that the depiction(s) of Norwegian Kings in Icelandic sagas was done so a result of the Icelanders' independence from royal authority, the hypothesis that Icelandic representations of kingship match the archetypal dual-image of the *Stranger* or *Outsider*. Why dual? As many literary critics have theorised, description of outlanders or strangers generally tend to cause a either very positive or overly negative reaction in the human psyche. This often results in the Stranger being seen either with angelic or demonic attributes. The Norwegian King's depiction in some sagas, including *Egils Saga*, and *Laxdæla saga* matches this pattern. When discussing the demonic character of kingship in the Icelandic family sagas we refer to King Haraldr hárfagri. In contrast, other rulers are depicted in an extremely positive manner,

are praised for their faith and wisdom and their rethorical abilities, and some Kings seem to possess magical abilities or to hold magical artefacts which they bestow to heroes. The case of King Æpelstan of England who provided Hákon the Good with a legendary sword – Quernbite – was detailed here.

The hypothesis of the illustration of the King as *Outsider* has been enriched with arguments from *Laxdæla saga* as well. Queen Gunnhildr konungamóðir appears in demonic hypostases in many sources, which portray her as a witch with a voracious sexual appetite. According to the saga, she became acquainted with the hero-ancestor of the people of Laxárdalr, Óláfr Páir, and granted him many gifts as well as her blessing for the protagonist's return journey to Iceland. Conversely, in *Egils saga*, the Queen appears to be the one inciting King Eiríkr blóðøx against the hero of the saga. We therefore observe two diametrically opposed depictions of the same Queen, the first angelic while the second is demonic. Also, concerning *Laxdæla saga* the idea that the heroes did not even have to perform some special quest for the King to award them his graceful treatment was confirmed.

In the same chapter the focus has shifted from representation(s) of Kings to the depiction of Icelandic rulers in the family sagas. Here, the findings of Jón Viðar Sigurdsson in the research of different models of power in the Old Norse world have been very useful in outlining the differences between the illustration of the power of the chieftain vs. the power of the King. While Kings are described with six or more outstanding features, Icelandic chieftains rarely appear with more than two or three qualities, some of them evincing only one important feature. Looking at the portrayal of Egill Skallgrímsson in the eponymous saga it was interesting to observe how his description, wearing a blue-cloak, wielding a spear, donning a golden helmet, is very similar to the image of Óðin, who wielded the famed spear *Gungnir* in the *Eddas*. The description of Egill also seems to follow the advice laid out in *Hávamál*, in regards to the obligations of a chieftain to keep his friends well-armed and equipped.

Concerning, Guðrún, the protagonist of *Laxdæla saga*, she displays many typical qualities for notable chieftains, namely her wisdom and ability to speak well, as well as being a woman of good fame; she fulfils the traditional role of women in the sagas, that of inciting men to defend their families' honour, and excels in being a fervent Christian. In fact, Guðrún's religious zeal for Christianity (since she memorised the Psalms and took pride in considering herself the first woman anchorite in the country), is almost unique for the head of a family in the sagas. Most other saga heroes, such as Egill, appear as undecided between the pagan past

and Christianity. In some sagas the hero's struggle with accepting the new religion actually makes the whole subject.

In the last part of this chapter we have turned to a contemporary sagas that describes the deeds of an Icelandic chieftain from the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Þórðar kakali. Our main purpose here was to offer an assessment of the extent to which the new political realities in Iceland during the *Age of Sturlungs* shaped a different political ideology, in which the role of the Norwegian King, who was attempting to enforce a full control over Iceland, was downplayed in favour of the role of the chieftain. We have provided instances in the saga where Þórðar is described with qualities fit for a future King, therefore the protagonist appearing as a King *in nuce*. Next, we have tried to understand to what extent the power of the Norwegian King was downplayed in the saga, arriving to the conclusion that the contestation of King Hákon Hákonarson's authority represents one of the few such examples that indicate a tendency towards Icelandic independence under a strong chieftain of the Sturlunga family.

#### Chapter 4. *Conclusions*

All things considered, we hope to have provided a convincing account of the *mixed ideology* of power as evinced in the hereby selected sources pertaining to Norway and Iceland in the period from the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> century to the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Such paradigmatic changes as the one that occurred in the Scandinavian world during the period of our investigation are emblematic and occur at turning points in history, a fact which would allow us to express hope that the current contribution to the study of manifestation(s) of power in an area of rapid political and cultural transformation reveals universal tenets that may contribute to better understanding current world-wide affairs in the context of rapid and increasing globalization and prompt mondial cultural-social interactions.

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