

**Háskóli Íslands**

**Íslensku- og Menningardeild**

**Medieval Icelandic Studies**

# **Royal Ideology in Fagrskinna**

*A Case Study of Magnús inn blindi.*

**Ritgerð til M.A.-prófs**

**Joshua Wright**

**Kt.: 270194-3629**

**Leiðbeinandi: Sverrir Jakobsson**

**May 2018**

## **Acknowledgements**

I owe thanks to too many people to list, but I would be remiss if I did not mention Julian Valle, who encouraged and advised me throughout the process, and Jaka Cuk for his company and council at numerous late night meetings. Dr. Sverrir Jakobsson's supervision and help from Dr. Torfi H. Tulinius were both indispensable help throughout the process. I owe my wife, Simone, a special thanks for her input, and an apology for keeping her up in our small room as I worked at strange hours. I cannot fully express my debt to my father, David Wright, and my uncle Harold Lambdin, whose urging and encouragement pushed me to try academia in the first place.

I dedicate this to my mother, Susanne, who would have loved to see it.

## **Abstract:**

When looking at the political thought of the kings' sagas, scholarship has overwhelmingly focused on *Heimskringla*, widely regarded as the most well-written compilation, or on the older *Morkinskinna* because it is more proximal to the 'original' sources. An intermediate source, *Fagrskinna*, is almost always overlooked, mentioned only in passing by scholars that are more interested in other texts. The limited work that has been done on this source, most prominently by Gustav Indrebø, attracts little attention and Indrebø has remained mostly unchallenged nearly a century after his writing. While there have been systemic analyses of the ideology of these sagas (by Bagge and Ármann Jakobsson, among others) they are only tangentially interested in *Fagrskinna*, with the result that this work and its unique ideology have been largely unexplored, although its subject matter predisposes it towards contributing to the discussion. Indeed, a more robust understanding of *Fagrskinna* adds directly to the contextual and theoretical basis of arguments concerning the ideology of the kings' sagas generally, and especially to discussions of *Heimskringla* since it is, at least in part, derivative.

While a comprehensive analysis of *Fagrskinna*'s political thought is beyond the scope of a masters' thesis, a case study could prove fruitful. To that end this study focuses on the account of Magnús inn blindi and his rivalry with Haraldr gilli, violent overthrow, and unfortunate end, using this divisive figure to piece together *Fagrskinna*'s conception of royal ideology in contrast to other accounts, especially *Morkinskinna* and other materials that may have been sources for the author of *Fagrskinna*. An intertextual comparison of accounts will serve as the basis for the argument, focusing on *Fagrskinna*'s unique attributes and positing a basic royal ideology for the anonymous author, ultimately arguing for an alignment with a strong view of European-Christian understandings of royal legitimacy.

## Ágrip:

Flestir fræðimenn sem hafa fengist við stjórnálagshugsun í konungasögum hafa einblínt á Heimskringlu, sem talin er merkilegasta safn konungasagna, eða á eldri Morkinskinnu, þar sem hún hefur þótt vera nær „upprunalegum“ heimildum. Næstum alltaf er horft framhjá Fagurskinnu sem liggur á milli hinna verkanna. Í mesta lagi er tæpt á henni af fræðimönnum sem eru að fást við hina textana. Það litla sem hefur verið skrifað um Fagurskinnu, mest af Gustav Indrebø, fær litla athygli. Hugmyndir hans hafa verið að mestu óumdeildar í næstum hundrað ár eftir að hann ritaði verk sín. Skipuleg greining á hugmyndafræði konungasagna, meðal annars í skrifum þeirra Sverre Bagge og Ármanns Jakobssonar, hefur lítillega snert Fagurskinnu. Það hefur leitt til þess að lítið hefur verið hugað að verkinu og einstæðri hugmyndafræði þess. Þó ætti verkið það skilið efnislega að það sé haft með í umræðunni um þessa bókmenntagrein. Ígrundaðri skilningur á Fagurskinnu mynd styrkja þann grundvöll sem rannsókn á hugmyndafræði konungasagna hvílir á, ekki síst á Heimskringlu, sem byggir að einhverju leyti á eldri verkum.

Heildargreining á stjórnálagshugsun í Fagurskinnu yrði of viðamikil fyrir ritgerð til meistaraþrófs. Eigi að síður gæti úttekt á einu tilfelli leitt til dýpri skilnings. Því er sjónum beint að frásögnum af Magnúsi blinda, samkeppni hans við Harald gilla, fall hans og harmræn endalok. Athugun á þessari persónu gerir kleift að draga fram konunglega hugmyndafræði Fagurskinnu sem er að einhverju leyti frábrugðin þeirri sem lesa má úr hinum frásögnunum, einkum frásögn Morkinskinnu og annað efni sem höfundur Fagurskinnu kann að hafa stuðst við. Samanburður á frásögnunum mun skapa grundvöll til að rökstyðja að þessi óþekkti höfundur aðhylltist konunglega hugmyndafræði sem var að mestu leyti í samræmi við ríkjandi skilning kirkjunnar í Evrópu á réttmæti konungsvaldsins.

## **Contents**

<b>1. Introduction</b>	1
<b>2. Development of <i>Konungasögur</i></b>	4
2.1 Earliest Sources	4
2.2 Vernacular Compendia	6
2.3 Interdependence of the Compendia	8
2.4 Incorporating Text-Critical Methods	12
2.5 Historical Overview	15
<b>3. Theory and Methodology</b>	18
3.1 Theoretical Background	18
3.2 Methodology	24
<b>4. Case Study: Magnús inn blindi</b>	28
4.1 Complete Omissions	28
4.2 Variations Within Scenes	30
4.3 Skaldic Poetry	37
<b>5. Conclusions</b>	39
5.1 <i>Fagrskinna</i> 's Ideal of Legitimacy	39
5.2 Reframing Magnús inn blindi	40
<b>Bibliography</b>	43
<b>Appendix</b>	46

## 1. Introduction

In the surviving records of Norway's kings, the short life of Magnús IV, or Magnús inn blindi, so called because of the mutilation he suffered at the hands of his political rival, Haraldr gilli, provides a brief glimpse into the instability of the monarchy before the 13<sup>th</sup> century. His rule was brief, and his role in the sagas of Norway's kings is one of the smaller ones; an apparently ineffective ruler who was quickly removed from power through violence. This arc is hardly exceptional: The crown of Norway was frequently the object of violent rivalries that appear frequently throughout the records of medieval Norwegian history.<sup>1</sup> Still, the brevity of this particular altercation makes it somewhat unique, and its pointed political character affords the opportunity to conduct an ideological examination of a very limited selection of characters and events without context and examples requiring a lengthy volume to adequately cover.

The sagas of Norway's kings are important sources for historical and sociological studies of medieval Scandinavia that are unavoidable in modern scholarship, especially when surveying the kings themselves. Among these is the comparatively brief *Fagrskinna*, commonly dated closely with (but following) *Morkinskinna* and preceding *Heimskringla*, which accepted stemmas suggest used both predecessors as sources.<sup>2</sup> Because of its subject matter and the existence of contemporary material, *Fagrskinna* is ideally situated for study along the lines of modern research interests, and especially for contributing to the ongoing discussions surrounding the ideology and expression of royal power in the era that produced these accounts, despite its history of being overlooked in favor of its lengthier contemporaries.

Traditionally scholars have accepted Snorri's authorship of *Heimskringla* with little reservation,<sup>3</sup> which served as grounds for a stable authorial perspective from which generalizations could then be reliably drawn.<sup>4</sup> More recently, however, scholarship has begun undermining this assumption which has historically served as the primary foundation for favoring *Heimskringla* as a source. Emblematic of this shift is Boulhosa's

---

<sup>1</sup> Sverre Bagge. *From Viking stronghold to Christian kingdom state formation in Norway, c. 900-1350*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 2010. p. 42

<sup>2</sup> Theodore Murdock Andersson. "King's Sagas." In *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A critical guide*, 197-238. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985

<sup>3</sup> Patricia Pires Boulhosa. *Icelanders and the Kings of Norway: Mediaeval Sagas and Legal Texts*. Leiden, 2005: Brill. p6.

<sup>4</sup> Snorri's supposed authorship of *Heimskringla* has not been abandoned by modern scholars entirely. The recent (2015) *Heimskringla: an interpretation* from Sawyer argues from this perspective.

*Icelanders and the Kings of Norway* in which she spends a good deal of her initial argument challenging the tendency of contemporary scholarship to read modern notions of authorship and narrative onto the medieval sources.

While the field has since reacted, it appears that most of the new efforts to broaden the focus have nonetheless skipped over *Fagrskinna* for either earlier source material or for a more general examination of the kings' sagas as a corpus. This is understandable, since its contemporaries are, in some ways, demonstrably better sources with more extensive and descriptive material. The work of analyzing *Fagrskinna* specifically for its ideology remains undone, and the most extensive treatment of the text has been mostly unchallenged for nearly a century. There have been several attempts at comprehensive analysis of other saga material, such as Sverre Bagge's *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla*, which argued for an overarching political ideology for *Heimskringla*'s author.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, Ármann Jakobsson conducted a lengthy ideological analysis of *Morkinskinna*, expanding on his dissertation in a recent book, *A Sense of Belonging*, published in 2014.<sup>6</sup> An analysis of the entire text of *Fagrskinna* in this way cannot be adequately conducted in a master's thesis, but a thorough breakdown of a smaller account within the text is manageable. My aim is to identify distinguishing features of *Fagrskinna*'s royal ideology, particularly ideas of legitimacy and transition which are highlighted in Magnús' contentious reign.

To that end, this study begins with an outline of the source material, providing the context for the surviving accounts and their relationship to each other, before giving a more detailed look at how the three compendia that are the subject of this study are connected. This is followed by an overview of the debates that have occupied scholarship in this area more recently, and especially how my thesis interacts with these developments. For context, I also provide a brief overview of the general historical development of the Kingdom of Norway during the lives of Magnús inn blindi and Haraldr gilli, the following 'civil war' period, and the development of the Norwegian monarchy leading up to the presumed composition of the compendia.

---

<sup>5</sup> Sverre Bagge *Society and politics in Snorri Sturlusons Heimskringla*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1991.

<sup>6</sup> Ármann Jakobsson. *A Sense of Belonging: Morkinskinna and Icelandic Identity c. 1220*. Odense, 2014

Once the context is set down, the study proceeds to an outline of theories of medieval political thought and royal ideology, which is used as the basis for an intertextual comparison of the accounts. The comparison is followed by my arguments concerning the ideological bent of *Fagrskinna*'s rendition, especially evident in omitted material, concluding that the writer of *Fagrskinna* is embracing a royal ideology that is far more concerned with preservation and continuation of a single, strong royal line than the other compendia. As a result *Fagrskinna* is better understood to be defending a comparatively more powerful, centralized ideal of monarchy and a decidedly less permissive understanding of legitimacy and succession than its contemporaries.

## **2. Development of *Konungasögur***

### **2.1 Earliest Sources**

The history of the Norwegian kings has been recorded numerous times through varying methods and materials, the earliest of which are no longer accessible. Unlike the family and legendary sagas, which are often considered to have pre-writing origins in the distant past of oral tradition, the *konungasögur* appear to be a recorded phenomenon that can be, with some reservations, placed in a historical context.<sup>7</sup> They are generally lumped into three categories: non-extant first sources, the Norwegian synoptics, and the vernacular compendia. In addition to these there was also a wave of independent sagas that informed the creation of the compendia, which are typically seen as having collected these newer independent compositions together for use in the creation of their own, lengthier histories.<sup>8</sup>

The initial works regarding the kings of Norway have not survived, but they are referenced by later compositions, fueling decades of speculation as to their contents and the order in which they were written. Unlike the bulk of other saga material, these early histories have stated authors, which has helped place them chronologically.<sup>9</sup> In practice discussion of ‘first sources’ nearly always distills down to two writers and their respective books. Ari, the author of *Islendingabók*, and his contemporary Sæmundr are both alluded to by subsequent writers, who reference this material in their own compositions. These writers refer to a chronicle of the kings of Norway that is attributed to Ari, with scholars theorizing that this may have originally been contained within an earlier version of *Islendingabók*.<sup>10</sup>

It is difficult to argue positively for the contents of these sources, however, as most of what is said about them merely alludes to what they contain, leaving historians and literary scholars to guess as to what other material might fit these descriptions with little objective evidence for weighing the arguments. Ari’s ‘book’ may have merely been chronological information for reference, as this is the impression that most references to his work give, and it is possible that it was initially little more than notes interspersed in

---

<sup>7</sup> Theodore M. Andersson. “King's Sagas.” pp216-217

<sup>8</sup> Shami Ghosh. *Kings' sagas and Norwegian history: problems and perspectives*. Leiden, 2011: Brill. pp4-18

<sup>9</sup> Theodore M. Andersson. “King's Sagas.” pp198-199

<sup>10</sup> Alison Finlay. *Fagrskinna*. pp3-5

*Islendingabók* rather than a separate work in its own right.<sup>11</sup> Later poems about the kings allude to Sæmundr's composition, suggesting that he covered the ten kings following Haraldr háfagri, roughly covering 858-1047,<sup>12</sup> and possibly extending further back. Beyond these occasional references there is little else that can be concretely determined about these oldest works.

Following these lost sources are the so-called synoptics, three books that are mostly intact, only one written in old-Norse/Icelandic. Their sources and to what extent they can be labeled an Icelandic or Norwegian phenomenon are subject to debate, chiefly because any source material they may have used (including, but not limited to Ari and Sæmundr) is not extant today. What that material was, how much of it was oral, and the extent to which these texts are dependent on each other are also hotly debated questions.<sup>13</sup> The *Historia de Antiquitate regum Norwagensium* of Theodoricus Monachus ends before the life of Magnús inn blindi, concluding with the reign of his father, Sigurðr Jórsalafari,<sup>14</sup> as does *Historia Norvegiae*. The other Norwegian synoptic work, *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum*, contains only a fragmented account of the beginning of Magnús' reign. None of these works are protracted, however: They are all far briefer than any of the vernacular compendia, even *Fagrskinna*.

As to where these synoptics got their information, an intriguing suggestion is that Theodoricus was relying on oral history for his work. Evidence for this claim is usually provided by citing Theodoricus himself, as he claims he is relating 'non visa sed audita' or 'not what I have seen but heard'.<sup>15</sup> This claim has not typically been taken too seriously, however, as it is doubtful that this distinction would suggest oral rather than written reception in the medieval context given that 'heard' is often used for written accounts as well. The reference may be suggestive, but in the estimation of most academics dealing with the subject it is nonetheless inconclusive. Given the general reluctance on the part of scholars to rely on oral sources it is not surprising that this speculation has not been explored further.

Between the gathering of the synoptics and the eventual emergence of the compendia, independent *konungasögur* emerge which inform the compendia, such as *Olafs saga*

---

<sup>11</sup> Alison Finlay. *Fagrskinna*. pp3-4

<sup>12</sup> Theodore M. Andersson. "King's Sagas." p199

<sup>13</sup> Shami Ghosh. *Kings' sagas and Norwegian history*. p13

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p11

<sup>15</sup> Theodore M. Andersson "King's Sagas." p210

*Trygvassonar*, *Jomsvikingasaga*, and the lost *Hryggjarstykki*, among many others.<sup>16</sup> This burst of literary activity resulted in a variety of styles and focuses, although there is an overall hagiographic overtone to the material, and several of them feature prominently in models of the source material for the vernacular compendia.<sup>17</sup> Of this material, the missing *Hryggjarstykki* would be of the most interest to this study, as it likely centered on an important character in the struggles of Haraldr and Magnús, Sigurðr Slembiðjárn,<sup>18</sup> but speculation on its content does not significantly contribute to the task at hand. It is worth noting, however, that these experiments in royal representation already demonstrate the incorporation of the more dominant European and Christian ideologies into a Norse context.

For example, the initial stories of the kings are essentially importing a European literary form into a Scandinavian setting, spreading the genre to a new audience. Many of these stories, like the famous *Olafs saga Helga* are Norwegian hagiography, attempting to turn the history of the kings into an edifying moral story in the tradition of the saintly literature being produced elsewhere.<sup>19</sup> Scholars have argued that this tradition represents an attempt at Christianizing the history with which these writers were already familiar, recasting old rulers as virtuous pagans or important figures for bringing Christianity into their realms. Additionally, the successors to these saintly figures relied on their connection to such a venerated person (and their associated relics) to concentrate power and secure a stable succession in their own reigns.<sup>20</sup>

## 2.2 Vernacular Compendia

In close succession around the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, three comprehensive histories emerge that expand on the previous records: *Morkinskinna*, *Fagrskinna*, and *Heimskringla*. Covering similar periods and often containing extended sections of nearly identical content, the connection between these works has typically been accepted as indisputable, even if the particulars of their interrelation are more contentious.<sup>21</sup> The

---

<sup>16</sup> Shami Ghosh. *Kings' sagas and Norwegian history*. pp8-11

<sup>17</sup> Theodore M. Andersson "King's Sagas." pp215-216

<sup>18</sup> Alison Finlay. *Fagrskinna: a catalogue of the kings of Norway*. p3

<sup>19</sup> Gro Steinsland, Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, Jan Erik Rekdal, and Ian Beuermann, eds. *Ideology and Power in the Viking and Middle Ages*. Leiden: Brill, 2011. p10

<sup>20</sup> Joanna A. Skórzewska. *Ideology and Power in the Viking and Middle Ages*. p333

<sup>21</sup> Shami Ghosh. *Kings' sagas and Norwegian history*. pp14-18

previously noted problem of tying source material to texts becomes more severe as time progresses, with the scholarly consensus being that these sources rely extensively on even more sources that are not preserved.<sup>22</sup> This is in part due to a long tradition of genealogically explaining the development of these accounts, in which the aim was to draw a line of sources from the earliest theoretical accounts into each surviving iteration. This approach has lost favor in more recent studies, and speculation about hypothetical source material can ultimately only contribute so much to the debate. The fact of their remarkable alignment in most of the accounts is enough to support an argument that these compendia were composed with a general knowledge of the same, or very similar source material, but this argument will be further unpacked in a later section.

There has been extensive debate as to the origins of the earlier material in these compendia, as with its predecessors, but Magnús inn blindi, being a far younger king than the divisive, perhaps legendary earlier collections, does not appear in the extant material aside from *Ágrip*, and there only briefly, as the recounting in *Ágrip* is unfortunately missing most of what it would have contained about Magnús. As a result, much of this debate is tangential to the subject matter with which this study is primarily concerned. *Morkinskinna*, for the purposes of this study, contains the oldest robust account of Magnús and Harald's reign, meaning that the discussion can be mostly contained within these three compendia.

*Fagrskinna* specifically has not been the subject of much study since Gustav Indrebø conducted his exhaustive examination early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>23</sup> This is largely because it is unfortunately situated between two texts that have compelling reasons to be preferred for study in its stead. *Heimskringla*'s adroit writing made it the predominant source for future material shortly after the three compendia emerged, and its traditional attribution to Snorri has kept it in the center of attention. That we know so much about Snorri's life and context gives scholars an advantage in leveraging arguments about his perspective and ideology, especially since Snorri's life was so bound up in the power struggles of his own context. Together, these factors have secured *Heimskringla* the preeminent place among the vernacular compendia and in discussions of Norwegian royal ideology during this period.

---

<sup>22</sup> Theodore M. Andersson "King's Sagas." pp217-218

<sup>23</sup> Alison Finlay. *Fagrskinna: a catalogue of the kings of Norway*. pp17-18

Where Snorri's literary skill and prominence are not enough to secure attention, the typical alternate response has been to look more into *Morkinskinna*, since it is believed to be older and thus, in the pursuit of more 'original' forms of these sagas and accounts, more valuable by default. *Fagrskinna* is neither the most comprehensive nor the 'most original' of the triad, which has relegated it mostly to the position of accessory in arguments primarily directed at either the older or the more developed compendium.

Whatever the reasoning behind these trends, the most thorough treatment it has received recently is most likely the introduction to Alison Finlay's translation, published in 2004, in which she makes a compelling case for *Fagrskinna*'s unique attributes and perspective,<sup>24</sup> which was part of the impetus behind this project. In her assessment, *Fagrskinna*'s unique perspective on the events is evident in places where the author seems to exclude hagiographical influences even more thoroughly than *Heimskringla*, exemplified by the scanty treatment the miraculous signs following the death of St. Óláfr. And while *Heimskringla* devotes a large portion of its text to the figure of St. Óláfr, *Fagrskinna*'s brevity is balanced across the numerous kings, a more balanced approach to the material overall.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, while *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* seem to be aware of the same sources, the author of *Fagrskinna* takes far fewer liberties with these sources than *Heimskringla*, at least where we can compare them to a known source. In that sense, then, *Fagrskinna* is valuable as a closer version to lost material, to be valued for its preservation of its predecessors.<sup>26</sup> Outside of Finlay's survey of the material, *Fagrskinna* has been used in arguments about the *konungasögur* broadly or in surveys of specific kings, but rarely as the main text.

### 2.3 Interdependence of the Compendia

With the limits set, the relationship between these texts, as most academics have understood it, should be outlined. Put briefly, *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* are proposed to rely on *Morkinskinna* for their accounts of later kings, and all three take from numerous, often lost, sources for their earlier content. Given the overwhelming similarities between the compendia it is very likely that the writers were aware of very

---

<sup>24</sup> Alison Finlay. *Fagrskinna: a catalogue of the kings of Norway*. p27

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p13

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p27

similar source material, with differences between their content largely attributable to varied focus, skill, and ideology.

Debate has raged over whether *Morkinskinna* is a first attempt to record at least some of its material. Traditional scholarship has assumed that there must be either an oral or written source for virtually all content in the compendia, and the dominant rule was to prefer written sources to oral tradition. This led to the creation of several hypothetical lost sagas from which *Morkinskinna* derived the accounts that do not appear in earlier material. This assumption is not necessary, however, and it is entirely possible that *Morkinskinna* was a pioneering effort to some extent, drawn from skaldic/oral tradition rather than written source material.<sup>27</sup>

Whatever is the case for *Morkinskinna*, the two later compendia are usually considered to be derived from its work, especially as there is no surviving source that is as exhaustive as *Morkinskinna* before its composition. There is significant overlap, not merely in scope, but in verbiage and content that tie these three together. *Heimskringla* in particular is almost identical in many places, and it is very likely that the compiler was aware of either *Morkinskinna* itself or another source with very similar contents.<sup>28</sup>

Of the three, *Fagrskinna*, also known by its title *Noregs konungs tal*, is comparatively sparse, with some scholars suggesting that it may even have been rushed to completion, its later sections under-written as a result. It is also noticeably less preoccupied with Icelanders and ‘provincial’ affairs than its contemporaries, which has led to the suggestion that its author may have been from Norway, whereas *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla* are traditionally ascribed Icelandic authorship. There are reasons to doubt this, especially the author of *Fagrskinna*’s familiarity with and adept use of skaldic poetry, usually considered a uniquely Icelandic specialization, but even this does not fundamentally challenge the idea that its author was more proximal to the Norwegian centers of power than its contemporaries, even if he was perhaps originally an Icelander.<sup>29</sup>

Early scholarship argued that *Fagrskinna* was essentially an abbreviation of *Heimskringla*, but the accepted view today is that *Heimskringla* is descended from, or at least later than, *Fagrskinna*. The simplest argument is that, given their similarities and the rigorous editing that *Fagrskinna* subjects its sources to in order to achieve its brief,

---

<sup>27</sup> Theodore M. Andersson “King’s Sagas.” p219

<sup>28</sup> Shami Ghosh. *Kings’ sagas and Norwegian history*. pp14-15

<sup>29</sup> Alison Finlay. *Fagrskinna: a catalogue of the kings of Norway*. p15

relatively dry presentation, its author would likely rely heavily on *Heimskringla* rather than *Morkinskinna* if he had been aware of both.<sup>30</sup> Other arguments rely on assuming Snorri's authorship and then placing its composition in his chronology, though this has become less convincing over time and will be explored further below.

*Heimskringla*, due to its attribution to the famous Snorri Sturluson, has always been the favorite of the three in scholarly circles, and it is not surprising that this should be the case: Compared to the others it is very thorough and well-written, containing far more detail than *Fagrskinna* and less of the moralizing character of *Morkinskinna*.<sup>31</sup> Scholars in the past have considered it to be an early form of modern history, less interested in supernatural and didactic writing than the other compendia. However, it closely parallels the general scope of its predecessors, and in fact sticks almost exactly to the bounds of *Fagrskinna*, with the notable exception of the pseudo-history of the earliest Norwegian kings. It is typically regarded as a much more realistic and 'objective' composition, a departure from the fabulous and miraculous elements of the earlier sources, which the author seems to have consciously sorted out. However, this view has been challenged as an exaggeration,<sup>32</sup> and indeed *Heimskringla* does not seem to be totally exclusive of fabulous elements: Even in the account of Magnús inn blindi and Haraldr gilli, the deposition and maiming of Magnús is followed by a series of wondrous signs that do not appear in either *Fagrskinna* or *Morkinskinna*.

Additionally, while much has been made of Snorri's methodology concerning the use of skaldic poetry as evidence, there is reason to believe that this articulation is not in fact his invention, but simply a more systematic effort than that which is already present in *Fagrskinna*. Unlike the author of *Heimskringla*, the writer of *Fagrskinna* does not acknowledge an explicit method of selection. Still, *Fagrskinna* excludes many of the stanzas used in *Morkinskinna* and ends up with a trimmed-down selection that mostly includes relevant dates or persons who would be seen as credible sources.<sup>33</sup> Thus, *Heimskringla*'s refinement appears to be an improvement on the work already started by *Fagrskinna*.

---

<sup>30</sup> Alison Finlay. *Fagrskinna*. pp17-18

<sup>31</sup> Theodore M. Andersson "King's Sagas." p220

<sup>32</sup> Carl Phepstead. "In Honour on St. Óláfr: The Miracle Stories in Snorri Sturluson's Óláfs Saga Helga." *Saga Book XXV* (2002): p304

<sup>33</sup> Alison Finlay. *Fagrskinna: a catalogue of the kings of Norway*. pp17-19

Most of the earlier material does not directly speak to the reign of Magnús and his conflict with Haraldr. The closest to an earlier account comes from *Ágrip*, but it is missing almost the entirety of the account, cutting off as Magnús and Haraldr are arming themselves for the battle at Fyrirleif and picking up with Harald's sons after the former have already died. As a result, there can be little inter-textual examination beyond the compendia, at least in this portion of the text, because there is nothing to compare to if we look further back than *Morkinskinna*.

However, recent trends, and especially the rise of text-critical methods have rocked the traditional understanding of these texts and their relationship. Recent scholars have questioned the wisdom of attributing authorship and context to artefacts that are rarely passed to us in their original form.<sup>34</sup> Given the difficulty of ascertaining a date of composition, and the speculation involved in judging what content could be 'original' in works that have no preserved manuscripts from their hypothetical first form, it is worth taking some time to defend, if not the traditional reception of these texts, then at least a moderate compromise. This is especially the important because this thesis depends heavily on the conclusion that there is a demonstrable connection between *Heimskringla*, *Morkinskinna* and *Fagrskinna*.

While the relationships previously outlined are often considered valid by most scholars, there is incessant debate over the accuracy of dating for these works, which poses significant challenge to an argument that relies so heavily on the interrelationship of the accounts they contain. To some extent the very claim that some part of one compendium is derived from another is suspect, which undermines the connection between them, at least in a linear sense, even further. But whether these texts are directly related, with material passed from one to the next, or only related by their proximity and content, there is clearly enough overlap in their narratives to support the idea that they are familiar with similar accounts and material, even if that material was not necessarily one of the other compendia. The widespread similarities between the three works strongly suggests that their compilers were, broadly speaking, aware of quite similar versions of the events they were writing, however these were preserved.<sup>35</sup> It would be more surprising that they were not familiar with the same source material, and that *Fagrskinna*'s departure from the other

---

<sup>34</sup> Patricia Pires Boulhosa. *Icelanders and the Kings of Norway*. pp30-31

<sup>35</sup> Theodore M. Andersson "King's Sagas." pp217-218

two springs from some other source than that these departures are driven by an ideological motivation.

I am proposing that *Fagrskinna*'s brevity in comparison with its contemporaries reflects a conscious choice on the part of the compiler. Some have suggested, based on its disinterest in details that the others include, that this is due to the author being constrained by an impatient patron or otherwise rushing through the composition, and indeed this was Indrebø's concession in his own study.<sup>36</sup> This may be true in part, but selection (and by extension, omission) of material is an action that reveals the intent and priorities of the mind at work. If *Fagrskinna* was composed by someone with awareness of most, if not all, of *Morkinskinna*'s content, and still saw so much material as dispensable when the other compilations evidently do not, then there is an ideology at play informing this radical difference in selection.

It is worth noting that *Morkinskinna*'s principal manuscript has a lacuna in this portion of the text, covering the section between Magnús departing so that he can be received as the new king following his father's death and the onset of the battle in Björgvin.<sup>37</sup> This is accounted for in Andersson and Gade's critical edition and translation by substituting the Íslenzk Fornrit version of *Heimskringla* which they consider to be closely related to *Morkinskinna*'s original version. The Íslenzk Fornrit edition of *Morkinskinna* also deals with the problem by including a presumably related extra source, although they substitute Fríssbók in their rendition.<sup>38</sup>

## 2.4 Incorporating Text-Critical Methods

In answer to the text-critical push and its skepticism of authorship claims, there is of course a risk in basing an argument so heavily on a known figure, as has frequently been done with Snorri Sturluson and *Heimskringla*. Nonetheless, even if it is not possible to determine a specific author, and even if the concept of authorship and the assumptions that it carries have evolved since the composition of these texts, there must still be an agent and a perspective involved in creating works like these. And whether it is right to insist that a chieftain named Snorri composed *Heimskringla* himself or not, in a society

---

<sup>36</sup> Alison Finlay. *Fagrskinna: a catalogue of the kings of Norway*. p18

<sup>37</sup> Theodore M. Andersson and Kari Ellen Gade. *Morkinskinna: the earliest Icelandic chronicle of the Norwegian kings (1030-1157)*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000. pp5, 459

<sup>38</sup> Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson. *Morkinskinna II*. Vol. 24. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 2011. p152

where literacy was not widespread the potential candidates who would have the training and resources requisite to carry out such a task is still limited to a small group with distinct and knowable characteristics.<sup>39</sup> As long as the argument acknowledges these limitations, this de-emphasis of authorship does not present an insurmountable boundary.

Unlike *Heimskringla*'s rich history of analysis conducted on the assumption that Snorri Sturluson specifically penned the earliest version, *Fagrskinna* has always been more enigmatic, and thus is less shaken by the transition away from reliance on authorship. While recent critics, particularly Boulhosa, have undermined the old assumptions about *Heimskringla*, and there is reason to question whether the evidence for Snorri's authorship anything is more than circumstantial at best, these changes only force us to reevaluate arguments made on the weight of their author specifically. By contrast, what can be known about *Fagrskinna*'s writer is limited to general information about the broad context and cues that can be picked up from the text itself, so I consider this critique to be mostly harmless to the task at hand.

Boulhosa points out that there is a fallacy in the normal assumption that the only way to treat a text seriously is to take it as a factual recounting, and I echo this sentiment.<sup>40</sup> For the sake of this argument, the historicity (or not) of these accounts is not of primary importance. Given the consistent similarities between them, and the close sequence in which they are believed to have been composed, what matters in this comparison is the selectivity the different texts show when dealing with mostly similar material, and the corresponding ideological interests these departures indicate. In a sense this comparison is extra-historical; not interested in whether the facts of the account are accurately presented. Indeed, they cannot all be accurate, as they are at times contradictory, but this does not lessen their value from an ideological point of view.

It is also true that the conception of a 'historical' work has changed since these were composed, and that unlike a modern scholar who delineates between historical and fabulous accounts, this distinction may not have been so important to the writers of these texts. The impulse to analyze them by how strictly they adhere to a realist presentation of their contents has been tempered by recent work in scholarship, and the field appears to be turning towards the conclusion that none of these are rightly understood to be a

---

<sup>39</sup> Shami Ghosh. *Kings' sagas and Norwegian history*. pp16-17

<sup>40</sup> Patricia Pires Boulhosa. *Icelanders and the Kings of Norway*. p35

historical work in the modern sense.<sup>41</sup> However, that these accounts are reflective of a mindset or ideology is not radically affected by whether the writer treated them as a modern reader or author would. The criticism, it seems to me, is actually a call to broaden the modern reception of these texts, rather than limiting the discussion to merely the historicity of the events described. A text does not have to be historical or given a ‘historical’ treatment to be ideologically weighted, and thus suitable to analyze as an ideological piece.

Whether the dating can be precisely determined or not, the context must inform the creation and intended reception of a work. Granting that there are reasons to be cautious about making sweeping assumptions from what limited information we are certain of from this period, the intractable problem of Norse-Icelandic studies is that the literary record is by far the most accessible and plentiful material we have. There is simply no avoiding written source material in this field, as there is not enough other material on which to base an understanding of these past events. Further, this study is focused on events and outlooks that are, relatively speaking, quite proximal to the writing and its writers, which minimizes the gap considerably in comparison with similar projects that were aimed at formulating Viking-age ideology using medieval source material.<sup>42</sup> So unlike studies that have focused on the legendary past that these works sometimes reference, this comparison is contrasting three views of what are comparatively recent events, events that the educated writers/compiler all have a vested interest in examining as a way of understanding their present.

Finally, the anonymity of *Fagrskinna*’s author, or whether that is what they should rightly be called, does not weaken the claim that a written work will be reflective of an ideological bent. In many cases the writings are explicit in endorsing or condemning an action and attributing the good or bad to specific moral or practical successes and failures on the part of the ruling parties. There is of course good reason to doubt the particulars of how much of the material that is available is indeed original, and to what extent it is reflective of the mindset of the hands that prepared the elusive oldest version, but this caution does not necessitate a rejection of the basic claim that we can distill some of their perspective despite our distance from their context.

---

<sup>41</sup> Shami Ghosh. *Kings' sagas and Norwegian history*. pp198-200

<sup>42</sup> Ian Beuerman pp370-372

## 2.5 Historical Overview: Magnús, Haraldr, and the Civil War Period

Magnús took the throne in 1130 upon the passing of his father, Sigurðr Jórsalafari. During his reign, Sigurðr had accepted the claim that Haraldr gilli was his half-brother, and this claim was pressed by Haraldr, who was acclaimed king by one of the regional þings, forcing his nephew to accept an uncomfortable division of the kingdom between them. This, unsurprisingly, was not acceptable to Magnús in the long term, and he ousted Haraldr in 1134, only to have him return with Danish aid that same year. After an unsuccessful defense in Bergen in early 1135, Magnús was captured, deposed, and mutilated before going into seclusion. This left Haraldr as the sole king until he was murdered by yet another pretender to the throne, and the kingdom was split between his two sons.<sup>43</sup>

This overthrow, while not at all unique in the violent history of claims to the Norwegian crown, is considered the inauguration of an especially troubled period of intermittent rivalries that carried on for most of the next century, and which were still not entirely resolved by the accepted dates of composition for the compendia.<sup>44</sup> During this period, Iceland also experienced an acceleration of politically motivated violence and instability.<sup>45</sup> The *konungasögur* that emerge during this time are commonly interpreted as searching for an explanation for the crises and speculating on possible solutions. Thus, their moralizing on the characters is not only descriptive, but also reflects an ideological understanding of how these characters and their actions precipitate the problems that befall them.<sup>46</sup> In a sense, whether a king will be successful can be attributed to their characteristics, and when a saga says from the outset that a person is mean-spirited or unpopular this translates directly into their failure as a ruler. There is a general hostility to the idea of a country having no king, which may be surprising considering that this literature was largely composed by Icelanders who, at this time, did not recognize the

---

<sup>43</sup> Knut Helle. *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008. pp369-370

<sup>44</sup> Sverre Bagge. *From Viking stronghold to Christian kingdom*. p40

<sup>45</sup> Diana Whaley. *Heimskringla: An Introduction*. London: Viking Society for Northern Research, University College London, 1991 pp9-10

<sup>46</sup> Ármann Jakobsson “The Individual and the Ideal: The representation of royalty in Morkinskinna.” *The journal of English and Germanic philology* 99, no. 1 (January 2000): pp77-78

Norwegian monarchy as their overlord. This remarkable feature has been taken as an indication of curiosity or even obsession with monarchical rule on the part of Icelanders.<sup>47</sup>

This century is also marked by the rise of institutional Christianity, which is regarded as contributing to the final centralization of the crown and the end of the so-called ‘civil war period.’<sup>48</sup> In the 1150s Norway was given an archbishop, who was granted oversight of the far-flung islands that comprised the tentatively Norwegian holdings abroad. This cultural unifier strengthened the sense of belonging to a unified kingdom over these regions which would, by the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, all capitulate to the rule of the Norwegian king. With the coronation of Magnús Erlingsson in the next decade a coordination between the monarchy and the church becomes evident, especially in their attempt at creating legal barriers to future pretenders by enshrining a legal requirement of a unified national acclamation of the king.<sup>49</sup> In the previous era (and in fact even in the story this project surveys) a series of regional þings independently issued their approval of kings, which allowed notable figures with some claim to power to secure control of regions when the presumptive king was not there, as happened in the case of Magnús inn blindi.

This change ultimately failed to prevent unrest but did lay the foundation for a centralized monarchy that would eventually bring the Norwegian church into their orbit. Around the time that *Morkinskinna*, *Fagrskinna*, and *Heimskringla*, were written, considerable consolidation had already happened, and shortly afterwards the monarchy was commissioning court literature to defend an institutional understanding of royal power and legitimacy.<sup>50</sup> These works, as well as the sagas and synoptics that precede them, can be rightly understood as, at least in part, reacting to the instability in Norway and attempting to synthesize a coherent ideology in response.<sup>51</sup> In that sense they are more than history (if the label can even be understood to apply) in that they have an ideological goal beyond recounting the events, and it is this extra-historical goal that is most relevant to the study at hand.

---

<sup>47</sup> Ármann Jakobsson “Royal pretenders and faithful retainers: the Icelandic vision of kingship in transition.” *Gardar*30 (1999): 47-65. Pp51-52

<sup>48</sup> Sverre Bagge. *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom*. pp40-42

<sup>49</sup> Knut Helle. *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia*. pp376-379

<sup>50</sup> Sverre Bagge. *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom*. pp206-211

<sup>51</sup> Wærdahl argues that this ideological consolidation played a role in the creation and consolidation of Norwegian ‘holdings’ abroad through a process of state formation.

Additionally, this development means that a proper understanding of the ideology contained in one of these texts must account for the entrenchment of Christian thought in the Norwegian and Icelandic contexts, which should be reflected in the texts. While it is reasonable to expect lingering influences to be carried forward from the pagan Norse past, the kingdom of Norway had already been substantially Christianized by the time these writings emerge, and those in power were interested in expanding Christian thought and influence within the realm, as a safeguard for their power.<sup>52</sup>

Not long after these compendia were drafted, the so-called civil war period drew to a close, typically attributed to the long reign and peaceful transition that followed the ascension of Hákon gamli, who ruled from 1217 until 1263 and reconciled the competing factions that had fueled the constant rise and fall of pretenders for decades. Customary dating places all of these texts within Hákon gamli's rule, a reign that was characterized by decreasing tensions and increased stability.<sup>53</sup> To some extent, then, it should be expected that this context, broadly speaking, applies to all of the works under examination, albeit to different degrees. It is in this setting, a kingdom in the process of coalescing after an extended period of instability, that we must understand the development of Norwegian ideas of royal legitimacy and exercise of power.

---

<sup>52</sup> Sverre Bagge. *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom*. pp148-156

<sup>53</sup> Knut Helle. *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia*. pp379-80

### **3. Theory and Methodology**

#### **3.1 Theoretical Background**

While there have been many efforts to analyze material for its political ideology by scholars of medieval Norse literature, it is difficult to describe a consistent set of methodologies that are normally applied when attempting such an examination. Scholars in this topic often present their work without explicitly breaking down their reasoning for approaching the material the way they do. Even prominent names are not immune: Sverre Bagge has written extensively on subjects relating to political ideology and thought in the era, but his arguments are largely propelled forward by the momentum of a series of assumptions with sparse explanation justifying them. This leaves the reader with the impression that these arguments are generally reasonable, but difficult to follow, and always vulnerable to questioning.

Additionally, when one considers the question of specifically royal ideology and thought, much of the groundwork and terminology is borrowed from scholarship focused elsewhere. Most scholars of kingship in the north concede that the medieval Norse conception of what a king was and should strive to be was heavily influenced by ideas emanating from the courts and writers in western and central Europe.<sup>54</sup> Thus, making an argument using the accepted theoretical and terminological conventions requires examining material that is primarily interested in the better documented rulers and courts in the west. These ideas were translated into the Norwegian context over time by the growing influence of the church in Norwegian affairs and increasing interaction between the kingdoms of Scandinavia and the more centralized monarchies.<sup>55</sup>

Much of the theoretical background for royal ideology has been consumed with discussing archetypes or ideals. Medieval Christian thought was very concerned with order and propriety; committed to the idea that all things, including kings, had specific roles to play in the correct ordering of a providentially-ordained world.<sup>56</sup> Christian thought precluded the idea that a legitimate authority could exist outside of the proper relationship it was meant to maintain. As a result, literature related to figures in positions

---

<sup>54</sup> Sverre Bagge. *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom*. pp167-170

<sup>55</sup> Þorleifur Hauksson. "Implicit ideology and the king's image in Sverris saga." p133

<sup>56</sup> Ármann Jakobsson "The Individual and the Ideal." p77

of power, and especially kings, is usually interpreted in light of this rigid sense of propriety, which ordered the rest of the world.

The assumptions bound together in a traditional understanding of ideal kingship have been given the label of *rex iustus* when applied to the office-holder, derived from arguments made by early church scholars, most prominently Augustine, whose political thought forms the foundation of later church political ideology.<sup>57</sup> Implicit in the assumption that there is such an ideal as a ‘just king’ is the corresponding contention that deviations from this ideal are unacceptable. In the orderly Christian cosmos, such deviations are inevitably accompanied by some form of judgment, a natural result of straying from the divinely established order. That is, insofar as a king is not *rex iustus* the kingdom itself will face difficulties that can be attributed to these deviations. The *rex iustus* can be assessed by his adherence to immutable principles that transcend his particular circumstances, and in a sense the king’s relationship to law is less that he makes good laws than that he applies true law, revealed through providence, to his kingdom. The king is less a law-maker than a law-uncoverer in this conception,<sup>58</sup> and as a result justice exists external to him.<sup>59</sup>

Were a king to fail dramatically at living up to the ideal, medieval thinkers reasoned that there may be repercussions that could necessitate disruption of the normal order, but not all failure could be understood as equally destabilizing. A special case of disruption was applied to kings who were ineffective, not because of vice, but due to incompetence. If, after all, a king is meant to hold certain virtues and uphold certain duties that are integral to the Christian conception of kingship, then a king who is unable to do so is effectively not a king at all, and fits the label *rex inutilis*, the useless king.<sup>60</sup> In such a case, it could be acceptable to supplant the current ruler, in order to once again establish the proper ordering of society. Arguments of this type were applied to ineffectual rulers in the west: The pope himself used a similar argument to defend the usurpation of the

---

<sup>57</sup> Gro Steinsland. *Ideology and Power in the Viking and Middle Ages*. pp9-10

<sup>58</sup> Jørn Øyrehagen Sunde (2014) argues that the conception of king as ‘law maker’ in the sense of innovating and creating new laws can be understood as an emergent process in the later part of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Prior to this, legal change still occurred, but was far more narrowly drawn and focused on resolving specific problems rather than attempting a comprehensive change in a legal system, and when more dramatic changes did occur it was understood to be a recompilation, rather than drafting a greater system.

<sup>59</sup> Joanna A. Skórzewska. *Ideology and Power in the Viking and Middle Ages* p335

<sup>60</sup> Edward Peters. *The Shadow King: Rex Inutilis in Medieval Law and Literature, 751-1327*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971. pp19-22

crown of the Franks by the Carolingian dynasty.<sup>61</sup> Ármann Jakobsson argues that this concept of the useless king is alluded to in the accounts of certain rulers contained in the *konungasögur*, and often the works are explicit in attributing the hardships associated with a breakdown of the traditional order to the ruler that, in theory, was supposed to be containing these problems. He even holds that Haraldr gilli, one of the main characters from the excerpt this study focuses on, is rightly understood as an exemplar of the *rex inutilis*.<sup>62</sup>

Edward Peters published a more thorough examination of the theory and its evolution over time in his book *The Shadow King* which argues for the development of a European royal ideology that emanates from the common understanding of what is required in order to effectively rule. Medieval thinkers were convinced that an effective authority needed more than merely a title (*nomen*) but also virtue and power. These were initially conceived of in personal terms, such that a king needed to be a powerful person and be able to control people around him, and if he could not, then he was not really a king.<sup>63</sup> By the 13<sup>th</sup> century this was developing beyond the king's person, and Peters argues for this change by pointing to the change in terminology and symbolism used to reference the king and his authority, moving from personal references to more abstract understandings like 'the crown'.<sup>64</sup>

It may be obvious at this point, but the medieval understanding of legitimate exercise of power was essentially dualistic, illustrated by stark contrasts and divisions between what is proper and what is abhorrent.<sup>65</sup> Those with the time and training required to read political treatises were given a black-and-white framework for assessing the achievements and failures of people in power, a binary that could be easily applied to most situations, comporting with the overarching Catholic Christian worldview that virtually all scholarship was indebted to in this period. This fundamental characteristic was imported with little differentiation into Norwegian political thought as well, and the juxtaposition of contrasting characters or traits is a strong cue that something beyond the pure recounting of facts is happening in a passage.

---

<sup>61</sup> Ibid 47-50

<sup>62</sup> Ármann Jakobsson. "The rex inutilis in Iceland." *Majestas* 7 (1999), pp48-49

<sup>63</sup> Edward Peters. *The Shadow King: Rex Inutilis in Medieval Law and Literature*. pp22-23

<sup>64</sup> Ibid 19

<sup>65</sup> Sverre Bagge. *The political thought of The Kings Mirror*. Odense: Odense University Press, 1987. p98

While most of these ideas predate the accounts in *Fagrskinna* and its contemporaries by centuries and originate well outside of the culture that preserved these accounts, the process of Christianization exerted a clear influence on the development of Scandinavian conceptions of royal legitimacy and exercise of power. The adoption of the organized church brought with it institutions with robust traditions of political thought. The church had been integral to the understanding and preservation of social power in central and western Europe for centuries.<sup>66</sup> It appears, from the seeming eagerness with which the Norwegian kings integrated Christianity into their realms, that they understood the strength of this ideology and sought to entrench it, and thus themselves.

This is not to suggest that the unique Norse elements of this region's political ideology were completely eclipsed by the intrusion of Christian thought. Certainly, there were competing views as to how far these imported ideas should be taken. The author of *Heimskringla* for example repeatedly emphasizes the role of a strong class of powerful magnates in advising and supporting a king, to a degree that does not mirror the ideals further west.<sup>67</sup> In contrast to the more western conception of kings, Norwegian kings had a more judicial role. The Old Norse conception of law and its ties to powerful figures changed the 'dominant' Christian perception in this new context.

Nor should an ideology be understood as monolithic: Even if in the broader sense Christian thought provided a system for understanding the proper use of power and explained specific situations in which deposition of a ruler may be acceptable, not all facets of an ideology have equal weight or are applied consistently even where they are known. In cases like this, where an ideology is being imported into a new context, it will inevitably be changed by the preexisting ideas that it challenges. Thus, it should not be surprising if certain aspects of this ideology, such as its claims about legitimacy or whether the deposition of a ruler can be acceptable, were challenged by the factions in Norway that stood to gain by resisting the new ideal.

Much has been written about the premodern Norse conception of kingship and what qualifies a person to rule. One of the most prevalent theories, argued through connections drawn in surviving written sources, is that the ruler was connected to the gods, often directly through kinship. This articulation, a form of 'sacral kingship' maintains that the

---

<sup>66</sup> Sverre Bagge. *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom*. pp157-161

<sup>67</sup> Sverre Bagge. *Society and politics in Snorri Sturlusons Heimskringla*. pp.128-129

superiority of the king, the impetus behind their authority over others, is drawn from their unique stature.<sup>68</sup> As relatives of the gods, however remote that connection, they maintain a superiority through their lineage that qualifies them for their position. The important connection between kings and gods is evident, perhaps only as a lingering influence rather than a compelling position in its own right, in *Heimskringla*, which ties the kings of Norway into the mythological past and, ultimately, to Óðinn. Fitting into the Christian context, however, Óðinn is not presented as a divine figure, but instead is euhemerized into a historical person, and his immigration out of classical mythology, supposedly heading north from Troy, suggests that *Heimskringla*'s author was attempting to place the Norwegian people, as well as their rulers, into the common Christian understanding of world history.<sup>69</sup>

In fact, there is doubt as to whether the dominant understanding was one of direct kinship with the gods, or some other form of alignment, perhaps with the chieftain or potential king controlling access to the gods in some way that lent them power. Either way this understanding would clash with the prevailing Christian understanding, in which the ruler's relation to God is not one he controls, and in which his power is given by God's grace to serve as a vicar in service to a larger cosmological end. This new relationship was not one that relied inherently on the parentage and lineage of the king, but on the impartation of authority from providence. The king was appointed, and his appointment carried obligations to act as a proper image of God, the ultimate ideal king.<sup>70</sup> Thus there is a direct conflict between these two conceptions of legitimacy, and whether this is found primarily in the person of the king and their unique bloodline or in external recognition of their exceptionalism by God.

Whether the older perception was really so important as has been argued by previous scholarship, it certainly was not as influential by the time the compendia were gathered, but the fact that these pagan myths retained an explanatory function well into the Christianization of Norway suggests that their ideological influence was not entirely supplanted. Instead, what changed was the expectation of certain behaviors. The king was no longer deserving of his position merely by virtue of his parentage but ought to be

---

<sup>68</sup> Gro Steinsland. *Ideology and Power in the Viking and Middle Ages*. p16

<sup>69</sup> Ibid 19

<sup>70</sup> Gro Steinsland. *Ideology and Power in the Viking and Middle Ages*. pp62-63

assessed by his adherence to an external ideal of kingly behavior.<sup>71</sup> In some sense the king was not merely an individual, but also an image of an agreed upon form. This ideal, articulated throughout Christian thought, was governed by the four cardinal virtues of rulership: temperance, wisdom, fortitude, and justice.<sup>72</sup>

The concerns of the period and culture also make their way into the more explicit formulations of political thought in this era. Within a few decades of the presumed compilation of the compendia, someone in the Norwegian court produced *Konungs Skugsjá*, a political tract that deals explicitly with the question of proper royal authority, and which echoes the concerns that were especially heavy for a society emerging on the other side of a particularly turbulent period. The author of *Konungs Skugsjá* is evidently quite concerned with the risk that more than one person might claim the throne, and even uses a special term to denote this unstable condition: the ‘dearth.’ In fact, a considerable portion of the text is devoted to expanding on this image and illustrating how unnatural this condition is for a society, which Sverre Bagge has used to argue that its author was primarily concerned with preserving sole succession, even at the cost of the traditional Norse ideas of hereditary succession, in which every legitimate son was considered a rightful claimant to the father’s holdings.<sup>73</sup> Thus, even as the new ideology of legitimacy challenged older understandings, the chaos that followed multiple pretenders exercising theoretically legitimate claims to power appears to have produced a reaction in Norwegian political thinkers, especially at the higher levels of their society. This tempering sought to limit the circumstances and rationales for unsettling centralized authority, with the aim of mitigating instability in the future.

Factionalism was not a unique problem for Norway, however. Medieval European monarchs were constantly balancing their aspirations for power against the reality that they were reliant on other, powerful magnates that could potentially threaten their rule. A critical component of the political thought that developed, then, assessed the ability of a given king to manage these magnates, disapproving if he was unable to do so or seemed to make too many concessions to those who he rightly ought to rule over.<sup>74</sup> *Heimskringla* seems to argue for a different approach, and depicts kings as fundamentally like their

---

<sup>71</sup> Ármann Jakobsson “The Individual and the Ideal.” p74

<sup>72</sup> Þorleifur Hauksson. “Implicit ideology and the king’s image in Sverris saga.” p130

<sup>73</sup> Sverre Bagge. *The political thought of The Kings Mirror*. pp49-51

<sup>74</sup> Edward Peters. *The Shadow King: Rex Inutilis in Medieval Law and Literature* p104

magnates, not necessarily superior.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, powerful magnates have a positive role in *Heimskringla*'s understanding of political power, supporting and advising the king for the betterment of the kingdom at large. The division between a good and a bad king is not whether they are reliant on magnates, as this is inevitable, but rather in their personal abilities to control and influence the people they must rely on.

This depiction reframes the dynamic between kings and their magnates, shifting it from fundamentally combative or competitive to a relationship of mutual reliance. In the eyes of the elites there appears to be a desire to stake out a strong positive role for an aristocracy, somewhat softer than the strict dichotomizing of the strong *rex iustus* ideological mold. By contrast, the centers of power and especially the king himself appear to be more supportive of a stronger monarchy, and the courtly literature commissioned in this period reflects a competition of ideologies that can also be seen in the vernacular compendia.<sup>76</sup>

### 3.2 Methodology

To explain my methodology, it will be helpful to first take a survey of other work that has attempted similar examinations. Initial efforts to understand the *konungasögur* were devoted to delineating the useful from the useless, searching for arguments that could defend the material as factual history, characterized by the Icelandic school of historians. These studies were conducted with a posture of trust in the fundamental accuracy of the written material, treating it as factual history with a patina of outside corruptions that must be peeled back. Scholars from this era, occupying much of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, frequently approached the texts with an eye toward determining what the 'original' content was, from which they could paint their historical analysis. Methodologically, most of their work has been superseded by subsequent scholarship, which turned from trying to extract tangible facts and instead focused on analyzing the sources for their ideas and assumptions.<sup>77</sup> Still, scholars continue to approach these histories and other Icelandic literature with an eye towards their political aims.<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>75</sup> Sverre Bagge. *Society and politics in Snorri Sturlusons Heimskringla*. pp134-135

<sup>76</sup> Sverre Bagge. *The political thought of The Kings Mirror*. pp212-15

<sup>77</sup> Patricia Pires Boulhosa. *Icelanders and the Kings of Norway*. pp6-9

<sup>78</sup> Axel Kristinsson, Lisa Fraser, and Hanne Monclaire's works are all reflective of this general trend, and are good examples of the variety of methodologies that fall under the broader study of Old Norse-Icelandic political thought.

Among the most prominent names in specifically Norse conceptions of political thought, Sverre Bagge has written several books on the subject over the course of decades, and the influence of these works is unavoidable, especially since, in their aim, they are not far from the goal of this project. Bagge has since been criticized for his dogged focus on concepts that are thoroughly modern in character, without clarifying the distinctions being made within his work.<sup>79</sup> He often invokes concepts like ‘history’ and ‘statehood’ and, while acknowledging that these were almost definitely not perceived the way we see them today, does not always explain how his methodology will account for these differences. In the introduction to his work on *Heimskringla*, for instance, he is forward about the difficulties associated with drawing conclusions about a society from a work composed by an author who is, in most ways, quite different from most people in the period. Having done this, however, he simply says “I have no standard method of solving this problem, but I shall try to distinguish between explicit comments in the text and what can be read between the lines, and I will compare him to other, contemporary authors.”<sup>80</sup> This has subsequently been found unsatisfactory and more recent scholars have moved away from his approach, though the difficulty remains.

Though he has fallen out of favor to some, his work remains one of the closest to the aim of this project. While some of the criticism he has received is valid (and indeed, he appears to expect the critique from his acknowledgments in his work) it can be overstated. Much has been made of his assumptions of authorship in the case of *Heimskringla*, and the context of these compositions, but he qualifies his assertions. Moreover, he does not radically reimagine the traditional understanding of these eras with his works. He is not a figure of the distant past like Indrebø, he is an active scholar today, and is certainly aware of the text-critical turn. Indeed, he has been publishing alongside these developments as they have occurred. In light of the critique that has been cast on projects of this nature generally, I will now explain how my argument intersects with these criticisms.

There is an inherent difficulty in arguing from these texts to a general ideology, but this critique applies with less force to the current work: Simply put, the ideologies are on display in these works through their depictions of royal figures. I am not making an argument as to which view was dominant in certain regions at a particular time. Because

---

<sup>79</sup> Shami Ghosh. *Kings' sagas and Norwegian history*. pp179-180

<sup>80</sup> Sverre Bagge. *Society and politics in Snorri Sturlusons Heimskringla*. p6

this project is merely contrasting accounts of similar events, whether they represent a generalized feeling is almost irrelevant, at least for the sake of this argument, since what is being compared are the specific portrayals themselves. If anything, the possibility of competing, contemporary ideologies strengthens the argument that these accounts have contrasting views that can be pieced together through comparisons.

Thus, my methodology relies on the assumption that there is a clear connection in content between these three texts, and that the differences in selection can be attributed to differences in focus that reflect competing ideologies in the time leading up to the resolution of the civil war era in Norway. Because their content and context are inextricably tied to the use of and claims to power, their ideological bent must be at least partially related to theories of royal power and legitimacy.

The typical method for arguing about ideology in these sources is to examine the source material in light of what is known about political thought in the era in which we think the source originates. Thus, Ármann Jakobsson and Bagge establish a dominant mode or modes for understanding kingship, relying on arguments and structures they find repeated elsewhere, and then explore particular accounts or presentations in the sources.<sup>81</sup> The bulk of the argument consists of aligning the depictions in these established ideological channels in order to reach conclusions about what sort of ideology is being defended in the presentation, or how the account's focus interacts with political thought that is generally believed to be common in the period. Implicit in these kinds of arguments is an assumption that the lives of kings serve a didactic purpose beyond merely relaying facts. This lesson is part of the intended message of the writing and carries at least as much weight as the historical information the account contains. This assumption is, to me, a sound one, although carrying the arguments to their conclusion depends heavily on a degree of certainty as to what medieval thinkers believed about kings and power structures that some are uncomfortable with.

In light of the theory outlined above, the question remains whether *Fagrskinna* omits too much material to be of use in the didactic framework of analyzing kings. It would seem that, in stripping these accounts down to their barest form, much of the context is removed from the story, material that may be necessary for understanding the extent to

---

<sup>81</sup> Examples of this approach can be found in Bagge's *Society and Politics* and Ármann Jakobsson's "The Individual and the Ideal."

which these figures fulfill or fail to reach the ideal of kingship. Indeed, Ármann Jakobsson relies heavily on the *þættir* to demonstrate the kingly qualities of various figures, and these have been thoroughly removed from *Fagrskinna*'s retelling.<sup>82</sup> Thus, it could be argued that most of the didactic value is missing in *Fagrskinna*, leaving little to interpret to defend an argument as to *Fagrskinna*'s particular ideology. However, I contend that the exclusions in this particular saga are ideologically driven, and can be seen as a conscious effort to reframe the presentation of an ineffective king and downplay the virtues of his rival. If we accept that *Fagrskinna*'s compiler was aware of the portrayal of king Magnús contained in *Morkinskinna* or an older common source, and aware of the way these portrayals were meant to be taken,<sup>83</sup> these changes taken together amount to a systematic rewriting of the characters of Magnús and Haraldr, as the passages that are cut down or removed entirely are those that criticize Magnús or explore the virtues of Haraldr. Omission indicates the priorities of the editor, and in the case of Magnús and Haraldr, *Fagrskinna* has a slant that becomes more obvious when compared to its contemporaries.

---

<sup>82</sup> Ármann Jakobsson "The Individual and the Ideal." p76

<sup>83</sup> Theodore M. Andersson. "King's Sagas." p218

## **4. Case Study: Magnús inn blindi**

### **4.1 Complete Omissions**

The most immediately striking thing about *Fagrskinna* when compared to the other compendia is its brevity. In the Íslenzk Fornrit editions, *Heimskringla* sprawls over three volumes, *Morkinskinna* takes two, and *Fagrskinna* just shares one with *Agrip*. It is not surprising, then, that the most noticeable differences in *Fagrskinna* are details, or at times entire scenes, that are missing from its account. While some of this can be accounted for by difference in scope (*Heimskringla* explored the semi-mythical origins of the Yngling dynasty, for instance)<sup>84</sup>, it is a safe generalization that *Fagrskinna*'s writer presents a significantly trimmed-down version of most of its contents when compared with the other compendia.

This becomes apparent fairly early in reading through the passages about Magnús and Haraldr, as *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla* both contain stories about their relationship well before their struggle for power in Norway that do not appear in *Fagrskinna*. The transition from king Sigurðr Jórsalafari to a split kingdom comes very abruptly in *Fagrskinna*, with very little for a reader to add to the context of the situation outside of Harald's appearance before the king to test his parentage. *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla*, by contrast, include lengthy scenes of the future rivals interacting while Sigurðr is still reigning. Perhaps most iconic of these is a bet between the two in which Haraldr is challenged to outrun Magnús on foot, while the other rides a horse. The two accounts are rather alike, so *Morkinskinna*'s version will be expounded here, with clarification where *Heimskringla* differs.

At the onset of the section where this story appears, Magnús overhears Haraldr bragging about the swift men in Ireland and eventually making the claim that some there can outrun a horse. Magnús inserts himself into the conversation, berating Haraldr and calling him a liar. Magnús then proposes a wager: his gold ring against Haraldr's head, that Haraldr cannot run as fast as he claims. At this, Haraldr protests that he did not claim he could run so swiftly, only that some in Ireland can. After more angry words, they part company for the night.

---

<sup>84</sup> Shami Ghosh. *Kings' sagas and Norwegian history*. p17

The next morning, Haraldr is summoned to Magnús, who is on his horse, and despite Haraldr's protests about the length of the course, they set off to race. The first time they match each other's speed, and Magnús accuses Haraldr of holding onto the saddle-girths to keep up. But the second time, Haraldr stays ahead of the horse the entire race. Irritated, Magnús then accuses him of having a head start. The third time, Haraldr waits until Magnús has already run ahead, and then overtakes the horse, beating him to the end by such a length that he had time to lie down and rise again as Magnús approached.

In *Morkinskinna*'s rendition, the reigning king weighs in on the foolish sport, judging for the audience that these two are unfit to be kings, one for his foolishness, and the other for his meanness. *Heimskringla* omits the king's judgment, but retains the story, which is not mentioned at all in *Fagrskinna*.

*Morkinskinna* further foreshadows the turbulent relationship between these two characters even earlier, during the trial to prove Haraldr's lineage. He succeeds in the trial, walking across seven glowing hot ploughshares in front of the king, as in *Fagrskinna*. Following the test, the king's son loudly declares his view that Haraldr handled it poorly and is reprimanded for the unnecessary hostility. While this scene is also present in *Heimskringla*, Magnús is not openly antagonistic, and in fact is not prominently featured as a character in that account. *Fagrskinna* relates that Magnús resented Haraldr and a number of others agreed with Magnús's view,<sup>85</sup> but avoids explicit commentary on whether this resentment is appropriate, unlike *Morkinskinna*.

While the lengthier accounts make an effort to explore Haraldr gilli's reign, including stories about his generosity to a prominent bishop and other successes, *Fagrskinna* rather abruptly transitions from Magnús leaving for the monastery and Haraldr consolidating his control over Norway to the man who will eventually kill Haraldr: Sigurðr Slembiðjákn. This gives the impression that *Fagrskinna*'s author sees Haraldr's reign as a problem to be corrected, shifting immediately to a potential solution to the disruption when the others detail his achievements.

Another, somewhat baffling change in *Fagrskinna* is the omission of Magnús' iconic death scene: There is no mention of Magnús' death in *Fagrskinna* at all, he simply disappears from the narrative in the battle where the other two compendia detail his demise. Magnús, of little use in combat from being maimed during his unfortunate

---

<sup>85</sup> Bjarni Einarsson. *Ágrip Fagrskinna*. Vol. 29. Reykjavik: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1985. p321

deposition, is recorded as dying along with his bodyguard while being carried to safety, a spear thrust killing them both, and the other accounts take the opportunity to praise the virtue of his loyal bodyguard, Hreiðar Grjótgarðsson.

#### 4.2 Variations Within Scenes

Not all differences are omissions, however; sometimes the same scene is reproduced with minor changes. When Haraldr is driven from Norway following the battle of Fyrirleif, all three accounts differ in the way they depict Magnús' decision to disband the levies. *Fagrskinna*, predictably, is the driest, merely telling that the levies were sent home, and Magnús went west, followed by Haraldr's return to challenge his nephew once more.

“Eptir Fyrirleifarorrostu lagði Magnús konungr allan Nóreg undir sik ok fór um haustit norðr til Björgvinjar, ok fóru þá heim lendir menn flestir til búa sinna.”<sup>86</sup>

“After the Battle of Fyrirleif King Magnús took control of the whole of Norway, and went north to Björgvin in the autumn, and then most of the *landed men* went home to their estates.”<sup>87</sup>

The surviving versions of *Heimskringla* are not neutral about this decision, however, and to varying degrees lay the blame for Haraldr's resurgence at Magnús' feet. The main manuscript for *Heimskringla* says that he was advised explicitly against dismissing the levies, and decided to ignore this advice.

“Magnús konungr lagði land allt undir sik eptir orrustu þessa. Grið gaf hann öllum mönnum, er sárir váru, ok lét græða sem sína menn ok kallaði sér þá land allt. Hann hafði þá allt it bezta mannval, er í var landinu. En er þeir réðu ráðum sínum, þá vildi Sigurðr Sigurðarson ok Þórir Ingiríðarson ok allir inir vitrustu menn, at þeir heldi flokkinum í Víkinni ok biði þar, ef Haraldr leitaði sunnan. Magnús konungr tók hit með einræði sínu, at hann

---

<sup>86</sup> Ibid p322

<sup>87</sup> Alison Finlay. *Fagrskinna: a catalogue of the kings of Norway*. p259

fór norðr til Björgynjar ok settisk þar um vetrinn, en lét lið fara frá sér, ok lenda menn til búa sinna.”<sup>88</sup>

“King Magnus laid the whole land under himself after this battle. He gave mercy to all of the wounded men, and allowed them to be tended as his own men, and claimed all the realm for himself. He then had choice of all the best men that were in the realm. And when they counseled together, Sigurðr Sigurðarson and Þórir Ingiríðarson, and all the wisest men wanted to retain an army in Víkin and wait there, in case Haraldr came from the south. King Magnús took his own counsel, and he went north to Björgvin and wintered there, and he let his men go from him, and the *landed men* to their homesteads.”<sup>89</sup>

Compared to the other account, then, *Fagrskinna*'s compiler is not merely the most concise, but the exclusion of material has the effect of defending Magnús, or at least shielding him from direct criticism.

The central scene in Magnús' reign is relayed in all three accounts, but here again *Fagrskinna* differs in a small but significant way from its contemporaries. When news that Haraldr has returned and is coming to confront Magnús reaches him, he attempts to recall his men, but many do not answer the summons, leaving him considerably outmatched by his rival. It is at this point that Magnús summons his best advisor, Sigurðr Sigurðarson, to counsel him on how best to deal with the interloper. In all three accounts, his advice is the same, but *Fagrskinna* presents his counsel in a different order than the other two.

In all three, Sigurðr's first suggestion is that Magnús send him and other great men to negotiate a division of the kingdom between them, much like the arrangement before Haraldr was ousted. Magnús rejects this advice because, having just consolidated the kingdom, it would be a shame to divide it without a fight. In *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla* Sigurðr follows this initial suggestion with, first, the gruesome advice of assassinating and replacing the disloyal magnates who have thus far evaded his summons,

---

<sup>88</sup> Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson *Heimskringla III*, Vol. 28. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag. 1951. p282

<sup>89</sup> The Erling Monsen translation was consulted throughout the project, but for stylistic reasons I have supplied my own translation instead.

and finally the disgraceful but perhaps necessary step of flight. Finally, the councilor realizes that Magnús will not take any course, and leaves him to his fate. Sigurðr's second suggestion is different in *Fagrskinna*: Whereas the other two accounts have Sigurðr advising the king to kill and replace some of the magnates with others who will answer the call to arms, *Fagrskinna*'s account has Magnús consider retreating to Þrándheimr first, only suggesting replacing the magnates as the last resort. This departure suggests that *Fagrskinna* weighs the merits of the arguments differently, especially if we assume that the order that Sigurðr's advice is presented is meant to progress from most to least desirable.<sup>90</sup>

Magnús' mutilation also varies in some significant ways between accounts, though all three agree in the fact of his mutilation. *Fagrskinna*'s account says that Magnús has his eyes gouged out and is castrated before going to live in a monastery. The other accounts have him lose one (*Heimskringla*) or both (*Morkinskinna*) of his feet, and *Heimskringla* is not explicit about whether his maiming includes genital mutilation or merely other forms of torture. Additionally, both *Heimskringla* and *Morkinskinna* spend some time trying to distance this mistreatment of a rightful king from his successor: *Morkinskinna*'s account lays the blame for Magnús' fate at the feet of Haraldr's advisors, explicitly condemning the fate Magnús suffers. Again, the omissions appear to be one-sided, serving to defend Magnús in comparison with the pretender, Haraldr:

“Síðan váru áttar at stefnur við vitra menn hvat gøra skyldi við Magnús konung. Þar var þá með honum Hákon faukr móðurbróðir hans, inn vænsti maðr, ok Ívarr Qzurarson. Ok urðu þau órræði at Magnús var frá ríki tekinn ok at hann mætti þá eigi konungr kallask. Þá var hann seldr í hendr konungs þrælum, en þeir meiddu hann, stungu út augun, hjoggu af fótinn ok geldu hann. Ívarr Qzurarson var blindaðr. Hákon faukr war drepinn. Fell Magnús svá í vald Haralds konungs ok allt ríki hans. Var þetta verk illt ok ókonungligt, því at liðsmenn réðu því meirr en konungr, ok fylgði annat eigi betra.”<sup>91</sup>

---

<sup>90</sup> Text and translation of the scenes is found in the appendix.

<sup>91</sup> Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson. *Morkinskinna II*. pp161-162

“...Then there were consultations with men of wisdom to decide what to do with King Magnús. With him were his uncle Hákon faukr, a very handsome man, and Ívarr Qzurarson. The outcome was that Magnús was deprived of his throne and could no longer be titled “king.” He was then turned over to the king’s slaves, who maimed him. They put out his eyes, chopped off his feet, and gelded him. Ívarr Qzurarson was also blinded and Hákon faukr was killed.

In this way Magnús fell into King Haraldr’s hands and lost his realm. The deed was wicked and not worthy of a king, but it was determined more by his advisers than by the king himself.”<sup>92</sup>

The details included in this telling give the reader more context by which to excuse King Haraldr for making an un-kingly decision. This is especially clear when compared to the *Fagrskinna* telling:

“Þá kómu menn Haralds konungs á skipit, ok varð þá Magnús konungr handtekinn, ok var hann í gæzlu Haralds konungs um hríð ok var þá um ráðit hans mál. Í þessum fundi fell ekki margt manna ok flestum váru grið gefin. Svá segir Halldórr skvaldr ... Eptir þetta var Magnús konungr bæði blindaðr ok geldr, en Rienaldr byskup ór Stafangri var hengðr úti í Hólmi við valslengjuna.”<sup>93</sup>

“Then King Haraldr’s men reached the ship, and King Magnús was captured, and he was in the custody of King Haraldr for some time while his case was discussed. In this encounter not many men were killed, and most were given quarter. So says Halldórr skvaldri: ... After that King Magnús was both blinded and castrated, and Bishop Reinaldr of Stafangr was hanged out on Hólmr near the catapult.”<sup>94</sup>

---

<sup>92</sup> Andersson, Gade *Morkinskinna: the earliest Icelandic chronicle of the Norwegian kings* p364

<sup>93</sup> Bjarni Einarsson. *Ágrip Fagrskinna*. pp325-326

<sup>94</sup> Alison Finlay. *Fagrskinna: a catalogue of the kings of Norway*. pp261-262

Significantly, the account in *Fagrskinna* also excludes the reasoning that Magnús should be somehow removed from calling himself king, continuing to call him by his title even after he has been maimed. The author apparently does not think this line of reasoning is significant, suggesting that he does not understand legitimacy and succession in the same way as the writers of the other accounts.

There is also a noticeable absence of focus on Haraldr's justification for his claim to the throne. *Fagrskinna*, as stated above, abruptly transitions from the previous king's death to co-rulership:

“Eptir andlát Sigurðar konungs váru þeir til konunga teknir, Magnús, sonr Sigurðar konungs, ok Haraldr Magnússonr, bróðir Sigurðar konungs, ok hafði sína hirð hvárr þeira, ok eigi höfðu þeir lengi báðir verit konungar, áðr en ósætt gørðisk á miðli þeira, ok svá mikit var at því, at hvárr þeira hjó bú fyrir oðrum, ok því næst drápusk þeir menn fyrir.”<sup>95</sup>

“After the death of King Sigurðr, Magnús, son of King Sigurðr, and Haraldr Magnússon, brother of King Sigurðr, were accepted as kings, and each of them had his own court, and they had not been kings together for long before dissension set in between them, and it became so serious that each of them destroyed estates belonging to the other, and next they were killing each other's men for it.”<sup>96</sup>

In both other accounts attention is focused on Haraldr's interactions with Magnús' father, his promise not to claim the throne while Magnús is alive, and the argument for why this vow is not binding:

“Þá lét Sigurðr konungr kalla Harald til sín ok segir honum svá at hann synjar honum eigi skírslu til faðersnis, með því at hann vill [þat binda með eiði], þótt honum berisk þat faðerni sem hann segir, at hann skal eigi beiða

---

<sup>95</sup> Bjarni Einarsson. *Ágrip Fagurskinna*. pp321-322

<sup>96</sup> Alison Finlay. *Fagrskinna: a catalogue of the kings of Norway*. p258

konungdóms meðan Sigurðr konungr lifir eða Magnús konungr. Ok þessu var játat.”<sup>97</sup>

“Then King Sigurdr had Haraldr summoned to him and told him that he would not oppose an ordeal to prove his paternity, with the stipulation that he \*commit himself to an oath\* that, should his paternity be confirmed, he would not lay claim to the throne as long as King Sigurðr and King Magnús lived. That agreement was made.”<sup>98</sup>

*Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla* seem to present the king as troubled by this newcomer and taking steps to preempt him claiming the throne: Clearly this mysterious figure could present trouble for his son. *Fagrskinna*’s scene does not mention oaths or hint at the risk that Haraldr could disrupt a peaceful succession. Since this material is not attested in *Fagrskinna*, it is not surprising that the debate over his claim to the throne does not appear either:

“Haraldr var þá í Túnsbergi, er hann spurði andlát Sigurðar konungs, bróður síns. Átti hann þá þegar stefnur við vini sína, ok réðu þeir þat af at eiga Haugabing þar í býnum. Á því þingi var Haraldr til konungs tekinn yfir hálf land. Váru þá kallaðir þat nauðungareiðar, er hann hafði svarit fǫðurleifð sína af hendi sér.”<sup>99</sup>

“Haraldr was in Túnsberg when he heard of the death of King Sigurðr, his brother. He then met with his friends, and they decided to hold Haugabing there in the town. At this þing Haraldr was taken to be king over half of the realm. It was then declared a forced oath that he had foresworn his inheritance.”

Unlike *Fagrskinna*, this account relays that Haraldr’s supporters believed his vow was made under duress, despite the earlier oath to leave his claim to the throne of Norway for

---

<sup>97</sup> Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson. *Morkinskinna II*. p147

<sup>98</sup> Andersson, Gade *Morkinskinna: the earliest Icelandic chronicle of the Norwegian kings* p355

<sup>99</sup> Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson *Heimskringla III*. p279

as long as his brother and nephew are alive. This suggests that *Heimskringla* and *Morkinskinna* are attempting to legitimize the reign of Haraldr gilli, presenting his parentage and the questionable legitimacy of the foreswearing as arguments against adhering to the oath he swore to Sigurðr. While *Fagrskinna* does mention the trial, it does not so much as mention Haraldr's oath or his breaking of it. This comports with the general picture that *Fagrskinna* is dismissive of Haraldr's legitimacy altogether, consequently not sparing any time to dwell on an oath to foreswear a meaningless claim.

Also in this comparison, we can see that the procedure of succession is far more important in the lengthier accounts than in *Fagrskinna*. *Fagrskinna* skips the acclamation of Haraldr as co-king by the Haugaping, skipping the legal process by which kings were granted authority over the various regions of Norway at that time.<sup>100</sup> The scene between Haraldr and the people of Konungahella illustrates further that Haraldr is generally held to have some legitimate claim to the throne by the other sources:

“Haraldr konungr kom til Konungahellu með lið þat, erhonum hafði fylgt ór Danmørk. Þá hófðu þeir þar samnað fyrir, lendar men ok býjarmenn, ok settu fylking upp frá býnum. En Haraldr konungr gekk af skipum sínum ok gerði men til bóndaliðs ok beiddi af þeim, at þeir verði honum eigi vígi land sitt, ok lézk eigi mundu meira beiðask en hann átti at réttu at hafa, ok fóru men milli. Of síðr gáfu bænr upp samnaðinn ok gengu til handa Haraldi konungi. Þá gaf Haraldr til liðs sér lén ok veizlur lendum mǫnnum, en réttarbætr bóndum þeim, er í lið snørusk með honum.”<sup>101</sup>

“ King Haraldr came to Konungahella with the men which had followed him out of Denmark. Then the *landed men* and townsfolk assembled against him, and set a force out of the town. But King Haraldr came from his ships and sent word to them, and bid them not to keep him from his own land by force, as he wanted no more land than what he had a right to have, and men mediated between them. And later they gave themselves

---

<sup>100</sup> Knut Helle. *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia*. p370

<sup>101</sup> Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson *Heimskringla III*. p.283

into King Haraldr's hand. To win favor Haraldr gave rewards and paid the *landed men* which were with him for their losses.”

When Haraldr attempts to return to Norway, the loyal people of Konungahella initially band together to resist his landing, prompting Harald to request that they disperse, and citing his right to claim power in the kingdom as a reason they should do so. It has already been established that Haraldr is a generous and typically kind person, and so the townsfolk disperse and ultimately recognize him as their lord. This transition from opposition to submission is predicated on Haraldr's right to the throne, something that the townsfolk apparently recognize as legitimate. He appeals that Norway, at least partially, is ‘his land,’ and this is granted by the people of Konungahella, who have already demonstrated their commitment to the normal order by standing up for the absent Magnús.

This is further established by Sigurðr Sigurðarson's council scene. In all versions of this account, he suggests splitting the kingdom on the basis of Haraldr's rights, but these have only been established at any length in *Heimskringla* and *Morkinskinna*. In the lengthier versions, then, there is an argument being built over the course of the rivalry that supplanting the current king is, all things considered, not too extreme a disruption of the established order. While not ideal, Haraldr is a legitimate claimant, less mean than Magnús, and ultimately a suitable candidate to rule over the realm. The omissions and changes throughout *Fagrskinna*'s account combine to undermine this argument by eliminating most of the context that the other versions provide.

Magnús' story does not end with his deposition, although he becomes a secondary character to the dynamic Sigurðr slemba after the latter goes on the run, having earned widespread disapproval over his dishonorable slaying of Haraldr. For the most part Magnús is not an independent agent for the remainder of his life, but appears to be a tool used by Sigurðr to strengthen his support in Norway. For most of Sigurðr's story, Magnús is following in his company, mostly in a series of misadventures which fail to accomplish much, leading to the unfortunate demise of both Magnús and Sigurðr.

### 4.3 Skaldic Poetry

There is, in addition to plain narrative deviations, a difference in the presentation of poetic material that is quoted throughout these accounts. *Morkinskinna* includes far more

skaldic poetry than either of the other compendia, although it is notable that *Fagrskinna* includes some that are not extant in *Morkinskinna*.<sup>102</sup> The author of *Heimskringla* lays out an explicit methodology for using skaldic poetry as reference material, a section that has been examined at length by numerous scholars. By contrast, most mentions of *Fagrskinna* and skaldic poetry are dismissive of its own selection, as it appears to be less methodical and more haphazard.

Skaldic poetry is not included, primarily, to be used as a documented source in the style of more modern historical arguments. Rather, they are most often a reflection on the event they concern, not simply an independent confirmation as to the fact of the event in question. As noted before, it is considered an ‘Icelandic’ phenomenon, even by the early work of Theodoricus Monachus.<sup>103</sup>

The variation between the accounts, in terms of the citation and inclusion of skaldic verse, is not as pronounced in the sections that this study is centered on as elsewhere in the accounts. As a result, the question of skaldic poetry and its value is better left for the more thorough studies that have been conducted, or a more focused future work that is better able to deal with these questions than the small section contained in this thesis.

---

<sup>102</sup> Shami Ghosh. *Kings' sagas and Norwegian history*. p15

<sup>103</sup> Ibid 20-21

## **5. Conclusions**

### **5.1 *Fagrskinna*'s Ideal of Legitimacy**

*Fagrskinna*'s presentation of kingship, reflected in its depiction of the conflict between Magnús and Haraldr gilli, is strikingly inflexible on the question of royal legitimacy when compared to the fuller accounts of the other vernacular compendia. The compiler uses his account to present a pro-royal position that is markedly hostile to division of the kingdom or muddying the line of succession, and appears to be actively substituting older models of legitimacy and royal power with a more 'mainstream' European understanding.<sup>104</sup> This is obvious throughout if the selection and omission of material is interpreted as an ideologically driven choice, rather than simply an accident of a hurried scribe, but also in the smaller differences between the accounts.

From the start of the saga, there is a clear ideological distinction between the versions. *Fagrskinna*'s account refuses to legitimize Haraldr's claim explicitly. Although his trial to prove his parentage is relayed, this is not presented in such a way that the reader leaves with the impression that he has a claim to the throne. Rather, he is portrayed uneventfully as the king's brother, without any time spent worrying about his ability to interfere in the eventual succession. His rights to kingship are only acknowledged by *Fagrskinna* in the counsel scene by Sigurðr Sigurðarson, a scene with extremely similar wording and presentation between accounts. Presented in isolation, it is far less compelling than the more thorough case made in *Heimskringla*.

But it extends beyond merely ignoring Haraldr's claim to royal lineage, which the other accounts present as credible claims to the throne. In doing this, *Fagrskinna* is staking its ideological side, rejecting the old idea that all siblings had an inherent claim to their predecessor's titles, and attempting to read back a different ideal in its place. The author deliberately excludes the context, which was accessible to them, that rationalized his pretension to the throne. Haraldr's ascension is a sudden, unexpected change, never hinted at being a possibility before the kingdom is divided, which is a dramatic shift from the presentation in *Heimskringla*.

Further evidence of a shift in ideology is found in *Fagrskinna*'s omission of the Haugaping. In eliminating this element, the account is deemphasizing the old method of taking rulership over Norway: regional councils. Where the other compendia detail the

---

<sup>104</sup> Gro Steinsland. *Ideology and Power in the Viking and Middle Ages*. pp11-12

method through which the kingdom was divided, *Fagrskinna* does not, and this affects the way Haraldr's rise appears to the reader. Haraldr in *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla* has both a claim to the throne through his parentage and some regional legitimacy through the acclamation of the Haugaþing. In *Fagrskinna* he is simply there, an obstacle to Magnús rule and an unnatural interruption of the proper way for a kingdom to function, emphasized in the immediate collapse of their co-regency into violence. The system is presented as unnatural and untenable in *Fagrskinna*, precipitating the chaos to follow through a disruption of ideal succession.

The portrayal we are given in *Fagrskinna* reads much more like a strong central European ideology than the more uniquely 'Norse' take on the king. If these are interpreted, not simply as omissions, but as conscious selection, the change in Haraldr's depiction regarding the throne itself is enough to suggest that the author of *Fagrskinna* was trying to reinforce a better model of royal legitimacy than his predecessors. The events precipitating Haraldr and Magnús' conflict, presented this way, are in effect an argument for the importance of a stable line of succession with one clear successor, an ideological goal that was important in at least some circles during the early years of Hákon gamli's reign.<sup>105</sup>

## 5.2 Reframing Magnús inn blindi

Less compelling, but still a possible indicator of an ulterior motive, is the omission of any mention of Magnús' mean-spiritedness, a fact that is agreed on by the other surviving material. His interactions with Haraldr prior to their co-regency are especially unflattering in this regard, reinforcing the claim that these accounts make later that Haraldr was well liked while Magnús only had followers out of loyalty to his father. These omissions have the effect of softening his image, or perhaps more accurately blurring his personality to the point where he is more or less inert. Still, if the writer had access to *Morkinskinna* and its sources, the fact that Magnús appears neutral seems to be an active emendation of the content, since the other accounts are consistently unflattering.

This refurbishing of his image extends even to defense of his bad decisions. The other sources openly criticize Magnús' dismissal of the levies following his victory at Fyrirleif,

---

<sup>105</sup> Hans Jacob Orning *Unpredictability and presence: Norwegian kingship in the High Middle Ages*. Leiden: Brill, 2008. pp 336-338

presenting it as an arrogant or foolish decision made in spite of wise counsel to do otherwise. The foolishness of the decision is highlighted both in the moment, through his portrayal as either ignoring or spiting his counsellors, and during the central council scene, which *Heimskringla* and *Morkinskinna* present with an explicit condemnation on the part of Sigurð Sigurðarson. *Fagrskinna* contrasts these presentations by depicting the scene as merely an unfortunate problem which befalls king Magnús, and to which there is no ideal solution. The reader is not given any information that would suggest that dismissing the levies is a bad decision.

In *Fagrskinna*, there is no acknowledgement of Haraldr's good qualities. His widely known generosity, a critical factor (if we believe the other accounts) in his accumulating enough followers to challenge Magnús' succession, is completely absent, making his rise to power enigmatic and unnatural. Episodes in which Haraldr's generosity is a key component, such as his helping the bishop Magnús after securing power for himself, are expunged. Even his piety before the battle of Björgvin, in which he promises to dedicate a church to a saint if he is granted victory, is skipped by *Fagrskinna*. In the process, Haraldr is changed from an amenable, if not particularly effective, ruler into a disruptive pretender who has neither a claim nor any redeeming qualities. With these two characters, muting their personalities as *Fagrskinna* does has the effect of making Magnús more palatable and Haraldr more ominous.

Much like how the advice given to Magnús is excluded, effectively shielding him from criticism over what the other sources seem to agree was a poor decision, Haraldr's counsellors are omitted from the scenes surrounding Magnús' deposition and maiming. While *Heimskringla* and *Morkinskinna* attempt to mitigate Haraldr's responsibility for the cruelty that Magnús suffers, either relegating the deed to thralls or blaming the decision on bad counsel, *Fagrskinna* does nothing to distance Haraldr from what the sources agree is an improper treatment of a king.<sup>106</sup> He is thus an improper pretender to the throne, and morally inadequate due to his mistreatment of a legitimate king.

Similarly, the author's exclusion of practically every event of Haraldr's reign does not appear to be neutral. It is possible that this is due in part to the author being more interested in battles or other parts of the stories, but *Fagrskinna* does not merely condense Haraldr's reign, as is the case more generally when comparing *Fagrskinna* to the other texts. Haraldr

---

<sup>106</sup> Bjarni Einarsson. *Ágrip Fagurskinna*. pp325-326

is all but eliminated from the text as an agent, reduced to an interloper in his ascension and skipped in favor of the man who will kill him once king Magnús has been deposed. Indeed, taken together, the omissions and variations in *Fagrskinna* amount to a de-characterization of an established figure. Haraldr gilli emerges from *Fagrskinna* as barely a character at all. This is more than condensing, this is selection to make a point.

With the argument laid out, some tentative claims can be put forward as to the ideology expressed across these scenes. It appears that the author is espousing something more akin to what we find in *Konungs skuggsjá*, a robust Christianization and centralization of the Norwegian monarchy, interested in single succession and clean transitions from one legitimate monarch to the next.<sup>107</sup> *Fagrskinna* does not just disapprove of the interruption of Haraldr, or his character flaws. Rather, the portrayal of Haraldr is ideologically informed; he is not portrayed as a king any more than strictly necessary, because he is not properly understood to be a king in the estimation of the author of *Fagrskinna*. The writer does not have to view this as altering the facts of the account, but merely as a reframing in order to defend the ‘correct’ understanding of what royal succession is.

This places the author firmly in the camp of those defending a powerful central monarchy, more akin to later works like *Konungs skuggsjá* in ideology than *Heimskringla*’s emphasis on a robust, supportive aristocracy. In this saga *Fagrskinna* appears to have an ideological alignment more in line with later courtly literature produced well into the centralization of Norwegian monarchical power. Thus, *Fagrskinna* is not merely a heavily trimmed or rushed presentation of the same material as its contemporaries, but perhaps offers a developed and dramatic ideological departure from the view that characterizes the other histories.

---

<sup>107</sup> Sverre Bagge. *The political thought of The Kings Mirror*. pp214-215

## Bibliography:

### Primary Sources:

- Andersson, Theodore Murdock, and Kari Ellen Gade. *Morkinskinna: the earliest Icelandic chronicle of the Norwegian kings (1030-1157)*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000
- Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson. *Morkinskinna II*. Vol. 24. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 2011
- Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson *Heimskringla III*, Vol. 28. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag. 1951
- Bjarni Einarsson. *Ágrip Fagurskinna*. Vol. 29. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag. 1985
- Finlay, Alison. *Fagrskinna: a catalogue of the kings of Norway*. Leiden: Brill, 2004.
- Laurence, Larson Marcellus, trans. *The King's mirror: Speculum regale-Konungs skuggsjá*. New York: The American Scandinavian Foundation, 1917.
- Theodoricus, Peter Foote, David MacDougall, and Ian McDougall. *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium: An account of the ancient history of the norwegian kings*. London: Viking Society for Northern Research University College London, 1998

### Secondary Sources:

- Andersson, Theodore Murdock. "King's Sagas." In *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A critical guide*, 197-238. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985
- Andersson, Theodore Murdock. "The Unity of *Morkinskinna*." In *Sagas and the Norwegian experience: 10th International Saga Conference*. Trondheim: NTNU, 1997.
- Axel Kristinsson. "Lords and Literature: The Icelandic Sagas as Political and Social Instruments." *Scandinavian journal of history* 28, no. 1 (2003): 1-17.
- Ármann, Jakobsson. "The individual and the ideal: The representation of royalty in *Morkinskinna*." *The journal of English and Germanic philology* 99, no. 1 (January 2000): 71-86.

- Ármann, Jakobsson. "Royal Biography." In *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, edited by Rory McTurk, 388-402. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.
- Ármann, Jakobsson. "Royal pretenders and faithful retainers: the Icelandic vision of kingship in transition." *Gardar* 30 (1999): 47-65.
- Ármann, Jakobsson. "The rex inutilis in Iceland." *Majestas* 7 (1999), 41-53
- Bagge, Sverre. *The political thought of The Kings Mirror*. Odense: Odense University Press, 1987.
- Bagge, Sverre. *Society and politics in Snorri Sturlusons Heimskringla*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.
- Bagge, Sverre. *From Viking stronghold to Christian kingdom state formation in Norway, c. 900-1350*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 2010.
- Boulhosa, Patricia Pires. *Icelanders and the Kings of Norway: Mediaeval Sagas and Legal Texts*. Leiden, 2005: Brill.
- Fraser, Lisa. "Royal entertainment in Morkinskinna, Heimskringla, and Fagrskinna." *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 15 (2005): 37-49.
- Ghosh, Shami. *Kings' sagas and Norwegian history: problems and perspectives*. Leiden, 2011: Brill.
- Helle, Knut. *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008.
- Monclair, Hanne. "Appearances matter: conceptions of leadership in the king's saga." In *Sagas and the Norwegian experience: 10th International Saga Conference*. Trondheim: NTNU, 1997.
- Orning, Hans Jacob. *Unpredictability and presence: Norwegian kingship in the High Middle Ages*. Leiden: Brill, 2008.
- Peters, Edward. *The Shadow King: Rex Inutilis in Medieval Law and Literature, 751-1327*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971.
- Phelpstead, Carl. "In Honour on St. Óláfr: The Miracle Stories in Snorri Sturluson's Óláfs Saga Helga." *Saga Book* XXXV (2002): 292-306
- Sawyer, Birgit. *Heimskringla: an interpretation*. Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2015.

- Steinsland, Gro, Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, Jan Erik Rekdal, and Ian Beuermann, eds. *Ideology and Power in the Viking and Middle Ages*. Leiden: Brill, 2011.
- Sunde, Jørn Øyrehagen, "Daughters of God and Counsellors of the Judges of Men: Changed in the Legal Culture of the Norwegian Realm in the High Middle Ages" In *New Approaches to Early Law in Scandinavia*, Stefan Brink and Collinson, Lisa, eds. Turnhout, 2014: Brepols. pp. 131-184
- Whaley, Diana. *Heimskringla: An Introduction*. London: Viking Society for Northern Research, University College London, 1991.
- White, Paul A. "The Latin men: The Norman sources of the Scandinavian kings' sagas." *Journal of English and German Philology* 98, no. 2, 157-69.
- White, Paul A. *Non-native sources for the Scandinavian Kings' Sagas*. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Wærdahl, Randi Bjørshol. *The Incorporation and Integration of the King's Tributary Lands into the Norwegian Realm C. 1195 and 1397*. Leiden: Brill, 2011
- Porleifur, Hauksson. "Implicit ideology and the king's image in Sverris saga." *Scripta Islandica* 63 (2012): 127-35.

## Appendix: Text and Translation of Counseling Scene

### **Morkinskinna:**

“Þá svaraði Sigurðr Sigurðarson: “Hér kann ek at leggja gott ráð til: Lát þér skipa skútu með góðum drengjum ok fá til at stýra mik eða annan lendan mann at fara á fund Haralds frænda þíns. Ok bjóða honum sættir eptir því sem réttlátir menn gera milli yðar, þeir sem eru í landinu, ok bjóðið at hann hafi hálf ríki við yðr. Ok þykki mér líkligt með orðafulltingi góðra manna at hann þekkisk þetta boð, ok verði þá sætt með yðr.” Magnús konungr svaraði: “Ek vil ok eigi þenna kost, eða hvat stoðar þá þat er vér unnum allt ríkit í haust undir oss ef vér skulum nú miðla hálf ríkit? Ok gefið hér til annat ráð.” Þá svaraði Sigurðr: “Svá sýnisk mér sem lendir menn þínir setisk nú heima ok vili nú eigi koma til þín, þeir er í haust báðu þik heimleyfs. Gerðir þú þá mjök móti mínum ráðum er þú dreifðir þá því fjölmenni er vér höfðum, því at ek þóttumk vita at þeir Haraldr konungr myndu aþtr leita í Víkina, þegar er þeir spyrði at þar væri höfðingjalaust. Nú er þat til annat ráð, ok er þat illt, ok kann þó vera at dugi: Gør til gesti ok annat lið með þeim; lát fara at lendum mǫnnum heim ok drepa þá er eigi vilja skipask við þína nauðsyn, en gef eignir þeira þeim mǫnnum nokkurum er yðr eru øruggir, þótt áðr sé eigi mikils virðir. Látið þá keyra upp fólkit; hafið eigi síðr illa menn en góða. Farið síðan austr í móti Haraldri með þat lið sem þér fáid.” Magnús konungr svaraði: “Óvinsælt mun þat verða at láta drepa mart stórmenni ok hefja upp lítlmenni. Hafa þeir jafnan eigi síðr brugðisk en verr skipat landit. Vile k nú heyra enn fleiri ráð þín.” Sigurðr svaraði: “Vandask mér nú ráðagerðirnar er þú vildir eigi sættaskok eigi berjask. Fǫrum vér þá norðr til Þrándheims, þannig sem landsleg ermest fyrir oss; tǫkum lið þat allt um leið sem vér fám. Kann þá vera at þeim Elfargrímum leiðisk at rekask eptir oss.” Magnús konungr svaraði: “Eigi vile k flýja fyrir þeim er vér eltum í sumar – ok ráð mér betra ráð.” Þá stóð Sigurðr upp ok bjósk braut at ganga ok mælti: “Ek skal ráða þér þat er ek sé at þú vilt hafa ok framgengt mun verða: Sit hér í Björgyn þar til er Haraldr konungr kemr með her manns, ok munuð ér þá annathvært þola, bana eða skammir.” Ok var Sigurðr ekki lengr á þessi stefnu.”<sup>108</sup>

“Sigurðr Sigurðarson replied: “I can offer good counsel: Take a ship’s cutter manned by good fellows and place me or some other district chieftain in charge. Dispatch them to

---

<sup>108</sup> Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson. *Morkinskinna II*. p159

King Haraldr, your kinsman, and offer him reconciliation on terms worked out between you by just men in our land, such that he will have half the realm jointly with you. It seems to me likely, with the intercession of good men, that King Haraldr will accept this offer so that there may be a reconciliation between you.”

Then King Magnús replied: “This is not the plan I desire. What good did it do us to win the whole realm last fall if we are now to divest ourselves of half the realm? Devise another counsel.”

Sigurðr Sigurðarson replied: “I have the impression that your district chieftains who asked leave to return to their estates last fall are sticking close to home and are in no hurry to join you. You acted in a way quite contrary to my advice when you dispersed the numbers we had at our command because I had the feeling that Haraldr and his men would return to Vík as soon as they learned that there was no one in command there. Now there is another plan available, although not a good one, but it might work. Dispatch your ‘guests’ (men at arms) with an armed following and have them go to the homes of the district chieftains who will not respond to you in your need and kill them. Give their lands to men you can rely on, although they have not amounted to much before. Let them round up men, bad as well as good, and go east to do battle with Haraldr with whatever force you can raise.”

The king replied: “It will be unpopular to have such distinguished men killed and exalt men of little worth. They have often been no more reliable and have administered the land less well. I wish to hear other counsels from you.”

Sigurðr answered: “The counsels are now harder to come by since you will neither make peace nor war. Let us go north to Þrándheimr, where our chief strength resides, and gather as many troops as we can. It may then turn out that the fellows from Elfr (Götaälv) get tired of chasing us.”

The king replied: “I do not wish to flee from the men whom we chased away last summer. Give me a better plan.”

Then Sigurðr stood up and prepared to go away, saying: “I will then give you the advice that I can see you want to hear and is inevitable. Sit tight here in Björgvin until Haraldr comes with a huge army. Then you will suffer one of two things, death or shame.” With that, Sigurðr departed from the council.”<sup>109</sup>

---

<sup>109</sup> Andersson, Gade *Morkinskinna: the earliest Icelandic chronicle of the Norwegian kings* pp362-363

### **Fagrskinna:**

“Þá kallaði hann til sín Sigurð Sigurðarson, Nefsteinssonar. Han var mikill höfðingi ok allra manna vitrastr. Ok spurði Magnús konungr hann ráða hversu háttu skyldi. En hann svaraði á þá lund: “Herra”, sagði hann, “til þess kann ek góð ráð leggja, ef þér vilið nýta. Gørið mik eða annan lendan mann móti Haraldi, frænda yðrum, ok látið bjóða hónum sætt, svá sem enir beztu menn leggja ráð til í báða staði, bjóða hónum þat ríki, er hann á at réttu at hafa, ok eru svá margir menn vitrir ok góðviljaðir, með Haraldi konungi, at þetta ørendi munu flytja gjarna við hann.” Þá svaraði Magnús konungr: “Litla hríð njótum vér þá þess sigrs, er vér skulum nú upp gefa at óreyndu, ok eigi vil ek þat, geftil annat ráð, hversu ek skal halda landinu.” Þá svaraði Sigurðr: “Þat er þá mitt ráð at fara á brott Gulapingslögum ok norðr í Þrándheim ok freistið, ef þér fáid styrk af Þrøendum.” Þá svaraði konungrinn: “Mun eigi þá Haraldr konungr leggja allt landit undir sik austan, ef vér flýjum undan?” Þá svaraði Sigurðr: “Enn er eitt ráð til ok er illt, gørið til gesti ok látið drepa einn lendan mann eða tvá, þá er nú sitja heima ok vilja eigi nú koma til yðar, ok gefa þær veizlur, er þeir hafa hafðar, þeim nokkurum, er hér eru með yðr ok þér trúid vel. Kann þá vera, at aðrir sé við ok vili eigi bíða Heiman þvílakra heimsókna.” Þá svaraði konungrinn: “Þetta ráð mun verða óvinsælt ok kann vera, þó at ek láta drepa lenda menn mína ok fæ ek oðrum lén þeira, kann vera at þeir sé mér eigi betri.” Þá stóð Sigurðr upp ok gekk brott ok mælti: “Hví skal ek eigi gefa yðr þat ráð, herra, er ek sé at þér vilið hafa, sitja hér í Björgvin þar til er Haraldr kømr með öllu liði sínu ok muntu þá verða annat hvárt at flýja eða þola meizlur eða dauða at þriðja kosti.”

110

“Then he summoned Sigurðr, son of Sigurðr Nefsteinsson, to him. He was a great leader, and wiser than any other man. And King Magnús asked him to advise how to deal with it. He answered in this way:

‘Lord,’ he said, ‘I know a good plan for this, if you are willing to take it. Send me or another *landed man* to see your kinsman Haraldr, and let him be offered a reconciliation according to the advice of the best men on both sides, and offer him the power he has a right to possess; there are so many men of wisdom and good will with King Haraldr that it will be easy to persuade him to accept this proposal.’

---

<sup>110</sup> Bjarni Einarsson. *Ágrip Fagurskinna*. pp323-324

Then King Magnús replied, ‘We will have had little time to enjoy the victory by which we subjected all this land in the autumn, if we are now to give it up without a try, and I am not willing to do that; suggest another way for me to keep the land.’

Then Sigurðr replied, ‘Then my advice is to go away from here out of Gulapingslög and north to Þrándheimr, and try whether you can get support from the Þrændir.’

Then the king answered, ‘Will not Haraldr then take possession of all the land to the east, if we flee?’

Then Sigurðr replied: ‘There is one further plan possible, though not a pleasant one; send the *gestir* and have them kill one or two of the *landed men* who have stayed at home and will not come to you, and give the rights of feasting which they have owned to some of those who are here with you and whom you trust well. It may be then that others will be by and will not want to wait for such visitors at home.’

Then the king replied, ‘That course will be unpopular, and if I kill my *landed men* and give their revenues to others, if may be that they will not treat me any better.’

Then Sigurðr stood up and went away, and said, ‘Why should I not give you the advice, lord, which I can see you want to take, to stay here in Björgvin until Haraldr comes with all his force, and then you will have either to flee or suffer mutilation, or, a third possibility, death.’<sup>111</sup>

---

<sup>111</sup> Alison Finlay. *Fagrskinna: a catalogue of the kings of Norway*. pp259-260