

Politics and Personal Abilities in Iceland, Norway and Orkneys

The aim of this presentation is to compare the personal abilities of earls of Orkney (*jarlar*), kings of Norway (*konungar*) and Icelandic chieftains (*goðar*) in sagas written on Iceland, mostly in the 13th century, and how qualities attributed to these three groups of secular leaders expose significant differences between these three societies.

We will start this discussion by looking at the descriptions of three rulers and the key concepts the sagas use to describe them. The Icelandic chieftain Gizurr Þorvaldsson (d. 1268) “became a great chieftain, intelligent and powerful”.¹ Earl Þorfinnr Sigurðarson of Orkney (d. 1065) “grew to become a great chieftain. He was unusually tall and strong [...] a forceful man, greedy for fame and fortune. He did well in battle, for he was both a good tactician and full of courage”.² Finally King Haraldr Harðráði [Hardruler] (d. 1066) who “distinguished himself above all other men by wisdom and resources of mind [...] He was the bravest of all men, and he was also victorious [...] King Harald was most greedy of power, and of all distinction and honour. He was very generous to friends who suited him”.³

Shrewdness is the characteristic that the sagas emphasise most in descriptions of the chieftains on Iceland, and use to explain why some chieftains survived the power struggles while others perished. On the whole, the smartest, most politically savvy chieftains became the most powerful. Gizurr Þorvaldsson is a good example of such a chieftain. He waited as long as possible before making up his mind. He did not make decisions until he could be virtually certain of what the outcome would be and thus of what would be best for himself and his supporters. This emphasis on the chieftains’ wisdom shows that the political battles in the Free State were usually fought with wits, and rarely with weapons. Power struggles were a question of mental tactics and political manoeuvres.

The kings’ sagas emphasise the importance of astuteness, as in the saga of Haraldr Harðráði, who was “stronger and stouter than other men, and so wise that nothing was impossible to him, and he had always the victory when he fought a battle; and he was also so rich in gold that no man could compare with him in wealth”.⁴ However, wisdom was just one of many abilities good kings required for success.

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1: Sts I, 402.
2: Íf XXXIV, 43.
3: Íf XXVIII, 198–199.
4: Íf XXVIII, 95.

Orkneyinga saga only mention the earls' cleverness in a few cases, and it appears as though this ability was of less consequence for the earls of Orkney than it was for kings in Norway or chieftains on Iceland. This departure may be due to the predominant activities of the Orkneys, where Viking raiding was more important than in the other two societies, hence the *Orkneyinga saga*'s particular attention to the personal abilities that result in victory in war and battles. To be a successful warlord, one usually has to be intelligent, so the *Orkneyinga saga* is indirectly stressing this personal quality.

One would expect the sagas to articulate the legal expertise and role of the secular leaders in legislation, but this is not the case. Though Icelanders with law skills are mentioned in the sagas frequently, chieftains are hardly ever included among them. Although the legal knowledge of the chieftains is hardly ever mentioned, most of them were well versed in the law. This was taken for granted, so there was no need to mention it. The law was a critical tool in the political game, which the chieftains could use to their advantage to put pressure on their opponents. For this reason, a good understanding of the law was essential.

The legal knowledge of the earls of Orkney is not mentioned, and on only a few occasions are kings of Norway said to be in possession of this ability, the reason being that this ability did not play any significant role in the political struggle in Norway and on the Orkneys. However, the Norwegian kings did participate in the legislation process, and sometimes used new laws to create popularity among the householders. Even though kings of Norway officially had control over the Orkneys, they were never involved in establishing laws there. There were only two cases in which the earls of Orkney were involved in organizing new laws. Nonetheless, it is rather likely that the earls controlled legislation on Orkney, and this fact was so obvious in itself that it was usually not worth mentioning. Consequently, the sagas do not give us a complete picture of the secular leaders' involvement, but through descriptions of their appearance and personal abilities underline the most important areas of activity.

The sagas place a great deal of emphasis on the generosity and wealth of kings, earls and chieftains. Gifts and feasts were used to create and/or renew ties of friendship, and it was through friendship that secular leaders built up their power base. Strong obligations of loyalty were associated with friendship; therefore it was the only means secular leaders had to ensure support. If the recipient could not afford to give a gift in return, the gift was to be paid for by rendering services. Otherwise, it could be taken back, and it was the service or a counter-gift that ensured the right to own or dispose of the gift. Because of the strong obligation to reciprocate, gifts were a good instrument by which secular leaders could bind supporters to them.

In all three societies, powerful secular leaders were described as *vinsalir*, that is, a person rich in friends. Generous leaders achieved great honour and thus more individuals wanted to be their friends. The generosity of the kings, earls and chieftains is usually expressed by the distribution of wealth down through society. However, the kings usually gave gifts to chieftains in Norway, whereas the earls and chieftains gave gifts to householders. The gift-giving process could not stop: if the secular leaders did

not continue to arrange feasts and give gifts, their friends would start looking for other, more generous leaders. The powerbase was therefore highly unstable, and boiled down to the economy of the leaders.

The reciprocity between secular leaders and their friends was the fundamental basis of friendship, and if the leaders failed to provide their friends with gifts or to arrange feasts, they knew that their support would fade away. This notion of mutual obligation attached to friendship was an intrinsic component of Norse culture. Another important aspect of friendship that we see in all three societies was the obligation of the leaders to support and protect any friends who were involved in disputes. Neglecting to perform this duty meant they could not expect their friends' support in return at a later point. Helpful, resolute and generous leaders became *vinsælir*; in other words, they became powerful, and on this foundation could further expand their power.

Sagas describing kings and earls, and especially in the portrayals of kings, extol the virtues of strength, fighting and leadership skills in battle. The societies of Norway and Orkney were more concerned with wars and armed conflicts, and were therefore more violent than Icelandic society in the 11th and 12th centuries. The power struggle between kings dominated the political scene in Norway during this period, while the earls of Orkney engaged in wars and plundering.

In the description of the leaders in the three societies, the sagas reveal an important difference between the political games that were played in these societies. The main difference was that Icelandic society was more peaceful than the two others, so the sagas paid more attention to the chieftains' cleverness, where as in Norway and on the Orkneys, the descriptions of the rulers focus on their gift for leading men into battle and their warlike abilities.

The main point of this comparison between kings, earls and chieftains is that all the sagas were written in Iceland. Can we safely assume that the saga authors give an accurate and trustworthy picture of the differences between the three groups of secular leaders? This question is fundamental to the study of Norse culture. It does appear that the saga authors were aware of the differences between the three societies, otherwise one would expect more Icelandic anachronism in the stories about kings and earls. We should not, however, overestimate the saga authors' capabilities. Although they may have made their mistakes, we are nevertheless left to rely on the picture they present, since it is the best we have.

References

- Íf IV = *Eyrbyggja saga. Brands þáttur Öruva. Eiríks saga rauða. Grœnlendinga saga. Grœnlendinga þáttur.* Íslenzk fornrit. Ed. by Matthías Þórðarson and Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, Reykjavík, 1935.
Íf XXVIII = *Heimskringla III.* Íslenzk fornrit. Ed. by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Reykjavík, 1951.
Íf XXXIV = *Orkneyinga saga. Legenda de sancto Magno. Magnúss saga skemmri. Magnúss saga lengri.* *Helga þáttur ok Úlfs.* Íslenzk fornrit. Ed. by Finnþogi Guðmundsson, Reykjavík, 1965.
Sts = *Sturlunga saga I-II.* Ed. by Jón Jóhannesson *et al.*, Reykjavík, 1946.