

Olaf Haraldsson's Relics – an Example of 'Hagiocracy' in Scandinavia

The analysis of the ideology of leadership in the medieval North would not be complete without the study of the source material concerning the three Scandinavian kings: Olaf II of Norway (k. 1015–1028/30), Knut IV of Denmark (k. 1080–1086) and Eric IX of Sweden (k. 1150–1160), who were reputed to be saints. The questions which are central to my research concern the cult of those individuals and the perception of their authority as reflected in written sources dating from about 1000–1250.

Since the number of extant writings is quite large, it provides relatively good information about the way this authority was skilfully used to promote certain ideologies concerning the rule of particular sovereigns. The impact of such ideologies (understood, to use the simplified popular definition, as “a set of ideas proposed by the dominant class of a society to all members of this society”) on medieval mentality was crucial.¹ As

the main purpose behind an ideology is to promote change in a society through a normative thought process, a study of this kind may enable us to better understand socio-political changes in medieval Scandinavia.

The holy heritage

The model of “the suffering leader” was quite a common model of sainthood in the medieval North.² Throughout the Middle Ages, the majority of the saints venerated in the West (especially in non-Mediterranean countries), were kings and princes. One cannot fail to note that a large number of the kings who were considered to be saints died a violent death, whether on the battlefield or struck down by their enemies. In both cases, they were later venerated as martyrs.³ The phenomenon continued for a few centuries as the evidence for the *cultus* of Saint Olaf, Eric and Knut demonstrates. Olaf died in a battle which was the result of his territorial power struggle with Norwegian chieftains and the Danish King Knut the Great (c. 995–1035), while the assassinations of both Eric and Knut were provoked by their demands for tithes and taxes to be paid to support the Church. All three kings were involved in the constitution of laws in favour of the Church, which was honoured with the title *rex iustus*

1: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ideology>.

2: See e.g. Bloch 1961, Folz 1986, Vauchez 2005: 158–167.

3: The new interpretation of martyrdom has been discussed e.g. by Gunnes 1972. It wouldn't be wrong to assume that, contrary to the *vitae* of the first martyrs, in the case of those individuals any pro-ecclesiastical works plus a violent death guaranteed the aura of martyrdom.

by writers and compilers of texts. The origins of this so-called 'hagiocracy' and its arrival in Scandinavia are difficult to pinpoint with precision.⁴ Nevertheless, the concept was adapted on a wide scale and used to legitimize the royal power of the successors of the holy rulers as well as their conquests of large areas of land.

The context of Olaf's death, for instance, is clearly political, and the Christian hagiography as well as national identity played a crucial role here. Olaf could hardly be described as a king who defended the new faith against paganism in his newly converted country, but his piety and sense of justice were frequently underlined in the sources. Two skaldic poems honouring Olaf and proclaiming his holiness were composed within a decade after his death, which signifies a rather dynamic initiative, at least in certain circles.⁵ The contents of the poems might have circulated around the country and led to a relatively sudden change in the popular opinion of him. However, their origin might have been the actual result of the king's growing popularity. If later texts are to be trusted as well, many people were dissatisfied with the Danish rulers after Olaf's death. Submission to the deceased sovereign became an act of repentance and penitence, but also a means to express patriotism. Also the acknowledgement of Olaf's *fama sanctitatis* was not limited to purely hagiographical or liturgical texts, designed for ecclesiastical use.

Heimskringla, a collection of histories of the Norwegian kings whose authorship is commonly attributed to the Icelandic skald, lawspeaker and politician, the Chieftain Snorri Sturluson (1178–1241), puts a particular emphasis on the political aspects of Olaf's sainthood. According to the text, the coffin had raised itself almost to the surface of the earth shortly after the burial. What is more, it looked brand new, and the king looked as if he had just fallen asleep. Also, Olaf's hair and nails had grown as much as if he had lived all the time that had passed since his fall.⁶ It does not seem that his hair or nails were ever used as relics in order to trigger a miracle. To understand the ideological meaning of those remains it is necessary to recall the story of Harald Fairhair/Finehair (who reigned in the years 872–930), Olaf Haraldsson's predecessor and forefather. According to the legend (also elaborated by Snorri Sturluson in *Heimskringla*), he was a petty king in Vestfold who fell in love with Gyda, the daughter of King Eric of Hordaland.⁷ Gyda refused to marry him before he was the king over all Norway. Harald, in turn, refused to comb or cut his hair before having achieved his goal. His conquest was successful, which also led to his marriage with Gyda. Nevertheless, Norway did not remain a unified country, the conflict among petty kings and chieftains proceeded. Olaf Haraldsson's saintliness reportedly played a decisive role in the unification of Norway, not less than his determination in battles.

As *Heimskringla* informs, Olaf's son, Magnus "the Good" (c. 1040–1047), who later became the king of Norway and managed to unify quite a big area, had an impressive reliquary made and would open it once

4: The term, a combination of words 'hagiography' and 'aristocracy', has been used i.a. by Vauchez (2005: 173) and implies a "natural" co-existence of sanctity, power and aristocratic distinction.

5: *Glælongskviða* by Þórarinn loftunga and *Erfidrápa* by Sighvatr Þórðarson.

6: ÍF XXVII, p. 404.

7: ÍF XXVI, pp. 94–149.

a year in order to clip his father's growing hair and nails regularly.⁸ He was also quite successful at continuing the task of the unification of the country, and his father's spiritual support was, according to the texts, crucial in this process. However, it was Magnus's paternal uncle, Harald Sigurðarson "the Hardruler" (k. 1045–1066), who successfully continued the task started by Harald Finehair and Olaf Haraldsson. This might also have been the implicit reason why he was the last one to take care of Olaf's hair and nail clipping. When Harald was ready to leave Nidaros he went to Olaf's shrine, unlocked it, clipped his hair and nails, and locked the shrine again. The keys were thrown into the river Nid, and since then, as the author/s maintain, Olaf's shrine has never been opened.⁹ Nevertheless, the very nearness of Olaf Haraldsson's body (which, never parted like many other relics, could be interpreted as the symbol of the country's integrity) was perceived as vital for Norwegian monarchs for decades and centuries later.

The proximity of the king

The physical presence of this particular royal saint had a vital meaning for his followers, as the pseudohistorical text of *Heimskringla* demonstrates. Not only the veneration of Olaf's body but also the placement of the relic was of utmost importance, especially for the closest family members of the King. Magnus Olafsson built a new royal residence and a new church close to it (Olaf's Church), where his father's relics were later moved from Clemet's Church.¹⁰ Harald Sigurðarson moved the relics to another church which he had built (Mary's Church), and his son, Olaf "the Peaceful" / "the Silent" (k. 1067–1093), moved the reliquary to a church for whose building he had been responsible (Christ's Church).¹¹ All the three kings were buried in churches which during their lives served as Olaf's shrines: Magnus in St. Clemet's Church, Harald in Mary's Church and Olaf – in Christ's Church.

The "journey" of Olaf Haraldsson's relics might be perceived in a few different ways.¹² Read as a historical text, the story might serve as a proof for a national, dynastic *cultus*, and it would not be wrong to mention rivalry among Olaf's followers in this context. At the same time, accepting all the information mentioned in *Heimskringla* as historical facts may be misleading. It must be borne in mind that despite certain historical truth (which had to be included in order to make the text credible to the audience), the stories are to a large extent based on the authorial concept of the past and a subjective interpretation. Thus, it is also very possible that the tales of the multiple translations of Olaf Haraldsson's relics should rather be read as a foundation myth in the political, not religious, sense. Knowing the church topography and not knowing its history, the author/s of *Heimskringla* might have invented it. Since the aim of the whole work was to give an account of all the Norwegian kings and show a certain continuity between particular rulers and their actions, a motif better than the relics of the country's protector could hardly be found.

8: ÍF XXVIII, p. 20.

9: "ok hefir ekki síðan upp verit lokit skríni ins helga Óláfs konungs" (ÍF XXVIII, pp. 175-6).

10: ÍF XXVIII, p. 121.

11: ÍF XXVIII, pp. 121 and 208.

12: See the discussion in Røthe 2004: 202-14.

The *cultus* of Olaf Haraldsson demonstrates that the authority of holy sovereigns, based on their alleged martyrdom for faith, could be used for ideological reasons in a variety of ways throughout centuries. A purely religious authority is debatable in case of this royalty, even in the initial decades of the veneration. Still, it is interesting to observe how the authors (compilers) of a much later non-liturgical text used Olaf's *cultus* in order to legitimize the unified land as an inheritance and the process of unification as a royal duty. Olaf's shrine served both as a pilgrimage site and a symbol of national identity. The fact that a holy Christian king was depicted as an heir of a heathen ruler never seemed to have been an obstacle. Quite the opposite, the family lineage has served as a convincing argument, which only underlines the persuasiveness of the 'hagiocracy' concept.

Abbreviations

ÍF – Íslensk Fornrit, Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag

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